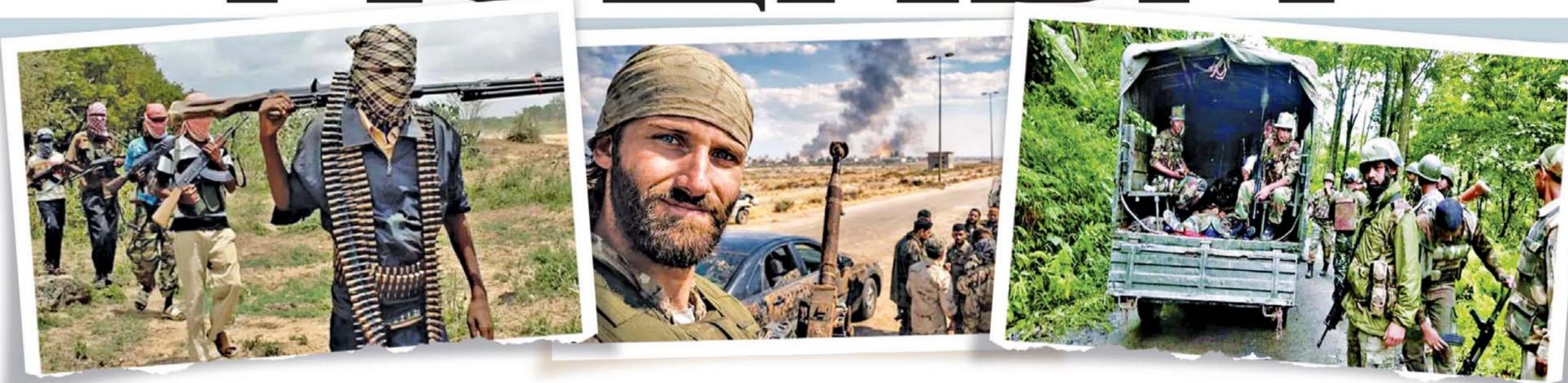


We must clean our national psyche from all manifestation of evil, be it kidnapping, militancy, insurgency or assassinations  
—Sunday Adelaia

New Delhi

March 22, 2026



## GREY-ZONE INTRUSIONS

### Is the Northeast becoming the hotbed of foreign operations?

The arrest of American national Matthew Aaron VanDyke and several Ukrainian citizens by India's National Investigation Agency has cast a sharp light on a shadowy network operating along the Indo-Myanmar border. What appears at first to be an isolated case of foreign involvement may, in fact, signal a deeper and more complex convergence of insurgency, geopolitics, and covert influence in India's Northeast

## The rising security challenges in Northeast India

The recent arrest of American national Matthew Aaron VanDyke and six Ukrainian citizens by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has exposed a sophisticated grey-zone network operating along the Indo-Myanmar border. Charged under Section 18 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the group is accused of training Myanmar-based Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) and coordinating the illegal import of drone technology-activities that the NIA claims directly threaten India's internal security and sovereignty.



**BHASKAR JYOTI MAHANTA**  
Former DGP of Assam

non-profit security organisation. Unlike traditional private military companies such as Blackwater, SOLI claims to provide military training and tactical advice to "oppressed" groups free of cost, funded through private donations.

In 2025, VanDyke claimed on social media to have been running covert operations with Venezuelan rebels since 2019. His arrest in India suggests a shift in focus towards the Myanmar conflict, leveraging the vacuum created by instability following the 2021 military coup.

The NIA's investigation reveals a methodical breach of Indian border protocols to facilitate insurgent support. The group, comprising VanDyke and 14 Ukrainians (seven of whom are still being tracked), reportedly entered India on tourist visas. This "hiding in plain sight" tactic enabled them to move through major hubs such as Delhi, Lucknow, and Kolkata before converging in the Northeast.

The accused allegedly bypassed the mandatory Protected Area Permit (PAP) to enter Mizoram. From there, they are believed to have crossed the porous 1,643-km border into Myanmar. A central pillar of the NIA's case is the alleged illegal shipment of drones from Europe via India. In modern guerrilla warfare, drones function as "force multipliers", used for surveillance and improvised explosive device (IED) delivery. Supplying such technology to Myanmar-based EAGs-many of whom share ethnic ties and logistical routes with Indian insurgent groups-creates a direct security risk for Indian forces.

Against this backdrop, the recent influx of thousands of Myanmar nationals warrants closer examination. The arrival of Chin refugees in Mizoram has reinvigorated discourse around Zo reunification-the idea of unifying Mizo, Chin, and Kuki communities. Rooted in shared Tibeto-Burman ancestry and a common Christian identity, this movement has evolved from a fringe cultural aspiration into a central element of regional political rhetoric. Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma has been particularly

vocal, taking the issue to international platforms. During his 2024 visit to the United States, he called for the unification of the "Zo" people under a single administrative framework, arguing that colonial-era borders have unjustly divided a single nation. This position echoes that of his predecessor Zoramthanga, who frequently invoked the "same womb" (chhul khat chhuak) philosophy to justify extending sanctuary to Myanmar's Chin and Manipur's Kuki populations, often in defiance of central directives.

The narrative of a "unified Christian state" has attracted intense scrutiny, particularly regarding possible Western influence. Some analysts argue that a unified "Zo-land" could serve as a pro-Western buffer zone between India, China, and Myanmar's military regime. Concerns have also emerged about potential extra-territorial loyalties. Allegations-though contested-suggest that Western agencies may view the Chin-Kuki-Mizo belt as a strategic foothold to counter Chinese influence in Myanmar's Sagaing Division and the Bay of Bengal.

The Government of India views these "Greater Mizoram" aspirations with caution, as they could challenge the territorial integrity of Manipur, Tripura, and Assam, complicating New Delhi's Act East Policy and its delicate engagement with Myanmar's military establishment. While the movement is rooted in genuine ethnic solidarity, its intersection with global power dynamics has turned it into a sensitive geopolitical flashpoint in Northeast India. The presence of a high-profile American "security analyst" alongside Ukrainian nationals-at a time when Ukraine remains central to global intelligence activity-raises further questions about the possible role of foreign agencies. Mercenaries like VanDyke can function as "deniable assets", advancing the strategic inter-

ests of external powers without formal state involvement.

The involvement of Ukrainian nationals also suggests the transfer of battle-hardened expertise. With the ongoing war in Ukraine serving as a testing ground for advanced drone warfare, the potential migration of such skills to the Myanmar theatre is a significant concern for Indian agencies.

While the US Embassy has maintained a "no comment" stance, there are indications that Russian intelligence may have shared inputs with India-possibly to counter Western influence in the region and safeguard its strategic interests, including defence ties with Myanmar's military.

The involvement of foreign nationals using advanced technology under the guise of activism or documentary filmmaking presents a complex legal and diplomatic challenge. For India, tightening border management remains a priority. Re-evaluating the Free Movement Regime (FMR) and strictly enforcing PAP and Restricted Area Permit (RAP) norms are now key focus areas.

Equally important is tracking the technological supply chain-particularly drone components entering through civilian channels to ensure that India's sensitive border regions do not become arenas for international proxy conflicts.

The NIA's ongoing probe into the masterminds and funding sources behind this network will be crucial in determining whether this was an isolated operation or part of a broader, coordinated effort to reshape the geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal region.

(The author is presently the General Secretary of the think tank SHARE)

#### Key facts about the Indo-Myanmar border

- The Indo-Myanmar border is 1,643 km long.
- India shares this border across four northeastern states: Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram.
- Security challenge driven by ethno-nationalist movements, porous terrain, and geopolitical instability within Myanmar.
- These risks have increased significantly since the 2021 military coup.
- Over 64,000 people have crossed the India-Myanmar border into India seeking refuge since the February 2021 military coup.

#### NE: THE ROOTS OF INSURGENCY

Insurgency in India's Northeast has been one of the most complex internal security challenges since independence. Rooted in issues of identity, autonomy, and ethnic assertion the region witnessed multiple armed movements across states such as Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Mizoram.

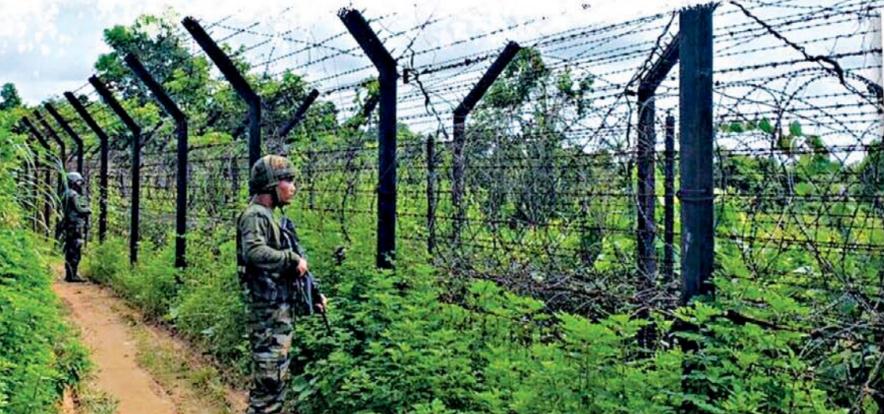
**Naga insurgency:** The earliest and most influential of these was led by the Naga National Council, which declared independence in 1947, setting the stage for decades of conflict.

**Multiple groups emerge:** Over time, other groups emerged, including the Mizo National Front, the United Liberation Front of Asom, and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, each articulating distinct political and ethnic demands.

**Mizoram Peace Accord:** The insurgencies were marked by cycles of violence, counter-insurgency operations, and political negotiations. The movements, led by MNF, culminated successfully in the Mizoram Peace Accord, leading to lasting peace.

**The transformation:** Over the past two decades, a combination of sustained security operations, peace talks, economic development initiatives, and improved connectivity has led to a marked decline in violence.

Key agreements, such as the 1997 ceasefire with NSCN (IM), and Bodo accords and peace deals with various militant factions have reduced tensions in Assam.



## THE CROSS-BORDER LINKAGES OF INSURGENTS

PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH

Matthew VanDyke, the filmmaker-turned-mercenary whose Myanmar gambit has just landed him in an Indian jail. His arrest has exposed a new threat to India's sensitive Northeast region. Matthew Aaron VanDyke is the archetype of the 21st-century self-proclaimed "freedom fighter" who markets himself as a documentarian and activist while quietly building a career as a combatant-for-hire. VanDyke's trajectory is a textbook evolution from observer to operator. Between 2011 and 2013, he gained

fame as a war correspondent in Libya, where he abandoned the camera, joined anti-Gaddafi rebels, was captured, and spent six months in a Tripoli prison. After his release, he surfaced in Syria to advise rebels while still claiming journalistic cover.

In 2014, he formalised the business model by founding Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), a self-described non-profit security firm that offers free military training, tactical advice, and equipment to 'oppressed' groups, funded by private donations. Internal security experts say SOLI wraps its operations in the language of humanitarian intervention and anti-authoritarianism.

It does not charge governments like public management consultants. By 2025, VanDyke was openly boasting on social media of running covert operations with Venezuelan rebels since 2019, including missions later publicised as "Operation Aurora". In early 2026, he simply pivoted theatres: from Caracas to the Myanmar civil war. The NIA alleges he and his Ukrainian team had been making repeated trips since 2024, training Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) in drone strikes, weapons handling, and electronic warfare-capabilities that have transformed Myanmar's battlefield.

CONTINUED ON >> P11

Many former insurgent groups have either disbanded, entered ceasefire arrangements, or joined mainstream politics. States like Tripura and Mizoram are largely peaceful, while Assam has seen a sharp drop in militant activity. Nonetheless, challenges remain, particularly in parts of Manipur and along the India-Myanmar border

"IT IS ALWAYS EASIER TO FIGHT FOR  
ONE'S PRINCIPLES THAN TO LIVE  
UP TO THEM"  
— ALFRED ADLER

# Witnessing Kazakhstan's historic referendum



I returned soon after referendum over in Kazakhstan (Astana) from a long circuit of polling stations across Kazakhstan, carrying with me not just notes and numbers, but impressions of a nation at a crossroads. The chill of early spring lingered in the air as voters, many wrapped in heavy coats, queued patiently to cast their ballots. There was no frenzy, no overt tension — just a steady, deliberate rhythm that seemed to mirror the tone of the referendum itself, controlled, significant, and quietly consequential.



ASHOKE RAJ

As I prepared to leave the capital, I found myself reflecting less on the scale of the victory and more on its implications. Constitutions are not merely documents; they are living frameworks that shape how power is exercised and contested.

Kazakhstan has, without question, entered a new chapter. Whether this chapter leads to institutional evolution or deeper centralisation will depend not on the text itself, but on how it is implemented.

From New Delhi, the referendum may appear decisive and orderly. On the ground, it felt more nuanced — a moment of transformation, certainly, but one whose true meaning will only emerge with time.

For now, what remains is the image of those long, quiet queues, and the sense that history, even when it appears settled, often unfolds in ways that are anything but predictable.

**Contrasts at the ballot, Kazakhstan and India**

From the capital to smaller provincial towns across Kazakhstan, polling stations operated with a quiet, almost clinical efficiency. Election officials worked under bright fluorescent lights, carefully verifying identities and guiding voters through the process with minimal delay.

For an observer from India, the contrast was immediately striking. Indian elections are often defined by their scale and energy—long queues winding through streets, animated political discussions, and a palpable sense of competition. Here, there were no such extended lines. Instead, in the lingering spring chill, voters arrived in short, steady intervals. Small queues formed briefly and dissolved just as quickly, shaped as much by the cold weather as by the streamlined process.

Yet the absence of long queues did not signal disengagement. People still turned out, wrapped in coats against the cold, to participate in what was framed as a decisive moment for constitutional change. The atmosphere, however, remained subdued. Conversations were muted, and there was little of the charged intensity that typically accompanies elections in India.

Several voters expressed cautious optimism, speaking of stability and the importance of a strong state in uncertain times. Others, in quieter tones, acknowledged that the outcome felt largely predetermined. There was participation, certainly — but not the kind of visible contestation that defines democratic exercises in India. It is within this contrast — between participation and competition — that the deeper meaning of the referendum begins to take shape.



### Redrawing the architecture of power

At the heart of the vote lies a fundamental restructuring of Kazakhstan's political system. The new constitution significantly enhances presidential authority, granting the executive broader influence over key

institutions.

Under the revised framework, the president will have expanded powers to appoint senior officials, including judicial and electoral authorities. These appointments will require approval from a newly restructured unicameral parliament, the Kurultai. However, if the parliament rejects nominees twice, it risks dissolution — a provision that effectively strengthens the president's hand.

In such a scenario, the president would also gain the authority to issue decrees carrying the force of law, at least temporarily. Supporters argue this ensures governance continuity. Critics see it as a mechanism that tilts the balance of power decisively toward the executive.

### Institutional shifts and political signals

The changes do not stop there. The constitution reshapes the legislature into a single chamber and introduces a new advisory body, the People's Council, whose members will be appointed entirely by the president. While framed as a mechanism for broader consultation, its structure raises questions about independence.

The revival of the vice presidency — absent since the 1990s — is another notable feature. Though the role includes representing the country internationally and stepping in for the president when required, its precise powers remain loosely defined. In practice, much will

depend on how the office is used — and by whom. Taken together, these reforms signal a clear trend: consolidation at the center, even as institutional forms evolve.

### Context matters

This referendum does not exist in isolation. It is the second major constitutional overhaul in just four years, unfolding against a backdrop of economic strain and lingering political memory. Inflation has weighed heavily on ordinary citizens, while the unrest of 2022 still casts a long shadow over the national psyche.

For many, stability is not an abstract ideal but a pressing necessity. The government has framed the reforms in precisely these terms — arguing that a stronger executive is essential in a volatile geopolitical environment.

Kazakhstan occupies a strategic position between major powers, including Russia and China. Regional tensions, particularly those linked to the war in Ukraine, have heightened the sense of uncertainty. In this context, the leadership's emphasis on centralized authority is presented as pragmatic rather than ideological.

### A managed mandate?

Yet the process itself raises important questions. Opposition voices were notably subdued in the lead-up to the vote, with limited scope for public debate or organised dissent. The campaign period lacked the vibrancy typically associated with transformative political decisions.

As a result, while the numbers point to overwhelming approval, the depth of that support remains open to interpretation. Is this a genuine groundswell of public endorsement, or a reflection of a tightly managed political environment?

From my vantage point at polling stations, the answer seemed somewhere in between. Participation was real. Engagement, however, appeared restrained.

### A regional pattern

Kazakhstan's trajectory is not unique. Across parts of Eurasia, constitutional reforms have often served as instruments for redefining political systems without necessarily expanding pluralism. Leadership-driven change, rather than bottom-up transformation, has been the dominant model.

President Tokayev, currently serving a single seven-year term set to run until 2029, has positioned these reforms as part of a term modernisation effort. Analysts suggest the new framework could offer flexibility for future political arrangements, even if no immediate changes to term limits have been announced.

The writer is an Associate Editor (Foreign Affairs) at *The Pioneer*. He recently visited Kazakhstan.

## FROM AGENDA COVER

### The cross-border linkages of insurgents

Indian investigators further claim the network maintained links with banned Indian insurgent outfits operating in the Northeast.

How VanDyke's Myanmar Presence Directly Undermines India's Internal Security

This is not abstract foreign adventurism; it is a direct vector into India's most volatile region. The India-Myanmar border—especially the 510-km Mizoram stretch—is notoriously porous, with free movement regimes, ethnic kinship across the line (Chin, Mizo, Naga communities), and a history of insurgent safe havens. VanDyke's alleged operation exploited exactly that corridor:

Technology proliferation: Drones and jamming gear routed through Europe, transited via Indian territory, and handed to Myanmar EAOs can easily flow back into Indian insurgent hands. Northeast groups have already begun experimenting with commercial drones for reconnaissance and IED delivery; professional training from ex-Libya, Ukraine, and now Myanmar operators accelerates that lethal learning curve.

Cross-border insurgent linkage: The NIA explicitly states the trainees included "banned outfits operating within India". Manipur's ethnic clashes, Assam's residual ULFA factions, and Naga splin-



ter groups have long drawn ideological and logistical oxygen from Myanmar's war economy. Training camps just across the border become exportable skill sets and exportable fighters.

Erosion of border sovereignty: Repeated illegal crossings through Mizoram (a state

already grappling with refugee influxes and drug routes) signal intelligence and enforcement gaps. Each undetected transit normalises foreign mercenaries treating Indian soil as a launchpad.

The Russian tip-off that cracked the case only

underscores how external actors (even rival powers) now monitor India's backyard more effectively than parts of India's own system.

Strategic destabilisation: Myanmar's civil war has already spilled refugees, arms, and militancy into India's Northeast. Adding

Western/Ukrainian-trained drone units raises the asymmetry: Indian security forces face not just AK-47s but precision loitering munitions and EW-denied zones. This directly threatens the Centre's Act East Policy, infrastructure projects, and the fragile peace accords painstakingly negotiated in Nagaland and Manipur.

In short, VanDyke did not merely film or advise in Myanmar; he allegedly built a deniable pipeline that funnels modern warfare know-how straight into India's internal fault lines. VanDyke's defenders will paint him as a romantic idealist empowering the powerless. The evidence emerging from Delhi's courts suggests something more prosaic and dangerous: a hardened mercenary whose humanitarian brand provides plausible deniability while he professionalises insurgencies on India's doorstep.

VanDyke's arrest is a warning. When filmmakers trade cameras for kill lists and non-profits become training academies for the next generation of drones over Manipur or Mizoram, India's internal security apparatus changes overnight. By arresting a CIA operative, India has sent a curt message that it will no longer tolerate its Northeast being used as a free-fire training ground for foreign mercenaries.

The writer is the Resident Editor of *The Pioneer*.

# SCIENCE

## Quantum test shows cause, effect need not follow a set order

Vasudevan Mukunth

In everyday life, cause always comes before effect. A window won't break before you throw a ball at it. But quantum mechanics has long hinted that this rule can be broken. Physicists from the University of Vienna and the Christian Doppler Laboratory for Photonic Quantum Computer have now taken a big step to proving it in an experiment.

Their results were published in *PRX Quantum* on March 17.

Quantum systems like atoms or electrons can exist in superpositions: a particle can be in two states at once until it is measured.

When causality itself works the same way – e.g. if A happens before B and B happens before A at the same time – it's called indefinite causal order (ICO).

Scientists have shown ICO can be used to increase the performance of quantum key distribution

– a technology scientists worldwide, including recently at IIT-Delhi, are exploring to make communications unhackable.

But before anyone can build technology around it, physicists need proof that ICO is a real phenomenon.

In standard causality, it's impossible for an experiment to score higher than 1.75 on a mathematical test called VBC.

If it's higher, the experiment has ICO. The researchers created pairs of light particles (photons) and sent them through a quantum switch.

The switch applied two operations to the photons but in a blurred order: neither operation was definitively first. When the team measured the photons that exited, the test's VBC score was 1.83.

The photons were correlated with each other in a way that couldn't be explained by anything happening to them in a fixed

sequence. For instance if the photons had gone through operation A then B or B then A, their properties at the end would be correlated up to a certain degree. But the experimenters measured photons whose properties were correlated in a way that couldn't exist unless there was no fixed order in which the operations happened. The alternative: the photons were in a superposition of both orderings at once.

The researchers were candid that their experiment had loopholes that prevented the result from being dispositive. For instance, because the experiment happened on a single table, it is not yet possible to rule out that some unknown signal travelled between the components to mimic the result.

Closing such loopholes will require separating the participants by much larger distances and improving detection efficiency.

## SNAPSHOTS



### Oceans more than gases helped earth cool

When researchers recently analysed Antarctic ice cores to reconstruct the earth's climate over the last three million years, they found that the world's oceans cooled by 2.5 C, most of it around 2.7 million years ago. While methane levels were unchanged, those of carbon dioxide did so barely 2.9-1.2 million years ago. The findings suggest that factors like ocean circulation and ice sheet growth, rather than gas levels alone, primarily drove long-term cooling.



### Nifty chemistry offers to make laundry cleaner

Researchers have made a fabric coating that offers to eliminate detergents from laundry. They sprayed alternating layers of compounds called PDADMAC and PVS onto textiles. The spray formed a dense layer that effectively repelled stains, residues, and germs, and could be washed off by rinsing under tap water. The team has estimated the technique could lower water and electricity use by 80% and also eliminate the discharge of detergent residues and microplastics in the wastewater.



### New reaction to recover Li from battery waste

A new method called halometallurgy could recover lithium from Li-ion battery waste. First, the battery materials are heated to move lithium from the cathode into a mix of sodium and potassium chloride salts, breaking the cathode's structure into transition metal oxides. As the salts melt, they coat the particles to create a barrier against oxygen, which allows graphite to reduce the oxides into metallic alloys. Finally, up to 96% of lithium is recovered in the saline solution.

# Cost concerns delay safer building codes for Himalayas

India's earthquake safety codes are under scrutiny after the government withdrew updated building standards backed by a decade of scientific research; the revision would have nearly doubled hazard estimates in the Himalaya and northeast

Jacob Koshy

Are the risks to structures in the Himalayas and northeastern states from earthquakes overestimated? Scientists, structural engineers, and representatives from several government ministries are expected to deliberate and report to the Cabinet Secretariat in the coming weeks.

This follows the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) withdrawing updated criteria that construction projects ought to incorporate to guard against collapse during earthquakes. The withdrawal was prompted, *The Hindu* reported on March 7, by a Cabinet Secretariat order stating the new standards "materially affected ... ongoing and future infrastructure projects including metro rail projects" and that a "holistic and comprehensive review of the revised IS 1893 be conducted, taking into account the perspectives of all stakeholders."

However, a decade of government-commissioned studies involving scientists from geological, seismological, and geotechnical and structural engineering institutions are clear: the potential damage to structures such as residential buildings, bridges, and power plants in the Himalayan States is higher than current risk assessments.

Engineers and architects are required to follow the IS 1893 standard. India's zoning map delineates four zones.

Zone II is the calmest;

## Shaky ground

Potential damage to all structures in Himalayan States exceed what current assessments predict



**Quake fury:** A view of a building destroyed in the 2001 Bhuj earthquake. An estimated 20,000 people are thought to have been killed in the event. AFP

■ Experts believe that most earthquake fatalities occur in small houses that lack adequate structural design

■ Government officials argue the proposed standards are too theoretical and would drastically increase public infrastructure spending

Proposed revisions would have nearly doubled peak ground acceleration values to match international safety standards for construction

■ The Indian government recently withdrew updated earthquake construction standards due to concerns about high infrastructure project costs

■ Scientific studies indicate that existing seismic assessments for the Himalayan region significantly underestimate the risk

■ The Bureau of Indian Standards is reviewing the seismic code to balance scientific accuracy with economic feasibility

Zone V is assigned to areas along the Himalayan front, where magnitude 8 quakes have occurred in living memory. At such forces, buildings experience stresses that can buckle steel columns and have floors pancaking onto one another.

For context, a magnitude 7 quake 20 km from a fault can produce peak ground acceleration (PGA) exceeding Zone V's design threshold.

The withdrawn update originated from a 2024 paper in the *Indian Journal of Earth System Sciences* that proposed a way to estimate earthquake hazards consonant with global methods.

It was the outcome of a project the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) had commissioned in 2019 from IIT-Madras and BIS. It was pre-

ceded by projects in 2007-11 and 2013-17 – all to move the hazard assessment towards a "probabilistic framework". This framework differs from India's existing approach to assess risk to regions only based on past seismicity; it incorporates several variables to forecast forces on a structure in the event of the strongest probable quakes.

The NDMA accepted the study and BIS published its outcomes in IS 1893 as a 2025 update – which was then withdrawn.

The authors comprise scientists from the IITs in Mumbai and Chennai, the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, and the Geological Survey.

"These PGA values are not derived based on any quantitative earthquake hazard assessment and are abysmally low, especially

for the higher earthquake zones," the authors report. "The 1897 Great Shillong Plateau earthquake in northeast India is reported to have resulted in PGA values more than [1 g]." They note that "design accelerations in similar areas worldwide are taken to be two times (or more) compared to that in the existing zone map of India." The study was led by S.T.G. Raghukanth, C.V.R. Murty, Bhargavi Podili, and K.P. Sreejaya of IIT Madras.

Previously, regions were assigned Zone IV or V only after a significant earthquake; the surrounding areas were assumed to be at lower risk despite decades of pent-up strain. The framework also didn't account for local soil conditions that amplify seismic waves or data from 168 Himalayan monitoring stations.

# Intentional communication is not a uniquely human trait



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

All living beings communicate. In honeybees, communicative signals in the form of a wiggle dance transmit information on the location of flowers. Recipient bees decode this information and use it to guide their behaviour. Human language goes beyond broadcasting: it can be used to intentionally reshape what another person thinks or does by adjusting the message based on what we believe the other person already knows.

Intentionality requires an audience towards whom the signal is directed. How do we use a gesture to ask someone to do something for us? Take an example of a group at a

dining table, where your goal is for a water bottle to be passed to you. First you make sure someone has your attention. Then you make a gesture, and repeat it if you are not understood, until the water is passed on.

Is intentionality a uniquely human trait? Experiments suggest that apes communicate in a goal-directed manner using appropriate gestures. At a higher level, they even seem to have an idea of what other apes in their vicinity know. Orangutans in captivity try communicating with their human handlers, using a particular gesture until their food arrives. Give them the wrong food and they will change over to another gesture – they seem to know that you know!

This brings us to elephants. Elephants are large animals that live in groups with a complex social



The elephant named Suvarna engages with her calf 'Sudha' at Bannerghatta National Park, 2020. FILE PHOTO

structure. They are known to have cognitive skills: they are even known to mourn the death of a group member, standing guard over the body and covering it with tree branches.

Individuals, females particularly, are known to greet acquaintances even

when they meet after years. The exchange involves flapping their ears and swinging their trunks from side to side, both gestures that require visual attention on part of the recipient. Elephants also have a repertoire of other gestures. Only a few of these, such as touching the reci-

ipient with their tail, do not require eye contact.

Elephants may also convey their intentions to their human handlers. In experiments conducted in a conservation area near the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, two trays, one empty and the other containing six apples, were placed before an elephant. If a researcher stood along with the trays, facing the animal and making full eye contact, it would begin moving its trunk in the direction of the tray with the apples. Soon, it would get its reward. However, if it was not given all the apples, it would continue to swing its trunk, as if indicating 'I want more'. When the researcher stood facing away from the elephant, there were no gestures (*Royal Society Open Science*, 12-242203, 2025).

In India, we have a long history of mahouts, the elephant handlers at tem-

ples and in conservation zones, who have one-to-one relationships with elephants that can last a lifetime. Mahouts communicate with elephants and read their emotions using a combination of touch, gestures, and vocal jargon. The zoologist Nibha Nambudiri has meticulously documented elephant-mahout interactions in her book, *Practical Elephant Management*. At IIT-Guwahati, Seema Lokhandwala and her colleagues, using classifier algorithms, have shown that elephant trumpet calls to mahouts are distinct from those aimed at other elephants. (*Speech & Computer*, 426-437, 2022, Springer).

(The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling)

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## Question Corner

### Waves in the ocean

Where or what is the human mind?

Evidence points to the human mind not being a physical object you can touch, but a process the brain creates. The foundation of the mind consists of approximately 86 billion nerve cells, a.k.a. neurons. These cells form a large and intricate web where they communicate by sending electrical signals and releasing chemical messengers called neurotransmitters across gaps known as synapses. Glial cells support these neurons by supplying nutrients and maintaining the structure. However, the mind is more

than just a bunch of cells. Most researchers view the mind as an emergent property of the brain, meaning that while individual neurons can't think or feel, their collective interaction produces consciousness and emotions. For an analogy, if the brain is the hardware of the body, the mind appears to be the software or maybe the active processing unit. It encompasses everything from human logic and language to people's deepest feelings. And research suggests that the mind is quite literally what the brain does.

Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in

## Why do electric vehicle batteries catch fire?

Are they safe? Do external conditions matter? What can industry and users do to ensure safety?

Vasudevan Mukunth

### The story so far:

A fire tore through a house in Indore on March 18, killing eight people, including two children. An electric vehicle (EV) charging point outside appeared to have sparked the blaze. An investigation is underway.

### Are EV batteries safe?

Nearly every EV on the road runs on lithium-ion batteries, which use the same chemistry that powers millions of smartphones and laptops. They pack more energy than lead-acid batteries and are generally safe when managed well.

A common cause of EV battery fires is thermal runaway. A lithium-ion battery packs thousands of cells tightly together, each generating heat as it charges and discharges. Normally, an onboard computer called the battery management system keeps the temperature within a safe range. But if something goes wrong, one cell can overheat, causing neighbouring cells to overheat in a chain reaction that can outpace the cooling system. This process releases a toxic cocktail of gases, including hydrogen fluoride, in a flammable vapour that eases the 'path' to a fire.

### What causes thermal runaway?

Manufacturers protect battery packs by packing them inside shells of reinforced steel or aluminium. However, a hard impact – like from a strong impact to the undercarriage – can

Parking an EV in direct sunlight for long periods or charging it immediately after a long drive can add to the thermal stress. Flooding also threatens batteries

deform the casing and puncture or deform the cells inside, leading to a short circuit. Charging a battery beyond its designed capacity can force charge to build up in the 'wrong' places

inside cells. Reputable EV manufacturers include safeguards in their charging systems to prevent this but third-party or damaged chargers may not pay attention to these limits. And regularly charging a battery overnight with such a charger can increase the risk.

As the battery expands and contracts during use, rare manufacturing defects such as a small protrusion of metal can bring the positive and negative electrodes in touch, causing an enormous current to flow between them. This releases heat that then spreads through the pack. Extension cords or domestic wiring in old buildings can also overheat when they cannot handle the sustained current.

### Do external conditions matter?

In hot weather, the cooling system can struggle to shed heat. Parking an EV in direct sunlight for long periods or charging it immediately after a long drive can add to the thermal stress.

As batteries age, their internal components also degrade. So users who ignore warning lights or skip inspections can miss early signs of swelling or chemical decomposition.

Flooding also threatens batteries. The contaminated water after heavy rains can infiltrate a battery pack and cause short circuits. Several EV fires have occurred in the days after vehicles were submerged in floodwater.

EVs are not uniquely dangerous. Petrol cars catch fire too, and more often, as they carry flammable fuel next to an engine running at a high temperature. The difference is that EV battery fires burn hotter, spread faster, and are harder to put out (as the battery releases oxygen as it burns).

The Indore incident was made worse by the fact that LPG cylinders were stored in the house, a sports bike was parked inside, and electronic door locks jammed when the power failed.

### What are industry and users doing?

Most EVs today have channels alongside the cells filled with a coolant that absorbs their heat and dissipates it into the air. Scientists are currently developing a new form of cooling where the coolant evaporates as it absorbs heat and releases it into the air, improving heat transfer and handling temperature spikes better.

Manufacturers are also exploring batteries with a solid electrolyte rather than the current liquid to reduce the risk of a thermal runaway, while refining firewalls inside existing designs so that if one cell fails, the fire does not spread.

Users can also take precautions by using the charger that came with the vehicle or one certified by the manufacturer, avoiding routine unattended charging, ensuring home electrical systems meet the necessary standards for high-power appliances, and having EV batteries inspected after any significant impact. Experts have recommended letting batteries cool after a long drive before charging and also keeping the charging area clear.

The Bureau of Indian Standards released updated safety norms for EV batteries in 2023 after a spate of fires the previous year prompted a government review. As part of its AIS-156 standard, the Automotive Research Association of India also requires tests to check how heat propagates in a battery and requires battery packs to give a vehicle's users at least five minutes to escape before a fire.

## Why is Israel attacking Lebanon?

Why is the ground offensive concentrated in southern Lebanon? Why has Israel carried out several attacks against Hezbollah in the past and why does it want to dismantle the Shia militant group? What does it want to achieve?

Stanly Johny

### The story so far:

As the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran enters its fourth week, another, perhaps more brutal, war is unfolding in the region. On March 16, Israel announced the launch of a ground offensive in Lebanon against Hezbollah. It has also carried out massive air strikes in southern Lebanon and the southern outskirts of Beirut, killing at least 1,000 people and displacing about a million. The ground offensive is concentrated in hilltop towns in southern Lebanon, where the Israel Defence Forces are facing stiff resistance from Hezbollah fighters.

### Why did Israel launch the offensive?

On paper, a ceasefire had been reached between Hezbollah and Israel in November 2024. The ceasefire was reached after a month-long campaign aimed at weakening Hezbollah, a Shia militant group and political party in Lebanon that maintains close ties with Iran.

When Israel launched its invasion of Gaza after Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, Hezbollah fired rockets into the Shebaa Farms, a Lebanese territory occupied by Israel. Israel responded with air strikes, triggering further Hezbollah rocket attacks that displaced thousands of Israelis from the Upper Galilee region.

In September 2024, Israel assassinated Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in



Damaged buildings and vehicles in Beirut after an Israeli airstrike, on March 21. The Israeli military said it had launched strikes targeting Hezbollah. AFP

Israel has declared that it wants to dismantle Hezbollah's military capabilities, push them away from southern Lebanon, and create a buffer inside the Lebanese territory

an air strike. The Israeli plan was to disrupt Hezbollah's command structure before launching a ground offensive. During the ground battle, Israel pushed Hezbollah fighters away from the border and occupied strategically important regions in southern Lebanon. In November that year, Israel agreed to a ceasefire, but it continued air strikes nearly every day in Lebanon, targeting Hezbollah positions. Hezbollah hardly retaliated.

On February 2026, after Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed by a joint Israeli-American air strike, Hezbollah fired hundreds of rockets into northern Israel. Israel retaliated with air strikes, which was followed by the ground offensive.

### What is Hezbollah?

Over the past five decades, Israel has carried out multiple attacks in Lebanon. In 1978, Israel launched an incursion into southern Lebanon to push the Palestinian militias based in the region, under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), to the north of the Litani River. In 1982, Israel launched another invasion with the same objective. It managed to force the PLO to relocate from Lebanon, but the consequences of the war led to the rise of Hezbollah as a militant Shia organisation. Iran, where the Shia clergy established an Islamic government in 1979, backed Hezbollah.

When Israeli troops stayed in southern Lebanon to keep a buffer on the Lebanese side of the border, Hezbollah emerged as the major resistance force. Israeli troops, faced with Hezbollah's guerrilla attacks, were forced to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000 – which was celebrated by Hezbollah as the first "Arab victory against Israel".

In 2006, Israel attacked Lebanon again, to dismantle Hezbollah's military infrastructure. After a month-long campaign, Israel had to agree to a ceasefire and pull back. This allowed Hezbollah to rise as a major socio-political and militant movement of Lebanon's sectarian system, where the army is very weak. But Israel has always called Hezbollah – which it designates as a terrorist outfit alongside the U.S. and their Western partners – an "Iranian proxy". There was an uneasy calm along the Israel-Lebanon border after the 2006 war, but it was broken by Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack.

### How strong is Hezbollah today?

Hezbollah, because of its long resistance history and battlefield experience, is generally seen as a powerful fighting force. After the 2006 war, they

joined the Syrian civil war to fight alongside the forces of President Bashar al-Assad. Hezbollah's involvement played a crucial role in turning around the civil war from 2015 to 2018.

Hezbollah, a state within the state in Lebanon, possesses tens of thousands of rockets and missiles. However, in September 2024, Israel's pager explosions, which targeted Hezbollah's mid-level commanders, and killed the group's top leadership, threw it into disarray. Around that time, Abu Mohamned al-Golani, a former al-Qaeda jihadist who was running Syria's Idlib, started a campaign to take over Damascus. The Syrian Army, which was targeted by hundreds of Israeli air strikes, was in a bad shape. Syria's three main supporters were Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah. Russia was busy with Ukraine. And Iran's space for manoeuvre was limited. Hezbollah was pushed back by Israeli attacks. It took only 12 days for Golani's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syria branch) to capture Damascus.

The fall of Assad's government in December cut a vital link between Hezbollah and Iran, which further weakened both sides. From the early 1980s, Iran had provided money, weapons and training to Hezbollah, and Baathist Syria acted as a land bridge between Iran and Syria (through Iraq, at least since 2003). In subsequent months, Israel continued to pound Hezbollah and the group hardly retaliated. But Hezbollah was also using this period to rebuild its command structure and replenish its arsenals, preparing for an eventual war. And when Israel and the U.S. killed Khamenei in February 2026, they joined the war, drawing in thousands of troops into Lebanon.

### What does Israel want to achieve?

Israel has declared that it wants to dismantle Hezbollah's military capabilities, push them away from southern Lebanon, and create a buffer inside the Lebanese territory. Israel has issued evacuation orders for the whole of southern Lebanon and some neighbourhoods in the north of the Litani River. It has bombed some bridges on the river to cut off supplies for Hezbollah. Israel is also pressing the Lebanese government to take action to disarm Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's version is that it is defending Lebanese territory. It has fired more than 1,000 rockets and drones at Israel since March 2, in a clear message that it still possesses attack capabilities. Israel is also facing stiff resistance in the hilltop towns of southern Lebanon, particularly in Khiam, a high plateau overlooking the Hula Valley in the south. While Israel seeks to push Hezbollah out militarily, an approach it tried several times in the past and failed, Hezbollah, though weakened by regional developments, is resisting with asymmetrical tactics. It is the Lebanese people who are caught in the middle.

## What did the SC say about paid maternity leave?

Why did the Supreme Court strike down Section 60(4) of the Social Security Code, 2020? What did it say about maternity leave for adoptive mothers? What did the Court recommend that the Union government do regarding paternity leave?

Priscilla Jebaraj

### The story so far:

Last week, the Supreme Court ruled that adoptive mothers could avail themselves of 12 weeks of paid maternity leave regardless of the age of their children at the time of adoption. Striking down Section 60(4) of the Social Security Code, 2020 (previously Section 5(4) of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961), which limited this benefit only to mothers who adopted children under the age of three months, the Court said that an adoptive mother had the same rights and obligations towards the child as a biological mother.

### What is the law on maternity leave in India?

Statutory maternity benefits for working women in India began to be granted in colonial times. The Bombay Maternity Benefit Act, 1929, covered women factory workers. It was followed by similar laws in other parts of the country in the run-up to Independence. In 1961, Parliament passed the Maternity Benefit Act to provide paid maternity leave of 12 weeks to working women across the country.

In 2017, the Maternity Benefit (Amendment)



Mother and child. GETTY IMAGES

The Court noted that the period of leave plays a key role in fostering emotional bond between the mother and the child

Act not only extended the period of paid maternity leave for biological mothers to 26 weeks, but also inserted a provision extending maternity leave for the first time to adoptive mothers or surrogate mothers. Section 5(4) of the Act stated that surrogate or adoptive mothers legally adopting a child below three months would be entitled to maternity leave for a period of 12 weeks from the date the child is handed over to the mother.

### Why was this law considered inadequate?

This provision was challenged in 2021 by Hamsaanandini Nanduri, a lawyer who adopted siblings in 2017. Ms. Nanduri told *The Hindu* that her Bengaluru-based law firm gave her only six weeks of paid maternity leave. "I could not leave my young children at home to turn up in office after just six weeks, so I took some additional months of unpaid leave. But it made me angry that there was no policy about it," she said.

Termining the 12 weeks of maternity leave granted in 2017 to adoptive or surrogate mothers as "mere lip service", the petitioner contended that when compared to the 26 weeks of maternity leave granted to biological mothers, the provision violated the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution.

The three-month limit was unjust to both children and parents, depriving older adoptees from receiving the maternal care they need for their development and integration into their adoptive families, her lawyer argued.

The petitioner also pointed out in Court that adoption procedures take much longer than three months in India.

Also, as Ms. Nanduri told *The Hindu*: "I found on filing an RTI (Right to Information) application with CARA (Central Adoption Resource Authority) that less than 5% of children adopted at that time were under the age of three months."

### What did the Court say about motherhood?

The Court made it clear that motherhood cannot be seen through the "narrow lens of biology" alone. It referred to adoption as part of the "right to reproductive autonomy". It noted that "the period of leave plays a crucial role in fostering [an] emotional bond between the mother and the child". The Court added that

stress hormone levels in children raised in orphanages are often higher than those in children brought up in a familial environment, which pointed to a greater need for paid maternal leave for older adoptees.

### How will the judgment help adoptees and their parents?

Madhumitha Venkataraman started interviewing for jobs as a senior HR executive while waiting for an adoption referral, stipulating in every interview that she would need paid time off to support her child. Several multinational organisations balked at the idea of granting leave for more than a few weeks. But Ms. Venkataraman was finally recruited by a global media company that promised her one year of paid maternity leave. "My son came home at the age of three and a half months in 2023, so I was not eligible for maternity leave under the old law. But because this company was so accommodating, I did not have to choose between my career and my parenting," she said. "There are emotional needs, and not just for the child. The time at home with my son gave me space to grow into motherhood," she said. It is this time and space that other adoptive mothers say they will be entitled to as well, from now.

Noopur Goyal's daughter was 15 months old when she came home in 2021. "I worked as a paediatric cardiologist at a top hospital in Delhi. I knew there was no provision for maternity leave, so I had to give up my job," said Dr. Goyal, a single parent who works as a freelance consultant in Noida. "I had brought her into a new world, so I had to be present for her. An adopted child has been uprooted twice. I needed the time at home with her to build attachment and give her a sense of security." Dr. Goyal said she was financially stable to be able to do this, but she is "glad now that there is a law mandating 12 weeks of paid maternity leave for all adoptive mothers."

### What did the Court say about paternity leave?

The Court also called on the Union government to examine the need for a formal law recognising paternity leave for all fathers, adoptive or biological. Noting that India's legal framework does not adequately account for the role of fathers in childcare, it underlined the importance of shared parenting. As of now, only male government servants are entitled to 15 days' paternity leave for the birth of a child or adoption. Leaves in the private sector are generally determined by company policies.

# PROFILES

## Voice of America

**Tucker Carlson**

The American conservative commentator, who says his worldview is shaped by his Christian faith, has emerged as one of the most influential critics of U.S. interventionist foreign policy, Washington's support for Tel Aviv, and, more specifically, Israel's war in Palestine and the ongoing U.S.-Israel attack on Iran

**Varghese K. George**

American conservative commentator Tucker Carlson is one of the most consequential political figures in today's United States. Millions tune into his monologues, interviews and shows across platforms and formats at a scale rarely seen in the western public sphere. He has termed the war against Iran "evil", and said, following the American bombing of a school in Iran, that a country that thinks it is acceptable to kill innocent children in a war was not worth defending.

Mr. Carlson's influence comes from the courage of innocence. He casts himself as the child who screams that the king is naked in the parade. He asks the most elementary questions about claims held as theology by the religious and secular warriors of the West, simply by exposing them to scrutiny. What actually is "Israel's right to exist", which is distinct from any other country – the U.K., U.S., Lebanon, or Iran?, he asked *The Economist* editor-in-chief Zanny Minton Beddoes. Where exactly in the Bible does it say that supporting Israel is obligatory for Christians, he asked Republican Senator Ted Cruz, who had suggested precisely that. Can the modern state of Israel claim all of the land the Old Testament says God gave to his chosen people, he asked the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee.

After some experiments with television on CNN and MSNBC, where he tried to play the mandatory conservative role, he landed in a primetime slot on Fox News in 2017, just as Mr. Trump was upending American politics. They agreed on most issues and reinforced each other's positions. Mr. Trump considered Mr. Carlson as a Vice-Presidential candidate in 2024 before choosing J.D. Vance, who is also Mr. Carlson's friend. Mr. Carlson tried to persuade Mr. Trump against launching a war on Iran. They have since fallen out.

Mr. Carlson was let go by Fox News

in April 2023 – when his viewership was miles ahead of the competition. The separation turned out to be liberation. His prime-time show on Fox had drawn 3.5 million viewers nightly. The day after his exit, the slot had 20% fewer viewers; no show on American cable news has matched him since. Mr. Carlson launched his independent show on X in June 2023 – the debut episode was viewed approximately 120 million times. His interviews and programmes have continued to command massive audiences that no American commentator or public figure, save Mr. Trump himself, can dream of.

### A worldview shaped by faith

Mr. Carlson says his worldview is shaped by his Christian faith – which is against violence, war, collective punishment, racism and discrimination. This interpretation of faith makes him a firm opponent of abortion, same-sex marriage and affirmative action. He argues that mass migration is remaking the demographic composition of western societies, and opposes it. He calls for large families. His hybrid views rile champions of liberal internationalism, global trade, Zionism and corporate capitalism. He has so disoriented the neat pretensions and classifications of the Western public discourse that he gets labelled a white nationalist and an Islamist sympathiser at the same time.

Other labels attached to him include racist, misogynist, regressive, antisemite and neo-Nazi. These stamps are applied by his opponents; in his own words, his positions and arguments are about moral clarity, disagreeable as they may well be to many people. Muslims in America must have the same rights as Christians, Mr. Carlson told a gathering of Christian conservatives last December. His humanist position sits uneasily with the textbook definition of any nationalism.

Mr. Carlson's critique of capitalism and corporate greed on the one hand, and his assertion of cultural and religious heritage on the other, is a



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

combination that draws public support in many parts of the world. This politics defies the familiar definitions of left, right or centre.

Mr. Carlson had an unsentimental view of Mr. Trump. "Happy countries don't elect Donald Trump President. Desperate ones do. In retrospect, the lesson seemed obvious: ignore voters for long enough and you get Donald Trump," he wrote in his 2018 book *Ship of Fools*.

Would he himself run for the presidency? Mr. Carlson, whose name now appears among Republican probabilities for the 2028 election, was

recently asked. He referred to his refusal to compromise on issues and his tendency to say things that others remain silent about as impediments to a political career, but did not rule out the possibility of taking an electoral turn. He went further, saying he would be happy to debate Ted Cruz – the Senator he questioned in an interview now viewed 39 million times – on a public platform at any time. Charges of antisemitism, Islamophobia and race supremacism against him rest primarily on Mr. Carlson's willingness to host people of all opinions. Nick Fuentes, an avowed white nationalist,

appeared on Mr. Carlson's show. While finding common ground with Mr. Fuentes on the U.S. relationship with Israel, Mr. Carlson disagreed with any equation of the Israeli state with Jews, because, he said, it goes "against my Christian faith".

Born in 1969, in San Francisco, Mr. Carlson was raised by his father Dick Carlson, a reporter who became director of Voice of America and president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. His mother, Lisa McNear, was an artist. His parents divorced when he was a child; he reportedly said he had not known his mother at all when she died. He had a wild side through school and college. After four years at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, he failed to graduate. He then tried to join the CIA; his application was denied. He turned to journalism.

### The Israel factor

Mr. Carlson has framed a politics that many Americans across the spectrum find reasonable. In his own words: "Any economic system that weakens and destroys families is not worth having"; "Market capitalism is not a religion," and Republicans were "controlled by the banks".

What works him into real anger is the centrepiece of American foreign policy – unconditional support for Israel. "My real rage, what I am actually upset about, is directed toward my people, Protestant Christian, evangelical pastors who have made deals with the Israeli government, or have theology so deranged that they think their Christian faith requires them to support the murder of children, including Christian children." Conservatives are taking note. Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation – the influential conservative think tank in Washington, DC – said "Christians can critique the state of Israel without being antisemitic", coming out in public support of Mr. Carlson. The debate has only just begun, and the spotlight is firmly on Mr. Carlson.

### THE GIST

Tucker Carlson was let go by Fox News in April 2023 – when his viewership was miles ahead of the competition. His primetime show on Fox had drawn 3.5 million viewers nightly. The day after his exit, the slot had 20% fewer viewers

He launched his independent show on X in June 2023 – the debut episode was viewed approximately 120 million times

Carlson has framed a politics that many Americans across the spectrum find reasonable. In his own words: "Any economic system that weakens and destroys families is not worth having; Market capitalism is not a religion," he once said

## Asphyxiating an island nation

### Blockade on Cuba

Donald Trump's illegal blockade on the island led to the collapse of the country's electricity grid last week; many are struggling with spoiled food and stifling heat

**Srinivasan Ramani**

Two ships moving through the Atlantic Ocean have caught the attention of maritime intelligence companies and geostrategists across the world. *The Anatoly Kolodkin*, owned by the Russian government and carrying an estimated 7,30,000 barrels of crude oil, is heading towards energy-starved Cuba in clear defiance of Donald Trump's illegal energy blockade of the socialist island-nation. Shipping tracker firm Kpler reported that the *Kolodkin* could reach Cuba as early as March 23.

It would not be the first tanker attempting to bring Russian fuel to Cuba in recent weeks. *The Sea Horse*, loaded with 2,00,000 barrels of gas oil believed to be from Russia but owned by a Chinese firm, was headed to Cuba before it abruptly halted in the middle of the Atlantic last month – likely fearing consequences from the U.S.. If the Russian ships arrive, they will be Cuba's first energy shipments in three months.

Russia's help would be a massive succour to a desperate Cuba. The country's entire electricity grid collapsed last week, leaving about 10 million people without power. Although the government managed to partially restore supply to parts of Havana, the consequences have been



AFP

disastrous for ordinary Cubans. A report from the ground in Havana by *The Guardian* indicated that there are few cars on the roads, most airlines serving the island have suspended flights, the Canadian company Sherritt International has shuttered nickel mining operations in Cuba, state offices have closed, and schools have partly suspended classes. Many, the newspaper reported, are struggling with spoiled food, stifling heat, and sleepless children.

Cuba's dependence on oil is structural: it accounts for 83% of total power generation, while oil products make up 56% of total energy consumption by industry, transport, agriculture, and households.

None of this has deterred the Trump administration which continues to pursue illegal actions. On January 29, Mr. Trump signed an executive order threatening punitive tariffs on any country selling oil to Cuba. Last week, he went further, explicitly threatening to "take" the island. Cuba's fuel supplies

had been highly dependent on Venezuelan oil under the oil-for-doctors scheme instituted by Hugo Chavez. In 2022, Venezuela supplied 75% of Cuba's oil imports; by 2023, this had dropped to 58% as Mexico emerged as a key supplier with 31%. Venezuela's supply fell from 46,500 barrels a day in December 2025 to zero following Nicolas Maduro's abduction in early January. After the January 29 order, Mexico also halted shipments.

### Decades of coercion

The current crisis is also the culmination of six decades of U.S. economic coercion. What Cubans call the "blockade" began in 1962 following the Cuban Revolution and nationalisation of industries. The embargo was reinforced in 1992 by the Torricelli Act, which prohibited foreign subsidiaries of U.S. firms from trading with Cuba and barred ships that had docked in Cuba from entering U.S. ports for 180 days. The first Trump administration redesignated

Cuba as a 'State Sponsor of Terrorism' in January 2021, days before leaving office.

Cuba recently admitted it was in discussions with Washington and appears willing to make some economic changes. *The New York Times* reported that U.S. negotiators were demanding the resignation of President Miguel Diaz-Canel.

Cuba has faced and overcome severe economic crises before. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which provided subsidies averaging \$4.3 billion annually, the island went through what it termed the 'Special Period' through the 1990s. GDP fell by 35% between 1989 and 1993 and Cubans faced severe food shortages. The government responded with partial liberalisation. More recently, it has permitted micro, small and medium enterprises. But these reforms have proved insufficient against the combined weight of the embargo and subsequent sanctions.

The Cuban government has remained defiant even as it negotiates. President Diaz-Canel responded that the U.S. government wants "to take over the country, its resources, its properties, and even the very economy they seek to suffocate in order to force us to surrender". He added: "Faced with the worst-case scenario, Cuba is guided by one certainty: any external aggressor will face unyielding resistance."

**V. Nivedita**

In a marked escalation of the West Asia conflict, Israel attacked Iran's South Pars gas field, the world's largest, shared with Qatar across the Persian Gulf, on March 18. Iran, in retaliation, launched missile attacks on energy facilities in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Israel.

The U.S. was quick to distance itself from the attack, with President Donald Trump saying that Israel acted alone and that Tel Aviv would not target the "extremely important and valuable" site again.

The war on Iran had already dealt a massive energy shock to the global economy by choking off exports of crude oil and LNG through the Strait of Hormuz. Brent crude rose 5% to \$108.66 a barrel on March 18, while U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude rose 2.5% to \$98.65 a barrel. Natural gas prices also shot up significantly. Beneath the Persian Gulf, straddling the maritime boundary between Iran and Qatar, lies a reservoir so vast it has become central to the energy economies of both countries and much of the world beyond.



AP

Qatar's North Field and Iran's South Pars together contain more than 1,800 trillion cubic feet of usable gas, enough, according to a Reuters report, to supply the world's needs for 13 years. The field is shared

by Iran and Qatar, giving both countries the second and third largest natural gas reserves in the world, behind Russia. The field was first discovered in Qatari waters in 1971. South Pars was discovered in 1990. The two countries then embarked on strikingly different journeys with the same resource.

Qatar built Ras Laffan Industrial City, a bustling metropolis 80 km north of Doha, to process the gas from this field. Today, Ras Laffan processes nearly all of the country's LNG and is responsible for approximately one fifth of the world's entire LNG supply. The revenues it generated transformed Qatar from a small Gulf emirate into one of the wealthiest countries on earth.

Iran's story takes a different turn. South Pars accounts for 70-75% of the Islamic Republic's total gas production. The gas heats homes, powers factories, and fuel industries. It is the backbone of the country's domestic energy supply.

An Israeli attack on a gas field straddling the Persian Gulf and Iran's counterstrikes have laid bare how fragile the world's energy security really is

### South Pars

effectively shut Iran out of global energy markets. Mr. Trump withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in 2018, during his first term, and reimposed tough sanctions on Tehran, leaving part of one of the world's richest gas reserves stranded behind a wall of geopolitical isolation.

### India's ties

The escalation of the conflict into energy sites in the region is bad news for India. India's energy relationship with Iran has remained limited as sanctions, security and commercial concerns kept several ambitious projects from taking off. The two countries discussed a 1,036-km Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, but New Delhi stepped back from talks in 2007.

In 2009, ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) and the Hinduja Group signed agreements to pick up a stake in Phase 12 of the South Pars gas field, along with Petronet LNG. The Indian companies were to receive up to 6 million tonnes of liquefied gas annually. OVL, along

with Indian Oil Corporation and Oil India, also had plans to invest \$5-5.5 billion in developing the Farzad-B gas field. None of these projects took off.

India, which imports nearly 80% of its crude oil needs, is heavily dependent on Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and the UAE. It also imports 60% of its LPG needs and around 50% of its natural gas requirements.

"Forty-seven percent of our LNG imports are from Qatar, [therefore], any impact there or anything which affects supplies in the Middle East [West Asia] would impact us," Sujata Sharma, Joint-Secretary at the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas told reporters on March 19. New Delhi is procuring LNG from alternative suppliers, but those supplies will take time to arrive and are likely to be more expensive.

Iranian attacks have knocked out 17% of Qatar's LNG export capacity, causing an estimated \$20 billion in lost annual revenue and threatening supplies to Europe and Asia. Even if the war ends tomorrow, it could take years before production is normalised. This means that availability would be reduced, and the prices are elevated.

In LNG markets, where there are limited strategic reserves and supply chains stretch across conflict zones, even short-term disruptions can have outsized consequences.

The Sunday Statesman

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# Water and gender equality

*Women are increasingly involved in technical and operational roles such as managing water supply systems. In Odisha, women take the role of water managers and independent water users breaking away from traditional restrictive roles. Gujarat incentivises women-led water committees. In Himachal Pradesh women are actively involved in rainwater harvesting projects ensuring that during the dry season there is continuous water supply*



## Wasted skills

India is not facing a jobs crisis in the conventional sense. It is facing a utilisation crisis - of talent, education, and aspiration. Each year, millions of young Indians enter the labour force with degrees in hand, often as first-generation learners. Over the past three decades, the country has dramatically expanded access to higher education, driven largely by private institutions and supported by policy frameworks shaped by bodies like the University Grants Commission. Enrolment has broadened across caste and class lines, signalling real social progress.

Yet the labour market these graduates encounter is structurally misaligned with their expectations. The problem is not merely unemployment; it is that the economy is producing too few quality, salaried roles that match the skills being created. This is why unemployment rates are often higher among graduates than among the less educated - a paradox that has persisted since at least the time of economist Joan Robinson.

The deeper issue lies in India's growth trajectory. Unlike the export-led industrialisation seen in South Korea or Taiwan, India's post-liberalisation model has leaned heavily on services, particularly IT and business process outsourcing. Institutions such as NASSCOM have helped position India as a global services hub. But this success has come with limits: services are skill-intensive and selective, not mass employers.

As a result, the economy has split into two tracks. At the top, a narrow segment of highly skilled workers secures stable, well-paying jobs. Below them lies a vast informal sector where most young people eventually end up - often after years of searching - taking up self-employment, gig work, or low-productivity roles. Over time, aspirations adjust downward, but the initial mismatch leaves lasting scars: delayed careers, lost earnings, and diminished confidence.

This also explains a subtle but troubling shift. Increasingly, even educated young men are returning to or remaining in family-based work - farms, small shops, informal enterprises - not out of choice but necessity. What was once largely invisible female labour is now absorbing male graduates as well, signalling a regression in employment quality, not progress.

Policy responses have so far focused on supply - more education, more skills and more training. Flagship initiatives like the Skill India Mission aim to enhance employability. But this approach assumes that jobs will follow skills. In reality, without a parallel expansion of labour-intensive sectors, particularly manufacturing, skills alone cannot solve the problem. Time is the binding constraint. India's demographic advantage, long celebrated as its greatest economic asset, will begin to narrow within a decade. If the current cohort of young people is not productively absorbed, the country risks converting a potential dividend into a long-term liability.

The real question, then, is not how many jobs India can create, but what kind of economy it is building - one that concentrates opportunity among the few, or one that can absorb the many. Until that question is answered decisively, India's most educated generation may also become its most underutilised.

## Buying time

The US Federal Reserve's decision to hold interest rates steady is less a mark of confidence than an admission of constraint. Policymakers are confronting a familiar but uncomfortable scenario: inflationary pressure driven not by domestic demand, but by geopolitical shock. The Iran conflict has pushed oil prices upward, and with them, the cost structure of the global economy. In such a moment, monetary policy begins to look like a blunt instrument.

Under chairman Jerome Powell, the Fed has chosen caution. That caution is understandable. Inflation, which had been gradually cooling, now risks re-acceleration due to energy costs and the lingering effects of tariffs introduced by President Donald Trump's administration. Yet, the labour market remains relatively stable, and growth forecasts have not collapsed. This leaves the central bank caught between two incomplete signals: prices are rising again, but the economy is not clearly faltering.

What makes this moment more complex is the nature of the inflation itself. Oil shocks are historically resistant to interest rate policy. Raising borrowing costs will not increase crude supply from the Gulf, nor will it ease shipping disruptions or geopolitical risk premiums. At the same time, cutting rates to pre-empt a slowdown could entrench inflation expectations, particularly if energy prices remain volatile. The Fed is, in effect, responding to a supply-side problem with demand-side tools.

This uncertainty is already visible in financial markets, where rate-cut expectations are being repeatedly pushed back, signalling that investors themselves are unsure whether inflation or slowdown will dominate the months ahead.

This mismatch explains the current pause. It is not indecision so much as recognition that any decisive move could be counterproductive. The central bank's projections - slightly higher inflation, steady unemployment, modest growth - suggest a narrow path where the economy absorbs the shock without tipping into recession. But such projections rest on fragile assumptions: that oil prices will stabilise, that tariffs do not amplify cost pressures further, and that consumer sentiment holds.

There is also a deeper structural shift at play. The global economy is entering an era where geopolitical risk is no longer episodic but persistent. Conflicts in energy-producing regions, trade fragmentation, and tighter migration policies are all reshaping supply conditions. In this environment, central banks may find their traditional playbook increasingly inadequate. The tools designed for managing cyclical demand are less effective against recurring external shocks.

The Fed's current stance, therefore, is best understood as strategic restraint. It is buying time - waiting for clearer data, for oil markets to settle, and for inflation trends to reassert direction. But this waiting game carries its own risk. If inflation proves more durable, delayed action could force sharper tightening later. If growth weakens suddenly, the Fed may find itself behind the curve. The real conclusion is stark: monetary policy alone cannot stabilise an economy buffeted by geopolitical forces. The Fed is not just pausing; it is operating at the edge of its relevance.

Since 1993 the global community has been observing every year on March 22 the World Water Day (WWD) focusing attention on the importance of fresh water and advocating for sustainable management of water resources. A core focus of WWD is to support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water and sanitation for all by 2030. Since women and girls are disproportionately affected by water-related challenges due to entrenched gender roles, inadequate infrastructure, under-representation, etc., the WWD 2026 calls for a rights-based approach where women have equal voice, leadership and opportunities for water decision making. Thus, the theme of WWD 2026 is "Water and Gender Equality".

The role of women in water governance was initially considered in 1992 at the International Dublin (Ireland) Global Conference. Principle 3 of the Dublin Statement establishes that women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water and therefore, positive policies need to be adopted not only to address the specific needs of women with respect to water, but also to empower them to participate at all levels of the water resources programme, including decision making and implementation. It was also observed that although in households, women are primary providers of water resources, around the world, they are rarely involved in water management.

Even today the world is still far from achieving gender equality in water and sanitation. These challenges are now exacerbated by the consequences of climate change. As water scarcity, heat waves and droughts are now common, women and girls walk greater distances to fetch water. In many cases this can affect girls' chances for being enrolled in schools. A study shows that a one-hour time reduction in water collection can increase girls' enrolment in educational institutions.

Ensuring safe and widespread access to WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) for women and girls contributes to gender

equality and their inclusion in society. Until recently menstrual hygiene was completely overlooked in water and sanitation places, excluding women and girls in public life. During this time girls miss school, and women are sometimes forced to stay at home affecting their employment. Thus, we generally risk the 2030 SDG Agenda, as access to water and sanitation are human rights. When families are unable to enjoy their rights, their health is immensely affected, curtailing their education and employment opportunities and denying their full role in society.

The SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) are interrelated and the Paris Agreement also endorses gender response action as essential for climate resilience. Integrating a gender responsive approach is not only fair but also necessary. When women participate fully, communities benefit from a wide range of perspectives, strong local ownership and innovative problem-solving approaches for achieving sustainable, equitable water solutions.

Globally 26 per cent of women and girls (1.1 billion) lack access to safely managed drinking water; in 53 countries where data exists, women and girls spend 250 million hours per day on water collection, which is over three times more than men and boys; worldwide only two out of five schools provide menstrual health education; adolescent girls and women living in rural areas are more likely to use reusable materials to manage menstruation and to have no improved water services on the premises; 1.8 billion people in the world still do not have drinking water on their premises and in two out of three households women are primarily responsible for water collection; adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years are less likely to participate in work, school and social activities during menstruation compared with women aged 20 to 49; fewer than 50 countries have laws and policies that specifically mention women's participation in rural sanitation and water resources management, while supplying almost half of all agricultural labour in low and middle

income countries, and women's agricultural productivity is on an average 20-30 per cent lower than male farmers. (FAO 2017, WHO/UNICEF 2019-25, UN Water 2021, UN Women 2024-25).

In 2019 the government introduced the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) scheme (called Har Ghar Jal) for enhancing rural water governance for achieving SDG goals and providing clean water access to rural households. Till 11 February 2026, out of 19.25 crore rural households in India, about 15.88 crore get piped water access in their homes.

JJM's initiative is not for creating infrastructure but for water service delivery. Village Water and Sanitation Committee/Pani Samiti or user groups (with 50 per cent women participation) are required to plan, implement, manage, operate, and maintain their own water supply systems. Four key pillars of government such as People's Participation, stakeholder participation, political will, and optimum utilization of resources define the spirit of the JJM. People's participation or Jan Bhagidari is also an important pillar for success. JJM made space for women to share water supply decisions directly and it has developed a gender-responsive approach to water management by empowering women while improving water service delivery. JJM's decentralized community-owned approach means that women are not only consulted but they are also decision makers. In Bundelkhand region, these JJM programmes offer training to farmers in developing technical skills like constructing check dams and participating in rainwater harvesting. Under the JJM schemes five persons, especially women, in every village are being trained to check the quality of water supply using simple 'ready to use' kits.

JJM mandates 50 per cent women's



S K SARKAR

The writer is Senior Advisor, TERI, New Delhi and a former Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources, Govt. of India

## The Daily Star

# Canal-digging drive must resist partisan influences

Rivers and canals are to Bangladesh what arteries are to the human body. The country is uniquely blessed with a vast, intricate capillary network of waterways, including rivers and canals. Yet its natural circulatory system has suffered severe sclerosis for decades, falling victim to myopic development.

Siltation, rampant illegal encroachment, and chronic institutional neglect have choked these channels. In their absence, farmers have been forced to relentlessly draw down the country's precious and finite groundwater reserves to keep agricultural production afloat.

The formal inauguration of a nationwide canal excavation and re-excavation programme by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman is thus a necessary intervention. By breaking ground on a 12-km stretch of the Sahapara canal in Dinajpur, the government has taken aim at a mounting

environmental and economic threat. The launch - coordinated with simultaneous excavation efforts led by ministers and lawmakers in 54 districts - marks the first phase of the implementation of a colossal election manifesto pledge made by BNP to restore 20,000 km of rivers and canals across the country.

The economic and ecological rationale behind the initiative is compelling. Redirecting the agricultural burden back to surface water will strengthen rural water management.

A freely flowing canal network serves a dual purpose: it functions as a drainage system to mitigate severe monsoon waterlogging while also acting as a reservoir to combat drought.

Officials at the water resources ministry are right to note that better use of stored surface water could improve irrigation,

boost agricultural productivity, and create employment opportunities for rural communities. More importantly, it could halt the dangerous depletion of the water table in northern districts.

Yet embedded within the DNA of this ambitious initiative is a political risk that the government must carefully navigate.

Infrastructure and environmental projects in Bangladesh endure only when they achieve broad social consensus. If this colossal excavation effort is treated merely as a partisan agenda, it will inevitably fall short of its potential.

The government must ensure that excavated canals do not fall into familiar traps: corruption, lack of maintenance, and swift re-encroachment by the politically connected.

For the project to achieve genuine transformation, the effort must be deliberately and visibly depoliticised. It should evolve

representation in Village Water and Sanitation Committees. Women are increasingly involved in testing, maintaining and managing water infrastructure. Women are increasingly involved in technical and operational roles such as managing water supply systems. In Odisha women take the role of water managers and independent water users breaking away from traditional restrictive roles. Gujarat incentivises women-led water committees. In Himachal Pradesh women are actively involved in rainwater harvesting projects ensuring that during the dry season there is continuous water supply.

'Nari Shakti Se Jal Shakti' schemes promote water conservation in many states such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, etc. In Maharashtra women play an important role in adopting micro-irrigation techniques for increasing water-use efficiency in agriculture. In Rajasthan, women-led groups build check dams, leading to improved ground water levels and ensuring water availability.

Despite the progress as indicated above, women's participation is often restricted by patriarchal norms particularly in decision-making processes regarding water distribution, pricing, maintenance etc. There is a need to reverse this trend in the near future.

In the Water Policy of the Central and state governments, there is a need to emphasize women empowerment in all aspects of water management. The Bundelkhand approach on water management should be followed in other states for women's participation in decision making in water governance. SDG Goal 5 (Gender equality) should be addressed in all water programmes in the country. Women should be water leaders, water managers, and technical experts in water governance and conservation. There is a need to ensure legal and policy reforms that support equal rights of women in water management.

Second, by using AI techniques, adequate data and knowledge on women's participation in water management should be publicized effectively.

Third, in every water programme, incentives to women should be given. These could be financial incentives or clear and well publicised recognition. The Women Water Champion Programme (WWCP) of the National Water Mission which recognizes 41 women every year at grassroots level for leading efforts in water conservation and amplifying women's voice in decision-making, should be adequately publicized and effectively implemented. Such programmes should also be introduced in all states of India.

Fourth, capacity building of women for water management should be adopted by involving different stakeholders, experts, NGOs, policy makers etc. There should be a facilitating platform for women, for showing the best practices influencing water policies.

Finally, SDG 13 (Climate Action) stresses the need to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Since women and girls will be most affected in water resource management for water access, climate resilient remedial action should be addressed in all government policies/programmes.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

## Condemnable

Sir, This refers to today's report, "Around 400 killed, 250 wounded in Pak airstrikes on Afghan rehab centre," in The Statesman. The reported airstrikes by Pakistan on a drug rehabilitation centre in Afghanistan, allegedly killing 400 people and injuring 250, represent a chilling descent into brutality that defies all norms of humanity and international law.

If verified, this act is not merely a military excess but a calculated atrocity against some of the most vulnerable individuals - those seeking recovery and rehabilitation.

Targeting a civilian facility, particularly one dedicated to healing, exposes a disturbing disregard for human life and the principles enshrined in global humanitarian conventions. Such an assault cannot be justified under



any pretext of national security or counterterrorism. It instead raises grave concerns about proportionality, accountability, and the erosion of ethical restraints in conflict zones. The international community must respond with unequivocal condemnation and demand a transparent investigation. Silence or diplomatic hedging would only embolden further violations, normalising a dangerous precedent where civilian lives become expendable in geopolitical calculations.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru, 18 March.

## Sensitivity

Sir, This has reference to the news item "Sonam Wangchuk released from Jodhpur jail after 170 days" (15 March).

Ladakh's separation from J&K and reorganisation into a Union Territory in 2019 raised significant administrative, political, environmental and demographic concerns.

Since then, it has constantly witnessed widespread protests over the ruling party's failure to keep its promises of autonomy and inclusive development.

Despite climate activist Sonam Wangchuk's release from detention under the National Security Act, the agitation has again gained momentum across Ladakh and renewed demands of statehood for Ladakh, constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule, and

greater control over land, culture, and local governance by tribal communities, have been raised.

Ladakh is a sensitive and strategically important border state that needs inclusive and responsive governance. The ruling dispensation should adopt a more nuanced approach.

It should move beyond mere symbolic gestures, actively engage in discussion and dialogue with all stakeholders and address their genuine demands.

This would win the trust of alienated people, ensure lasting stability, protect the region's fragile ecosystem, usher in sustainable development in the Himalayas, and check China's trans-border encroachments and infrastructural build-up.

Yours, etc., D S Kang, Hoshiarpur, 17 March.

# The privilege of silence

ABHIK ROY

Few scandals in recent memory have shaken public confidence in institutions as profoundly as the revelations surrounding the late financier Jeffrey Epstein. What initially appeared to be the story of a wealthy man engaged in criminal behaviour gradually revealed something far more disturbing: a network of privilege and influence that allowed abuse to flourish for years.

Epstein was not an obscure criminal operating on the margins of society. On the contrary, he moved comfortably within the highest circles of wealth and power. His social orbit included political leaders, billionaires, celebrities, academics, and influential figures from across the world. His homes and private aircraft became gathering places for individuals whose wealth and status placed them among the global elite. The disturbing implication is that the scandal was not merely about the crimes of one individual, but about the social environment that enabled those crimes to persist.

For years, Epstein maintained extraordinary access to influential people even after serious allegations about his conduct had surfaced. That fact raises an unavoidable question: how could a man widely accused of exploiting vulnerable young girls continue to enjoy the company and confidence of the powerful?

The answer lies partly in the culture that often surrounds extreme wealth and privilege. In elite social circles, influence and money create environments where scrutiny becomes uncomfortable. Invitations to exclusive gatherings, access to

private networks, and the promise of financial opportunity produce relationships that discourage confrontation. In such settings, troubling truths can remain hidden in plain sight, not necessarily because everyone is unaware, but because acknowledging them would disrupt a world built on mutual advantage and social deference.

The Epstein scandal therefore illustrates how power can distort accountability. Allegations surfaced repeatedly over the years, yet meaningful consequences were slow to follow. Legal proceedings moved cautiously, investigations stalled, and the voices of victims struggled to gain attention. For the young women who came forward, the imbalance of power was overwhelming. Many came from disadvantaged backgrounds and found themselves confronting not merely a wealthy individual but an entire social structure shaped by prestige, money, and influence. Their experiences reveal how systems of privilege can silence the vulnerable, especially when the accused inhabit social circles that command admiration and authority.

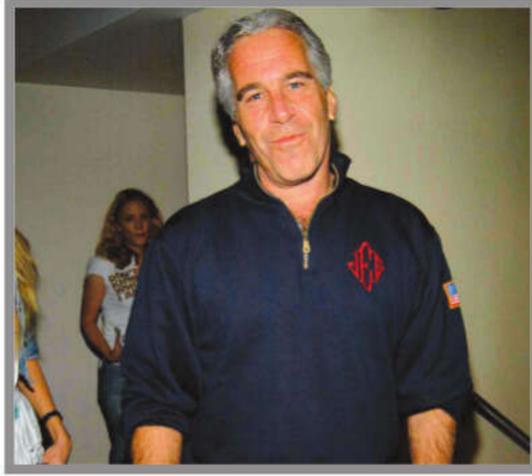
In societies that claim to uphold equality before the law, such outcomes should provoke deep reflection. Justice cannot function effectively if wealth and status create invisible barriers to accountability. The perception that powerful individuals operate under different rules is perhaps the most corrosive consequence of this scandal. When citizens begin to suspect that the law applies differently to the rich and the influential, trust in institutions inevitably begins to erode. Courts, investigators, and law-enforcement agencies derive

their legitimacy from the principle that no one stands above the law. When that principle appears compromised, the credibility of the entire system comes into question.

The case also raises a broader issue about how modern societies respond to wrongdoing within elite circles. Extreme wealth often brings with it a powerful social shield. Individuals who move within exclusive networks benefit from prestige, influence, and access to resources that ordinary citizens can scarcely imagine. Their reputations are protected by institutions that may depend on their patronage, donations, or political connections. In such circumstances, allegations against influential figures frequently encounter hesitation rather than decisive action. Journalists may face pressure to tread carefully, institutions may worry about confronting powerful benefactors, and legal processes may move slowly when complicated financial and political interests are involved.

The cumulative effect is a culture in which silence becomes easier than accountability. Such silence can have devastating consequences for victims. Many of the young women who accused Epstein of abuse spent years struggling to be heard, their voices overshadowed by the prestige of those surrounding him. Yet their persistence eventually forced the world to confront uncomfortable realities.

Their courage reminds us that systems of privilege are not invincible. When victims speak out and investigative journalism exposes hidden truths, even powerful networks can be challenged. Nevertheless, the fact that such



NOW AND AGAIN

## FIXATED BY FOOTWEAR

J.A. RAMA MOORTHY

The other day, I went to bed after reading the Sherlock Holmes mystery novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The entire night I was fixated over the plot.

The next morning, I woke up to find one of my boots missing. I recalled how the vendetta-driven Jack Stapleton had stolen the boots of Sir Henry Baskerville so as to place it before his massive hound to scent out and attack when the latter was walking alone at night. I shuddered at the thought of a similar fate awaiting me.

I confided my fears to my neighbours. They assured me that there were no deserted moors in Kolkata. Also, I was not a politician, film-star, businessman, or one involved in property disputes, to be targeted in this manner. At the same time, what happened to me was not something unusual and that a couple of households in the neighbourhood had experienced their footwear being lifted by stray dogs. Therefore, I should stop being carried away by mystery novels.

That settled my nerves, but I could not fully get shoes out of my system. I recalled the numerous instances of my friends losing newly bought footwear from outside religious places.

I recalled how my father never went alone to a temple. In those days, there were no booths for depositing your footwear. My father would take along my mother, or me. There, while one would go inside for darshan, the other would stand guard footwear.

For a long time, I wondered why a disgusted person would fling only one shoe at a 'lousy poet' during a kavi sammelan or mushaira. Had both been used as missiles, the hapless poet could at least have his shoe rack full of useable footwear!

To my mind, the Japanese are the most innovative people in the world. Even when they choose to protest, they use their creativity. Savour this one: the workers in a shoe factory were aggrieved that their demand for a substantial pay hike was not being met. Did they use tactics like strikes, or lockouts, to have their way? No Sir. They started producing shoes for only one foot. When the factory was flooded with unusable shoes, the management was forced to concede the demands.

Readers may recall Erich Maria Remarque's iconic war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, set in the backdrop of the First World War. Here, some of the soldiers are not unduly perturbed over their friends being killed. Instead, they feel smug in the feeling that they can now 'inherit' the boots of their fallen colleagues.

Even Dale Carnegie, the doyen of motivational writers and speakers used the footwear analogy to put across his point for being thankful for what we have, instead of cribbing about what we do not have. In his book, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, he prominently used the following lines:

I had the blues,  
Because I had no shoes,  
Until upon the street,  
I met a man who had no feet

## News Items

### CALCUTTA ROBBERY

## SIRCAR RELIEVED OF RS. 3,400

London, Mar.

In connexion with a robbery committed in Tarachand Dutt Street, Calcutta, on Friday night, the Jorasanka police have arrested two taxi drivers, Abdul Kader and Ranki Singh. It is said that Badridas Brahman, a sircar in the employ of a Marwari firm, was going along the street, carrying Rs. 3,400 in notes, tied in a piece of cloth. He had just reached the head of Mandir Street, when a taxi occupied by four men, coming from behind, suddenly pulled up in front of him. Two men got down from the cab and snatching away the bundle of notes from the sircar boarded the taxi again and drove away.

### DACCA ACCIDENT

## DEATH OF TWO COOLIES: TWO MISSING

Dacca, Mar.

Yesterday, while some coolies were working at a sewerage under construction at the Bangsal Road side, the banks of the drain, plinth were unprotected, gave way, with the result that the coolies fell under the debris. Shortly after two men who are rescued died at the Mitford Hospital. A third man who was also taken out shortly after is lying in a precarious condition in hospital. It is stated that about five men were working when the sides gave way, but no trace of the other two could yet be obtained.

## STATE RAILWAY EARNINGS

(From Our Correspondent.)

DELHI, Mar.

The total approximate gross earnings of all State railways for the week ended March 6, 1926 amounted to Rs. 2.01 crores or Rs. 22 lakhs less than the figures for the corresponding period of 1924-25. The total approximate gross earnings from April 1925 to March 6, 1926, amounted to Rs. 91.90 crores or Rs. 100 lakhs less than the figures for the corresponding period of last year.

# What his words tell us about Trump

RODRIGO PRAINO

US President Donald Trump speaks in a way unlike any of his predecessors.

His distinctive and highly recognisable style may even play a role in his appeal to his political base. Since the infamous Access Hollywood tapes, he has got away with saying things none of his predecessors would have ever dreamed of saying in public. This is particularly striking in a country that was shocked to learn in the 1970s that Richard Nixon used dirty words in the Oval Office.

Scholars have described Trump's rhetorical style as "unbalanced vituperation", stressing his constant use of demeaning language, false equivalences and exclusion.

Even more strikingly, a recent study found Trump's use of violent vocabulary, especially language linked to war and crime, represents a radical departure from US political tradition.

Since the beginning of the war with Iran, Trump's rhetoric has become even more combative and outrageous, marking an even sharper shift from the language used by his predecessors in similar occasions.

What effect does this have and what does it tell us about the commander-in-chief's state of mind?

Trump announced the death of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by calling him a "wretched and vile man". Later, in a Truth Social post, he called him "one of the most evil people in history" and referred to "his gang of bloodthirsty thugs".

A few days later, he continued denigrating leaders of the Iranian regime, describing them as "deranged scumbags" whose killing was for him a "great honor". He has also insulted Mojtaba Khamenei, who succeeded his father as Iran's Supreme Leader, describing him as "unacceptable" and a "lightweight". He also stated during an interview that he believes Mojtaba is alive but "damaged".

Americans are no strangers to their presidents using strong language to describe adversaries. Ronald Reagan famously referred to the Soviet Union as an "evil empire", and George W. Bush warned of an "Axis of Evil".

Yet such rhetoric rarely extended to personal insults against individual foreign leaders. Leaders generally bring a mood to these speeches that recognises their words will be frightening for many people. It also acknowledges that in a war situation, lives will inevitably be lost.

George W. Bush, for example, simply stated that US forces "captured Saddam Hussein alive". Barack Obama announced to the nation Osama bin Laden's killing by addressing the mastermind of the worst terrorist attack on US soil simply as "Osama bin Laden, leader of al Qaeda, and a terrorist".

Trump has also shown little restraint in issuing threats. At the beginning of the conflict he stated in an interview that he had not even started hitting Iran hard and that the "big wave" was coming soon. He later posted on Truth Social that he was ready to hit Iran "twenty times harder" and threatened to "make it virtually impossible



Iran to ever be built back, as a Nation, again", adding that "death, fire and fury will reign [sic] upon them". At one point, he even suggested that he might strike Iran's Kharg Island oil export hub again "just for fun".

This language is not only vitriolic. It also is in sharp contrast with the rhetoric of past US presidents who often emphasised restraint in the use of force and showed willingness to de-escalate military conflicts.

Previous presidents have been very clear about the strength of the US military, but they have also tried to focus on diplomacy and negotiation.

Obama, talking about Syria, famously remarked that "the United States military doesn't do pinpricks". Yet, moments later, he asked Congress to postpone a vote authorising the use of force while his administration pursued diplomatic options.

Nixon stated during the Vietnam war that "The peace we seek to win is not victory over any other

people, but the peace that comes 'with healing in its wings'; with compassion for those who have suffered; with understanding for those who have opposed us; with the opportunity for all the peoples of this Earth to choose their own destiny".

Trump's threats of escalation also raise concerns about the safety of civilians and the protection of critical infrastructure. He recently stated he "didn't do anything to do with the energy lines, because having to rebuild that would take years". This remark suggests some awareness of the consequences of such actions.

Even so, earlier presidents often distinguished explicitly between military targets and civilian populations. George H. W. Bush, during the Gulf War, declared "our quarrel is not with the people of Iraq. We do not wish for them to suffer".

In 2003, George W. Bush warned Iraqi military and civilian personnel: "do not destroy oils wells, a source of wealth that belongs to the Iraqi people. Do not obey any command to use weapons of mass destruction against anyone, including the Iraqi people".

It is still unclear why Trump's rhetoric is so violent and so far removed from the language of virtually every US president before him. A 2020 study found Trump's foreign policy rhetoric often aims to create a sense of crisis to mobilise his domestic base – or distract from political troubles at home.

Some observers argue Trump has used, or even manufactured, national crises as a mechanism to

expand executive power through emergency declarations. Whether this is the case in the current war with Iran remains to be seen. But words certainly matter.

On 19 December 1945, US President Harry S. Truman issued a special message to Congress recommending the Department of War and the Department of the Navy be merged into a single "Department of National Defense". Between 1947 and 1949, Congress and the executive branch implemented this proposal.

Many other countries went through a similar process in the postwar period, replacing the language of "war" from the name of their departments and ministries with the more restrained term "defence".

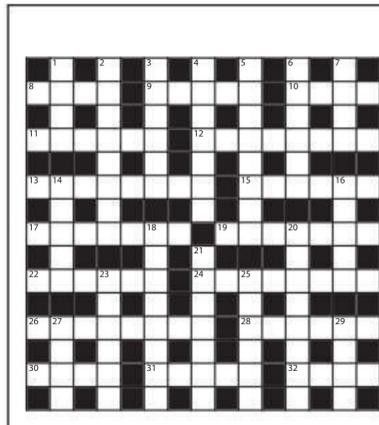
Seventy-six years later, in 2025, Trump reversed that tradition with an executive order renaming the Department of Defense as the US Department of War.

This same executive order clearly states that the new name demonstrates a willingness to fight wars at a moment's notice. And the reason is not only to defend, but to "secure what is ours".

Viewed in light of the current war with Iran, those words provide some insight into the administration's thinking. They also invite reflection on other words coming out of the administration and its supporters, including the "Gulf of America", the idea of Canada as the "51st state", and even the far-fetched "Trump 2028" chant.

(The writer is Professor & Director, Jeff Bleich Centre for Democracy and Disruptive Technologies, Flinders University. This article was published on www.theconversation.com)

## Crossword | No. 29341



### Last Sunday's Solution

SNOWBERRY ABSORB  
TIA OXYUA  
RELIC SPECTATOR  
I P K E R R I  
DRAUGHT OX TINEPT  
E R T E Z  
IN JOKE S I T I C I O N  
W T U A H E  
ARSENIC SUNLIT  
S D Y H D H F  
HOKUM PROSECUTE  
E E U R P R A E  
DAMP SQUIT R E H A B  
U P I S O G U L L  
P U T S I C H S I T A R G I A Z E

### ACROSS

- 8 See 4 Down
- 9 Rock partner's body (5)
- 10 Setter caught on to representation (4)
- 11/19 Former wrestler now enjoys hand jiving (6,7)
- 12 Trick signal from Robin? (8)
- 13 Pour very shakily for dealer (8)
- 15 A burden is over (6)
- 17 South of Madrid, capital of Brazil – bizarre! (7)
- 19 See 11
- 22 Where you might be exposed to French letter on the radio? (6)
- 24 Way to put down or flatter animal, maybe (8)
- 26 Where to find novel rock? (8)
- 28 Rock flower (6)
- 30 You and I exist incompletely and deteriorate (4)

### DOWN

- 1 "Kept by tame owners," as pet would say? (4)
- 2 Set ovary in motion – be my guest! (4,4)
- 3 Hard stone over English cathedral city ... (6)
- 4/8 ... has turrets and a rocky peak (7,4)
- 5 Rocky state of a party led by Brown, for example, in America (8)
- 6 Witness struggle over nude twerp (6)
- 7 Origins of hard outgrowth ruminant needs? (4)
- 14 Adieu loyal sudoku solver: you ultimately rock (5)
- 16 Ruin treat (5)
- 18 Rock is a 50-carat amalgam, middle-sized (8)
- 20 Desperately need a key to perception without enhancement (5,3)
- 21 Rock climbing in secret in Argentina (7)
- 23 Star of toilet graffiti? (6)
- 25 Stick poster in this place (6)
- 27 Rocky area on eastern tip of Finland (4)
- 29 Stone-working axes (4)

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

## Millions of citizen non-voters!



**ACROSS THE AISLE**  
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

FOR NEARLY four decades of the history of the Republic of India, not many people noticed the Election Commission of India (ECI). Not many were aware of the provisions in Part XV of the Constitution of India.

Elections were held once in five years to the Lok Sabha and to the State Assemblies. People flocked to vote but few were aware of the law, the rules, the arrangements, the preparations, and the process leading to the outcome. If one found his/her name in the electoral rolls, one could vote — several millions did vote and several thousands did not vote. Whichever candidate won the election in a constituency, a big majority of voters accepted it, and moved on.

Elections were largely uneventful barring some incidents of violence or impersonation. However, behind the calm facade there lay many injustices. Vast numbers of people were not included in the electoral rolls. Large sections of the electorate were prevented from exercising their right to vote — especially Dalits, tribals, groups of persons belonging to the backward communities in areas where there was a dominant community, and religious minorities.

There was a hue and cry for a few days, but it died down soon.

### Enter crusader

The ECI was represented by the Chief Election Commissioner. The CEC was a distinguished civil servant but, by and large, faceless and silent. The CEC was rarely dragged into controversies or to the Courts. The reported instances where the CEC was drawn into the limelight were when parties split and there were public fights over the reserved symbols.

T N Seshan was appointed CEC in 1990 and breathed life into Part XV of the Constitution. He enforced strict compliance with the Acts, rules and instructions. He made people aware of the ECI and its enormous powers. He instituted cases in the Supreme Court and invited verdicts that became binding rules. He was scrupulously neutral, showed no favour or disfavour, and became a folk hero. Other distinguished CECs included Mr J M Lyngdoh, Mr T S Krishnamurthy, the late Navin Chawla and Mr S Y Quraishi. The slide began in the last decade and CECs have been embroiled in controversies.

### To sir with mischief

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in 2025-26 exploded the neutrality of the CEC. Under Article 326 of the Constitution, "elections... shall be on the basis of adult suffrage; that is to say, every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than eighteen years of age... shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election". The stress is on *adult suffrage, citizen and entitled to be registered as a voter.*

Millions of the adult population — on average 10 per cent — are missing from the electoral rolls. Are the missing persons adult, yes. Are they citizens, yes, unless proved to the contrary. So, why are they missing?

The plain meaning of these words is that the electoral rolls must include the adult population of the country unless the person is not a citizen of India. Normally, the total number of voters in the updated electoral rolls of every state must be nearly equal to the adult population of the State. If a Census were held every ten years, the count of the adult population would be accurate. The last Census in India, unfortunately, was held in 2011. However, there are advanced statistical tools to estimate the population, and these tools are employed by expert bodies. Therefore, it is logical to argue that the total number of voters in the updated electoral rolls of a State must be nearly equal to the estimate of the adult population of that State.

The post-SIR electoral rolls have revealed an unpleasant surprise. Mr Yogendra Yadav has demonstrated that the divergence between the number in the post-SIR electoral rolls and the estimated

number of the adult population in States is shockingly high — leading to the conclusion that the SIR was not inclusive and left out millions of adult citizens. Here is a tell-tale table (on the left):

### Perverse result

Ideally, the last column in all the rows should be 100 per cent, but we do not live in a perfect world. A small number of genuine adult citizens may be left out of the electoral rolls despite an earnest effort by the government, political parties and citizens groups. However, such an effort was conspicuously absent during the SIR exercise. Contrast with the effort made in the United States under the Civil Rights Act, 1964, to enroll black Americans who had been excluded on illegal grounds. The burden was on the ECI to ensure that persons were included in the electoral rolls on the basis of adult suffrage. On the contrary, under SIR, the ECI adopted a hostile attitude and cast the burden upon the voters to prove their citizenship; those who were unable to do so were promptly excluded from the electoral rolls.

As can be seen from the last column of the Table, millions of the adult population — on average 10 per cent — are missing from the electoral rolls. Are the missing persons adult, yes. Are they citizens, yes, unless proved to the contrary. So, why are they missing?

Instead of preventing proven non-citizens becoming voters, the ECI has 'succeeded' in turning millions of eligible citizens into non-voters.

STATE	PRE-SIR ELECTORS TO POPULATION RATIO	FINAL ELECTORS TO POPULATION RATIO*
Bihar	96.7%	90.7%
Chhattisgarh	99.5	87.3
Gujarat	96.0	82.7
Kerala	100.7	97.2
Madhya Pradesh	96.0	89.8
Rajasthan	97.2	91.2
Tamil Nadu	106.8	94.3
Overall	98.7%	90.3%

(\* POPULATION PROJECTIONS AVAILABLE IN REPORT OF TECHNICAL GROUP ON POPULATION PROJECTIONS, JULY 2020)

(Next column: April 5, 2026)

## In times of trouble



**FIFTH COLUMN**  
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

AS I sat down to write this piece, pictures of a handsome young man appeared on social media with a noose on his chest where a medal should have been. His name was Saleh Mohammadi, he was nineteen years old and had won international prizes for his country in wrestling. He was executed by Iran's despotic, merciless regime last week for publicly protesting their wicked deeds. His execution reminded me why I celebrated the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and posted on 'X' that when evil men are killed, the world's shadows become a little less dark for a moment.

My post evoked angry reactions from Muslim friends who argued that no matter how awful a regime, it should not be changed by military intervention from another country. I reminded them that thousands of Iranians had been shot dead in the streets earlier this year because they dared to defy the Islamist tyrants who have kept an iron grip on Iran for half a century. In democracies, angry protests can bring regime change. Not in theocracies when the rulers claim that Allah is on their team. I continue to believe that the world is a better place without the Ayatollah.

Now let's talk about the war. It is not going well for the side that I believe India as a democracy should support. The United States and Israel have the most competent intelligence agencies in the world so why is it that they did not anticipate that Iran would use the Strait of Hormuz to defeat them? Donald Trump spends not a day without boasting about how the war has already been won but last week, he ranted and railed against his European allies for not helping him unblock this vital strait. Every time he castigated NATO for not coming to the aid of the United States, he inadvertently made clear that he was taken by surprise when Iran weaponised this vital waterway. Iran has also weaponised the energy sources of its Gulf neighbours and the price for this will be paid by countries like our own.

Are we prepared for what could happen next? Are we prepared for the possibility that the war could drag on and that the price of oil that has doubled in the first three weeks of this war could double again in another three weeks? If this happens it would be catastrophic for the whole world and especially for India. But there is a lesson to be learned, and this is that we need to do much more to reduce our dependence on foreign sources of oil and gas.

What can we do? Quite a lot. More than ninety percent of Indian oil and gas resources have not yet been exploited, according to expert estimates, and one reason is that this is an expensive business and our 'socialist' rulers kept private companies away from these resources for decades. Allowing Indian private sector companies more access is necessary. If we also need foreign companies and foreign technologies, let us find them urgently.

While endlessly watching the news all last week I came upon a political lesson that we could also learn from. I happened to stumble upon Tulsi Gabbard, director of National Intelligence in the United States, being interrogated by the senate intelligence committee and was astounded at the inquisition she faced. Jon Ossoff, from Georgia, asked her repeatedly whether she thought Iran posed an 'imminent nuclear threat' to the United States. When she tried to evade the question by saying that it was the President's responsibility to decide this, he reminded her that it was her direct responsibility to provide an assessment that was objective and non-political. She had no answers. His point was made.

Why have we never seen our own parliamentary committees ever do something similar? Why after Operation Sindoor were there not open hearings of this kind? Is it because our opposition parties spend more time sitting on the steps of Parliament house instead of inside it? Is it because they think slogan-shouting is more effective than real debate? Whatever the reason, what is clear is that they are not doing their fundamental duty to the people who elected them, which is to demand answers from the government when things go wrong.

It is hard to say whether the war is going to end soon or much later but in India, it gives us a chance to put our own house in order. The Prime Minister needs to concentrate on finding out why it is still so hard to do business in India despite his constant assertion that 'ease of doing business' is what he wants. Does he know that lowly officials can keep shipments on hold for weeks and months? On the political front he needs to find out why his chief ministers waste time passing laws to prevent religious conversions instead of laws that improve municipal governance.

It is said that reforms in India only happen in times of trouble. In long years of journalism, I find it hard to remember a more troubled time than the one we are in just now. This week it looks as if the turbulence and chaos is going to continue spreading. By the time I finished writing this piece, the number of executed Iranian teenagers had risen to three. Regimes that kill children deserve to be toppled. This I firmly stand by.



**INSIDE TRACK** | BY COOMMI KAPOOR

### MAMATA'S CATCH 22

Mamata Banerjee declared victory after the Supreme Court decreed that judicial officers would decide on claims and objections in the ongoing SIR, not the Election Commission. But now that the election time schedule has been announced, it is unlikely that the scrutiny of the 60 lakh cases under adjudication will be complete by April 23, the polling date for the first phase. Banerjee is caught in a Catch-22 dilemma. If she insists that all disputed voter identity cases be cleared before the elections, then polls will have to be postponed and Presidential rule imposed in the state, as her term as caretaker CM expires on May 7, the EC's deadline for installing a new Assembly. The home ministry seems to have shrewdly envisaged this possibility by appointing as the new Governor the assertive R N Ravi, a former police officer and former Governor of Tamil Nadu. Banerjee is unlikely to create circumstances to call for Governor's rule during elections.

### CASTE ASIDE

UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath was accorded a huge welcome when he presided as chief guest at Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, for a symbolic Jauhara ceremony honouring Rajput history and heritage earlier this week. Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekawat was also present. Both men addressed rallies honouring Rajput culture. Adityanath, was, however, quick to dispel the impression that the gathering was in any way a show of caste solidarity. A day later, at Sire temple in Rajasthan's Jalore district, he emphasised that he discouraged casteism and while historically the caste system had helped organise society, casteism only weakens the social fabric and divides the nation. Adityanath perhaps wanted to make his position clear since the party high command generally frowns on such gatherings. Last year, a senior party leader, who organised a meeting of BJP MLAs to assess the reasons for the poor performance of the party in 2024 in parts of UP, was chided for attempting to organise a ginger group of upper castes.

### PRESCIENT PREDICTION

The tussle over the tenure of the chairperson of Tata Sons, N Chandrasekaran, and the recent contentious removal of Tata Trust members are indicators of a brewing power struggle for control of India's premier corporate house in the wake of Ratan Tata's death in 2024. It is a scenario which the late Cyrus Mistry was prescient in envisaging. Mistry had warned Ratan Tata of the importance of institutionalising the Tata Group so that it was not run by any single individual as was possible in the past due to the sheer respect commanded by earlier chairpersons, J R D Tata and Ratan Tata himself. Mistry believed a clear mechanism should be spelt out for handling a deadlock when disputes between members arose. When Ratan refused to take his suggestion seriously, Mistry himself drafted a corporate governance framework to clarify the roles of Tata Sons and the role of the operating companies. His apprehension was that after some years, the trusts "could be lost to the wrong people". He planned on introducing the preliminary draft of such a framework to a board meeting of Tata Sons on October 24, 2016. Minutes before the board meeting, Mistry was axed.

### WHAT'S IN A NAME

As a Parsi, I wince every time I hear an American on TV pronounce the name of the embattled global flashpoint, the Strait of Hormuz, as if the word ending was a 'moose', the horned deer. Hormuz is another title for the Zoroastrian lord of light and knowledge, Ahura Mazda. Parsis are likely to be the most familiar with the correct pronunciation of a name passed on by word of mouth for generations since the Zoroastrians' arrival in India in the 8th century. Hormuz is a common Parsi first name and appears frequently in Zoroastrian prayers. It predates the Arab invasion of Persia in the 7th century and is of middle Persian or Pahlavi origin, the liturgical language of the Zoroastrian scriptures. The present generation in Iran appears unaware that the spelling originally ended with a 'd' and should be correctly pronounced "Hormazd" or "Ohrmazd".

### LITTLE EYE CONTACT

Delhi BJP leader Vijay Goel does a disservice to his recently released biography of Atal Bihari Vajpayee by terming it a "coffee table book". Goel, who had a 50-year-long relationship with Vajpayee, has sifted painstakingly through photographic archives to compile a pictorial chronology of Vajpayee's life to accompany his text of the late prime minister's biography. And the camera does not lie. The fiery orator who could magnetise crowds with his words was surprisingly deadpan in displaying emotion while interacting directly with people and usually avoided eye contact. In fact, Vajpayee's face often displays more animation while speaking to Opposition leaders than to his own party colleagues.

## Rahul invokes Kanshi Ram, but the past tells another story



**HISTORY HEADLINE**  
BY SHYAMLAL YADAV

WHILE ADDRESSING a "Samvidhan Sammelan" (Constitution conference) in Lucknow last week, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said had India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru been alive, he would have made Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) founder Kanshi Ram the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh.

In the course of Nehru's nearly 17-year-long tenure as the PM over multiple terms, during which he also called the shots in the Congress's affairs, UP saw four CMs from the party, all of whom belonged to upper castes. The Congress continued to be a dominant force in UP up to 1989.

During Nehru's premiership (1947-64), the Congress appointed four CMs in UP: Govind Ballabh Pant (Brahmin, 1950-54), Sampurnanand (Kayastha, 1954-60), Chandra Bhanu Gupta (Vaishya, 1960-63, 1967 and 1969), and Sucheta Kripalani (Kayastha married to a Sindhi, 1963-67).

Other CM aspirants in the UP Congress then included leaders such as Purushottam Das Tandon, Sri Prakasa, Vijaylakshmi Pandit and Kamalapati Tripathi (became the CM in 1971), who were all from upper castes too. The Congress leadership frequently changed the CMs in UP, but their selection seemed to ignore considerations of social justice or equitable representation. While party factionalism was a concern for Nehru, he was also not seen to have prioritised the representation of deprived sections in top government roles.

On his part, Kanshi Ram castigated Nehru-era politics as he made a scathing critique of national politics as part of his movement for the uplift and empowerment of Bahujans in the country.

Kanshi Ram's critique of Nehru-era



Kanshi Ram's politics centered on advancing Ambedkar's ideas while sharply criticising Gandhi, Nehru, and the upper-caste dominance of political leadership under the Congress

politics featured in his book "The Chamcha Age (An Era of Stooges)", published on September 24, 1982 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Poona Pact, which was an agreement between Mahatma Gandhi and B R Ambedkar that replaced the proposed separate electorates for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) with a reservation system for them.

Kanshi Ram's politics centered on advancing Ambedkar's ideas while sharply criticising Gandhi, Nehru, and the upper-caste dominance of political leadership under the Congress dispensation. He viewed the post-Independence Congress as perpetuating a system where the SCs, Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and minorities — whom he termed the "Bahujan" (85% of India's population) — remained leaderless and exploited through "chamchas" (stooges) of upper castes.

Kanshi Ram argued that during the Nehru era, upper castes, especially the Brahmins, dominated the power structure. In Chamcha Age, he cited the 1957 Lok Sabha elections, saying that 47% of elected MPs were Brahmins and even with the 22.5% reserved SC/ST seats, Nehru ruled "majestically" with SC/ST representatives acting as "chamchas".

He also referred to the 1980 general elections when Indira Gandhi was the Congress supreme, stating that the polls saw 15% Kshatriyas along with 36% Brahmins getting elected as the party MPs, as Indira was wary of ex-party leader Jagjivan Ram's prime ministerial aspirations.

On April 14, 1984, Ambedkar's birth anniversary, Kanshi Ram launched the BSP. The party focused on neutralising Congress influence, particularly among the SCs and even among the OBCs and minorities. His famous slogan, "Jiski jitni sankhya bhari, uski utni hisseadaari" (representation in proportion to population), has since resonated across the country.

During the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, when they also headed the Congress, six other party leaders became the UP CMs, who also belonged to upper castes. They included Kamalapati Tripathi (Brahmin), H N Bahuguna (Brahmin), N D Tiwari (Brahmin), VP Singh (Thakur), Sriprati Mishra (Brahmin), and Bir Bahadur Singh (Thakur).

None of the 10 Congress CMs could complete a full five-year tenure in a single term amid a perennial tension between the party dispensation in Delhi and Lucknow, which led to frequent changes at the helm of UP government.

Some OBC leaders also became the UP CM over the decades, but none of them was from the Congress. They included Ram Naresh Yadav (Janata Party), Mulayam Singh (SP), Kalyan Singh (BJP) and Akhilesh Yadav (SP).

The only Dalit leader who could assume the post of the UP CM is Mayawati, the BSP chief, who was chosen by Kanshi Ram as his political successor.

The writer is Senior Associate Editor, The Indian Express

## Weighty matters just got easier

THE PATENT of the blockbuster diabetes and weight loss drug semaglutide expires this weekend.

Pharma majors like Cipla and Zydus plan to launch their generic versions in India at a fraction of their cost, bringing down the monthly rate of Ozempic duplicates from approximately Rs 9,500 to under Rs 4,000. These medicines have been a game changer for obesity management and a manna from heaven for the impossibly vain — a magic potion to achieve aesthetic perfection that, somehow, always remains tantalisingly out of reach. Who hasn't glanced in the mirror, wistfully, wishing a roll of fat around the abdomen would just disappear?

Now that it's entirely possible, these drugs expose an underlying social tension between the fit and the fat. Thousands of YouTube videos gleefully dissect which Bollywood stars are jabbing themselves to shed kilos. Reddit is full of anonymous grumblings about people taking the easy way out. As if it's akin to a moral failing to

achieve the thin ideal via pharmaceuticals, instead of the old-fashioned way, working out and zipping the mouth.

In what was a pointed swipe at the glittering tux and gown crowd at last week's Oscars Ceremony in LA, an anti-vanity commercial highlighted the misuse of GLP 1 drugs for cosmetic purposes. There is a distinct moral component in the conversation around body image. In all areas of our lives, we're taught to value effort and integrity. Constant exercising and dieting signify determination, which is then rewarded by weight loss. Getting the same prize via other means, somehow, feels wrong.

The sneering derision the fighting fit have for the chronically unfit taking these meds is that a slim body was the last truly democratic status symbol; a toned shape cannot be bought, inherited or stolen. Its value lies in the silent message it conveys that this is somebody with self-control and discipline, who's willing to work to look a certain way. So of course, it's annoying that



**ON THE LOOSE**  
BY LEHER KALA

a pill popper gets the same privilege without striving for it. In the post-pandemic era, there has been a cultural shift beyond materialism. High net worth individuals became more reluctant to flaunt labels, ushering in the phenomenon dubbed as "stealth wealth". But that doesn't mean the fundamental human need to differentiate ourselves from our peers has vanished.

Jack Dorsey of Twitter fame popularised OMAD (one meal a day) while Peter Thiel's diet regimen is legendary. Ultra fitness was the last acceptable lifestyle brag, now threatened by GLPs.

The obsession for GLPs raises another point: that the world never really embraced different body types. When so many are on it for svelteness, how deep does body positivity actually go? Taglines like "Beautiful at any size" evolved in the 2010s as a pushback against the prevailing narrow beauty standard, of waif-like and elfin. A correction was definitely required but the Body Positivity Movement never really rang true with its in-

sistence that appearance doesn't matter. All the data says the opposite. The medical aesthetics space, even in India, is experiencing unprecedented growth, the revenue generated by the Indian cosmetic surgery space predicted to reach 11,567 million USD by 2030. Who are we kidding? People will do anything to lose weight, including hoard drugs meant for diabetics, while claiming with a straight face that fat is beautiful.

Who knows, maybe five years from now, everyone will be ingesting pills before a big night, just to fit into the extra small dress. The opposite could also happen, that if thinness becomes so easy to attain, we may desire it less. Most likely, the way people have stopped looking askance at Botox, fillers and lip jobs, GLPs will go mainstream too. In a world where maintaining an image is critical, whatever enhancements we make or don't make, many of us will continue to feel that we need to do more.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

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'GROWTH HIT NOT SEEN SUBSTANTIALLY NEGATIVE, THERE ARE TAILWINDS FOR CYCLICAL RECOVERY'

# 'Need enough buffers, inflation to be seen via multiple channels'

'It boils down to what is the duration of this shock. If this is a few months, the inflationary impact will be less'

Amid the ongoing West Asian crisis and uncertainty becoming the new normal, India needs to keep more than enough buffers to deal with any kind of volatility, **Sonal Varma**, Managing Director & Chief Economist- India and Asia ex-Japan, Nomura said.

In an interview with **Aanchal Magazine**, Varma said there are multiple channels that will impact inflation even if pump prices are kept unchanged, but noted that growth impact should not be substantially negative as countercyclical policy easing has already sown the seeds of a cyclical recovery. Edited excerpts:

**The world has seen one crisis after another over the last six years. With the West Asian crisis now, how do you assess its impact on India?**

I think we need to get used to uncertainty being the new normal, and for the big picture, when we are making policies, we need to essentially keep more than enough buffers to deal with any kind of volatility. So, it could involve being more self-sufficient in certain things. The Iran conflict impacts the world at large and India specifically quite significantly, given we are a net energy importer. India is a net importer of crude oil and LNG. We also import coal. Of course, we export petroleum products.

But, on the whole, we are a net importer of energy and currently, because of the conflict and the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, prices have gone up across the board. The Strait of Hormuz essentially sees about 20 million barrels per day in terms of global oil transit, that's 20% of global oil demand, and almost 80-90% of the oil and LNG that passes through the Strait of Hormuz actually goes to Asia.

So, Asia is at the epicentre, and within the Asian countries, India gets impacted because we are a net importer. I think the important issue here is the shock that we are facing right

now is a combination of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war and the pandemic, in the sense that this is not just an energy price shock, it is also a physical supply shortage. We have very limited (supply), there are some buffers, some inventory, some cargo that is on shipment at sea, but if this inability to access supply of things like LPG, where more than 90% actually comes through the Strait of Hormuz, the physical shortage of LPG, LNG and crude oil over a period of time will also impact growth adversely to an extent, but more importantly, inflation on the upside. That's the situation the world is dealing with right now.

**What are the channels through which it impacts India?**

There are multiple channels through which there will be an inflation impact even if pump prices are kept unchanged. Although, at current oil prices, India's crude oil basket actually is higher than Brent, which we track on a day-to-day basis. So the oil marketing companies as of now are running a loss of almost Rs 18 per litre, in terms of under-recovery on petrol and diesel. The big question now is what will be the duration of this shock? If it's a short-term shock, then it could be absorbed. But if it is more prolonged, then there will need to be some re-distribution of this loss between the OMCs and the government and to some extent even consumers as well.

Inflation impacts in multiple ways. This is not just a crude oil price increase, it is also an increase in LNG price as firms are substituting for other forms of energy. For instance, you use coal because natural gas is not available, that's also pushing up coal prices. Energy lies at the foundation of what we do on a day-to-day basis, so that automatically pushes up the cost of production across the board for companies.

Second, the increase we have seen in things like commercial LPG, in some cases, the



**EXPRESS** interview **SONAL VARMA**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, CHIEF ECONOMIST - INDIA AND ASIA EX-JAPAN, NOMURA

unavailability of LPG, this is putting increasing cost pressures for various restaurants, so we could see menu costs getting revised higher. Aviation turbine fuel has gone up again substantially. In fact, this is the important point here, the increase in product prices. Globally, diesel, petrol fuel oil, jet fuel oil, the price increase in products has been substantially more than the increase in price of crude oil. So, as an airline, the operating expense goes up and that basically pushes up airfare, so that automatically feeds into higher services inflation.

This filters into downstream sectors too. For instance, prices of urea are now on the rise and if the fertiliser prices pick up alongside an increase in energy price, then that will, over a period of time, also put some upward pressure on food inflation potentially. And, the downstream sectors use various intermediate inputs that basically get processed from the energy side. So things, for instance, making tiles, cement, packaging, even auto consumer durables, all these sectors, ultimately, actually will see an increase in cost.

So, for the manufacturing sector, which in the last one-and-a-half years has seen a substantial moderation in input costs and therefore, an improvement in their profitability, this environment actually leads to higher input cost and a pressure is on their profit margins. And since the increase in

cost is so substantial, the ability of firms to just withstand it in their margins will be difficult. So, we are likely to see some pass through of this increase, even in terms of an increase in goods prices, in some categories. I think from food to energy to even the core basket of the CPI, both on goods and services, actually, this has the potential to be quite inflationary. At the end of the day, it boils down to what is the duration of this shock. If this is a few months, the inflationary impact will be less. But if it is more than three months, then there is a greater risk of higher inflation coming through. Those are some of the main channels through which inflation comes through.

**The Chief Economic Advisor listed out three scenarios — crude at \$90 per barrel, \$110 per barrel, and \$130 per barrel. You spoke of second-order effects. If crude prices don't rise sharply, will the growth projections still take a hit?**

It does depend on how long prices stay at \$100 (per barrel). The situation that we are in right now, where we are hovering around \$100 on Brent (crude), in the very near term, it does look like we are still in a period where the impact of physical shortage will probably be visible sometime in April, because there is still some inventory that firms have that they are running down right

now or, firms have contracted certain cargo which is already in transit on sea. So, there is some supply that you can depend on, let's say for the next 25 days, beyond which, it becomes a dual price and volume shock. And then the question is—let's say if the conflict ends and the transmission opens up on the Strait of Hormuz, what is the landing price on energy? Do we settle back at \$70-\$80 (per barrel), or even higher? There is significant uncertainty on how this plays out, so it does make sense to work with various scenarios. Our assessment right now is that if this is a short-duration impact, let's say 2-3 months of a peak impact, and then it settles down maybe slightly above where we started out in terms of energy prices, but lower than where we are right now, in that scenario, the growth impact will be negative but it should not be substantially negative.

So, for FY27, we are currently working with a real GDP growth assumption of around 7%. Prior to the Iran conflict, our number was closer to 7.1% with upside risk. The reason I say that is if you look at the last 12 months, we have seen a substantial amount of fiscal easing, monetary easing, liquidity easing, macroprudential easing in India, and therefore, the combined impact of this countercyclical policy easing has already sown the seeds of a cyclical recovery. So, a lot of our lead indicators actually do suggest that prior to this conflict, there is this tailwind to some of the domestic cyclical growth sectors that is playing out. Whether it is in car sales or commercial vehicle sales, a lot of this is going to show up in the coming period.

Second, one of the big issues last year has been the 50% US tariff that has now reset lower. So, there should be some positives from that side and third, to the extent that the government is protecting consumers, so, if there is a wedge in terms of government either cutting the excise duty on petrol, diesel, or giving more subsidies to the OMCs, that is, protecting consumers in the process, there is some impact on firms, but the consumers are still protected, credit growth is picking up.

FULL INTERVIEW ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

## Govt raises commercial LPG allocation to 50%

**Sukalp Sharma**  
New Delhi, March 21

THE CENTRAL government on Saturday approved an additional 20% allocation of commercial liquid petroleum gas (LPG) to states and Union Territories specifically for restaurants, dhabas, hotels, industrial canteens, food processing and dairy sectors, subsidised canteens or food outlets run by state governments and local bodies, and community kitchens.

These segments of commercial LPG consumers were among the worst-hit. The additional allocation will also be for refills of 5-kg cylinders for migrant labourers. Moreover, the government has made it mandatory for commercial and industrial consumers of LPG to register with public sector fuel retailers, and also apply for a piped natural gas (PNG) connection to become eligible to get commercial LPG.

With this additional allocation, commercial LPG allocation to states can be up to 50% of the estimated requirement.

The government had earlier allowed 20% allocation to states for commercial LPG consumers, and later offered an additional 10% if states took certain specific measures to help expedite PNG infrastructure. LPG supply to commercial and industrial consumers was cut

### STEP ON THE GAS

● The government had earlier allowed 20% allocation to states for commercial LPG consumers, and later offered an additional 10% if states took certain specific measures to help expedite PNG infrastructure

● With this additional allocation, commercial LPG allocation to states can be up to 50% of the estimated requirement

● LPG supply to commercial and industrial consumers was cut in a bid to shield households

in a bid to shield households that use LPG as kitchen fuel. This was done as a large chunk of India's LPG supplies were disrupted due to the effective closure of the critical maritime chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz amid the West Asia war.

India depends on imports to meet about 60% of its LPG demand, and 90% of its LPG imports comes from West Asia through the Strait of Hormuz.

Apart from prioritising LPG supplies to households over commercial and industrial consumers, the government ordered refiners to maximise LPG production, and directed them to divert propane, butane, and other streams from petrochemical manufacturing to

LPG production.

These measures have helped raise domestic LPG production by around 40% vis-à-vis the pre-war levels, which translates to around 16% of the country's overall LPG demand. The increase in domestic production of the fuel is being seen as a reason for the increased allocation of commercial LPG to the states.

While the supply of LPG is still a matter of concern in view of the prevailing geopolitical situation, delivery of LPG cylinders are being maintained at the pre-war levels, the government said in a release.

It added that panic cylinder bookings among households have been reduced and there has been no dry-out reported at any of the 2,500-odd LPG distributors in the country.

In a letter to chief secretaries of all states and Union Territories, Petroleum Secretary Neeraj Mittal said the commercial and industrial LPG consumers will have to register with public sector oil marketing companies (OMCs)—Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum Corporation, and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation—before they can become eligible for commercial LPG supplies. Also, they will have to apply for a PNG connection in order to get commercial LPG.

FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

## Tariffs, AI, war & oil: What is ahead for stock markets?

**Siddharth Upasani**  
New Delhi, March 21

WHAT A difference a few weeks can make. After a troubling 2025 that spilled into the first month of 2026, February got off to a flier for India: The 2026-27 Union Budget was immediately followed by an interim trade agreement with the US — days after a full deal was reached with the European Union — that eliminated the penal 25% tariff and reduced the reciprocal rate to 18%, and the AI Impact Summit that saw India stake its claim to be a partner in the latest tech wave.

Inflation remained low as per the new Consumer Price Index series while growth was a robust 7.6% even under an updated GDP calculation method. And then it all fell apart after the US and Israel attacked Iran and the latter retaliated by attacking other Gulf nations and shutting the crucial waterway of the Strait of Hormuz.

"The Indian equity market has digested a lot of good news...and ignored them," American investment bank Morgan Stanley's analysts said earlier this month.

"The trailing 12M (12-month) performance is almost the worst in history and relative valuations are at previous troughs." Since Morgan Stanley's comments, the Sensex and Nifty are down 7% each. Since the war began in West Asia, both the benchmark indices are down more than 8%.

The last year-and-a-half has seen Indian stocks hit by several global factors: Donald Trump's re-election to the White House, his tariff war, the AI investment boom that sent several other countries' stock markets on a tear, with the consolation for India being it could serve as a 'reverse AI trade'. And now, it is the war and the supply shock that has sent global energy prices haywire. Even the resignation of Atanu Chakraborty as HDFC Bank's part-time chairman helped spark a 3% fall on Thursday.

**Company earnings worries**

Even as there is no clarity on when the war will end, the next set of headwinds are lining up, first among them being financial results for the current quarter that will start trickling in from early April.

The surge in crude oil prices is expected to hit profits of several sectors, starting with the likes of oil marketing companies, whose margins have slumped to the lowest in almost

● Oil, FPI flows, and exchange rate: How Indian stock market has stagnated

Month	Nifty	Net FPI equity flows (\$ mn)	India crude oil basket price (\$/bbl)	Exchange rate (Rs/\$)
Oct-24	24,205	-11,195	75.12	84.1
Nov-24	24,131	-2,563	73.02	84.5
Dec-24	23,645	1,828	73.34	85.8
Jan-25	23,508	-9,043	80.20	86.7
Feb-25	22,125	-3,977	77.33	87.3
Mar-25	23,519	-401	72.47	85.5
Apr-25	24,334	510	67.72	85.2
May-25	24,751	2,344	64.04	85.4
Jun-25	25,517	1,690	69.77	85.5
Jul-25	24,768	-2,052	70.95	87.7
Aug-25	24,427	-3,994	69.11	87.6
Sep-25	24,611	-2,702	69.61	88.7
Oct-25	25,722	1,656	65.08	88.6
Nov-25	26,203	-425	64.31	89.4
Dec-25	26,130	-2,515	62.20	89.8
Jan-26	25,321	-3,976	63.08	91.8
Feb-26	25,179	2,497	69.01	91.0
Mar-26	23,115	-9,572	117.09	93.7

Note: Nifty, exchange rate month-end levels; Crude oil price average for month

Source: NSDL, NSE, PPAAC

India achieves 1BT coal production for 2nd year in row

Press Trust of India  
New Delhi, March 21

INDIA HAS achieved 1 billion tonne (BT) coal production for the second consecutive year amid heightened uncertainties in global energy markets due to the West Asia crisis.

"With sustained and coordinated efforts across the coal sector and the invaluable contribution of all stakeholders, the country has successfully achieved the landmark of 1 billion tonne (BT) coal production on March 20, 2026 for the second year in a row," the coal ministry said in a statement.

The higher and sustained coal output has helped the country meet rising energy demand and supported the power sector in maintaining record coal inventories at coal-based thermal plants, officials said.

This performance showcases strong planning, efficient execution and tighter coordination across the coal value chain, and is adding significantly to the nation's economic growth momentum, it said.

The coal ministry said it remains firmly focused on nurturing a stable, transparent and performance-oriented ecosystem. By rolling out proactive policy measures, closely tracking performance and engaging actively with stakeholders, it is ensuring dependable coal availability and smooth operations across sectors, it said.

"Aligned with the national vision of 'Viksit Bharat 2047', these efforts reinforce the government's resolve to build a resilient energy framework," the statement said.

US TRADE DEALS HAVE LOST THEIR ECONOMIC VALUE AFTER THE IEEPA RULING

## US is building a new tariff architecture: Why India plans to wait and watch

**Ravi Dutta Mishra**  
New Delhi, March 21

WITH THE US Supreme Court scrapping the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) tariffs last month, the Trump administration has imposed 10% global tariffs under Section 122 for five months. But the United States Trade Representative (USTR), amid the turmoil in West Asia, could be working on a new tariff structure that could serve as the legal basis for its trade agreement.

The new tariff structure could be built around the Section 301 investigations that the US launched last week. The tariffs resulting from these investigations could be the basis of the American trade agreements, including the India-US deal, which has been agreed but not formally signed.

International trade experts said that US trade deals have lost their economic value after the IEEPA ruling as countries such as the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh and India had accepted tariffs of 15-20% and offered significant concessions on market access, procurement and regulations but after the court struck down the reciprocal tariff policy, Washington imposed a uniform 10% tariff on all trading partners.

**Comparative edge**

A Commerce Ministry official explained Monday that any trade deal with the US that India

### SHIFTING GEARS

THE NEW tariff structure could be built around the Section 301 investigations that the US launched last week

THE SECTION 301 investigations were started against India, along with several other countries, by the US. They cited structural excess capacity and overproduction, and the failure to prohibit imports of goods made using 'forced' labour

THE TARIFFS resulting from these investigations could be the basis of the American trade agreements, including the India-US deal, which has been agreed but not formally signed

signs would be focused on the upcoming tariff structure or comparative advantage that India gets in the US market, and that USTR is recreating a tariff structure.

This is because several US trade partners have begun to express doubts about their trade deals following the IEEPA ruling. While Malaysia has declared its trade deal with the US null and void, citing the collapse of the legal basis for the tariffs that supported it, the European Union had also put the EU-US trade deal on hold.

The US last week launched two Section 301 investigations on several countries, including India. While one cites structural excess capacity and overproduction in certain manufacturing sectors, the other cites fail-

ure to prohibit imports of goods produced using 'forced' labour. But the purpose could be to create a reciprocal tariff-like structure.

"The Section 301 investigations signal that even countries that negotiated trade arrangements remain exposed to new US investigations and potential tariffs. For many governments, this combination raises a fundamental question: why maintain politically costly concessions if the same tariff treatment applies without a deal and trade pressure continues anyway," head of Delhi-based think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), Ajay Srivastava said.

The fast-track nature of the investigation means that USTR will have new legal powers to impose differential tariffs on countries by May.

Deborah Elms, Head of Trade Policy at Singapore-based Hinrich Foundation, in a social media post, said this is a "very fast" investigation with a short comment window and the mandated hearing in early May.

"The reason for this unusually rapid inquiry is that the statutory authority for existing US tariffs currently set by the Trump administration at 10% globally under a different legal power, Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974, will expire on 27 July. The USTR's goal is to replace these Section 122 tariffs with new measures by July," Elms said.

**Stronger legal basis**

Elms said that, unlike other tariff authorities, Section 301 is

unlikely to get overturned by the US Courts or involve Congress. "Any penalties that get applied are likely to be long-lasting, particularly since Section 301 empowers the executive branch to modify, adjust, or reopen cases at will in the future," Elms said.

While Indian government officials have said that the final trade deal will take care of the Section 301 tariffs, USTR, in its investigation, has said that India has "structural excess capacity and production".

The top US trade body said that in 2025, India had a bilateral trade surplus with the US of \$58 billion, and that India's global goods trade surplus sectors include textiles, health and construction goods.

"For example, evidence suggests the solar module sector is plagued by excess capacity, including that India's current module manufacturing is nearly triple the annual domestic demand. India also has created significant excess capacity in petrochemicals, steel, and other industries," USTR said.

**Global response to shaky US deal**

The European Commission is now seeking "full clarity on the steps the United States intends to take following the recent Supreme Court ruling" on the IEEPA and that "the current situation is not conducive to delivering fair, balanced, and mutually beneficial transatlantic trade and investment", as agreed to by both sides.

FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

# Opinion

SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2026



It's a bit rich to be complaining about Sunrisers Leeds buying Abrar Ahmed when India continues to play Pakistan in multilateral events

## Sunrisers-Abrar issue a manufactured outrage

**RINGSIDE VIEW**
**Tushar Bhaduri**

IT'S THAT TIME of the year once again, when one routinely speculates (again) whether it will be MS Dhoni's last season, where he will bat and how many balls he will face.

There's still a week to go but the social media bombardment started a long time ago. The Indian Premier League (IPL), its franchises and players – both stalwarts and relative unknowns – are everywhere one looks. It's become an annual national pastime and for the next two months or more, most cricket fans will pretend that the travelling circus actually matters. Every team has its dedicated fan base but this year, something that happened thousands of miles away is supposed to have put the cat amongst the pigeons. Sunrisers Leeds, owned by Chennai's Sun group which also has Sunrisers Hyderabad in its portfolio, broke ranks with the other Indian-owned franchises in The Hundred auction and bid for (and eventually acquired) a Pakistani cricketer.

It had some self-styled champions of national interest frothing at the mouth with rage at the alleged anti-national expenditure. Some have even alleged that the tax on the £190,000 paid to leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed will go towards funding Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India. It's a bit rich to be complaining about Sunrisers Leeds buying Abrar Ahmed when India continues to play Pakistan in multilateral events, adding to PCB and Pakistan income.

That the Sunrisers Leeds said there was no discussion about not considering Pakistani players in the auction would have ranked them even more.

Pakistani players have not been seen in the IPL after the inaugural edition in 2008 in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attacks and the strained bilateral relations between the two neighbours, though it was never spelt out explicitly by the league or the BCCI. The 'shadow ban' over more than a decade and a half now doesn't even prompt raised eyebrows and Pakistani players have long ceased to even be part of the auction pool. However, former Pakistan all-rounder Azhar Mahmood did become 'eligible' for the IPL when he took up British citizenship.

But India's rules and policies can't be imposed on the rest of the world, regardless of the country's dominance on the field, in the boardroom, fan following or balance sheet. Pakistani players have been active in leagues around the world, including The Hundred, before IPL franchise owners acquired four of the eight teams.

**Watchdog**

Also, English cricket has an independent regulator which comes down hard on discrimination on any grounds, including nationality or ethnicity. If the other Indian-owned teams had no intention of going for Pakistani players, Sunrisers Leeds may have actually done them a favour by taking the spotlight off them. The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) also wouldn't want any such issues just a few years after the domestic game was exposed to be hostile to players of South Asian origin.

Surely, the entities knew that before bidding for the teams. Or did they believe that they could impose their preferences and prejudices in a nudge-nudge-wink-wink way, in the same manner that they did in the SA20 where all six franchises

are owned by IPL entities?

The BCCI and IPL exercised discretion in the whole matter with board vice-president Rajeev Shukla making it clear that Sunrisers Leeds signing any player for an overseas league was beyond their jurisdiction and the issue didn't concern them. Going back a few months, there was no hue and cry when Kolkata Knight Riders signed Bangladesh left-arm pacer Mustafizur Rahman for the 2026 IPL. It was only when some stray comments appeared in social media that the BCCI developed cold feet and instructed the franchise to release the player citing recent developments, alluding to incidents of atrocities against minorities in Bangladesh. It would have been a bit far-fetched to argue that the money paid to Mustafizur would be used to India's detriment. But political expediency doesn't always respect logic.

In all likelihood, the said player would have played in the IPL and gone home with only some isolated protests at some places, if at all, if the matter had been dealt with differently. Those objecting to Abrar Ahmed's signing by Sunrisers Leeds were conveniently silent when a player was asked to stay away from the IPL after being invited to be a part of it. It was a breach of agreement on the directions of a third party.

It was akin to inviting someone to a wedding and subsequently conveying that they were not welcome. The IPL is a BCCI event and the Indian board can make rules or modify them as it goes along. Also, everyone is entitled to an opinion and is free to decide what they want to say (or not say). But this smells like selective outrage.

**Can't play cop**

US President Donald Trump has made it clear that the Iranian team better stay away from the FIFA World Cup his country is co-hosting this summer. Iran, which has been involved in a brutal conflict with the US and Israel for the last three weeks and has suffered widespread damage and casualties, has been trying to move its matches to Mexico even though the world body doesn't seem to be playing ball at the moment.

But it may be even beyond Trump's jurisdiction (though one can never be too sure!) to instruct American owners of football clubs around the world (and there are quite a few) not to employ Iranian players.

The IPL is around the corner and it would be interesting to observe the response Sunrisers Hyderabad receive. They are one of the more flamboyant teams in the competition and odds-on favourites to be the first to breach the 300-run mark in the upcoming edition. One can never rule out any stray protest or similar incident, but it's unlikely unless someone or some entity goes out of the way to make an issue out of it. IPL fans are not too concerned about what happens in other leagues as they don't feature any top Indian players, unless they are told how to feel about it.

In the absence of regular skipper Pat Cummins for the initial part of the league, the team would be led by Abhishek Sharma with Ishan Kishan as his deputy. They are two of the leading lights of the national team that won the T20 World Cup a fortnight ago and are torchbearers of the brave new generation. If the team gets on a roll and wins its first few matches, the fans – who call themselves the Orange Army – are likely to get behind the team. Because even if the IPL is considered a weapon to exercise BCCI's hegemony over world cricket and convey who is in their good books and who isn't, it's first and foremost a cricket tournament, in which winning does matter (or at least should).

**ACROSS THE AISLE**
**P Chidambaram**


Millions of the adult population — on average 10% — are missing from the electoral rolls. Are the missing persons adult, yes. Are they citizens, yes, unless proved to the contrary. So why are they missing?

FOR NEARLY FOUR decades of the history of the Republic of India, not many people noticed the Election Commission of India (ECI). Not many were aware of the provisions in Part XV of the Constitution of India.

Elections were held once in five years to the Lok Sabha and to the State Assemblies. People flocked to vote but few were aware of the law, the rules, the arrangements, the preparations, and the process leading to the outcome. If one found his/her name in the electoral rolls, one could vote — several millions did vote and several thousands did not vote. Whichever candidate won the election in a constituency, a big majority of voters accepted it, and moved on.

Elections were largely uneventful barring some incidents of violence or impersonation. However, behind the calm facade there lay many injustices. Vast numbers of people were not included in the electoral rolls. Large sections of the electorate were prevented from exercising their right to vote — especially Dalits, tribals, groups of persons belonging to the backward communities in areas where there was a dominant community, and religious minorities. There was a hue and cry for a few days, but it died down soon.

**Enter crusader**

The ECI was represented by the Chief Election Commissioner. The CEC was a distinguished civil servant but, by and large, faceless and silent. The CEC was rarely dragged into controversies or to the Courts. The reported instances where the CEC was drawn into the



People queue up with documents for resubmission after their names were deleted from the Special Intensive Revision final voter list in Birbhum district, West Bengal

# Millions of citizen non-voters!

limelight were when parties split and there were public fights over the reserved symbols.

TN Seshan was appointed CEC in 1990 and breathed life into Part XV of the Constitution. He enforced strict compliance with the Acts, rules and instructions. He made people aware of the ECI and its enormous powers. He instituted cases in the Supreme Court and invited verdicts that became binding rules. He was scrupulously neutral, showed no favour or disfavour, and became a folk hero. Other distinguished CECs included Mr JM Lyngdoh, Mr TS Krishnamurthy, the late Navin Chawla and Mr S Y Quraishi. The slide began in the last decade and CECs have been embroiled in controversies.

**To sir with mischief**

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in 2025-26 exploded the neutrality of the CEC. Under Article 326 of the Constitution, "elections... shall be on the basis of adult suffrage; that is to say, every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than eighteen years of age... shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election". The stress is on adult suffrage, citizen and entitled to be registered as a voter.

The plain meaning of these words is that the electoral rolls must include the adult population of the country unless the person is not a citizen of India. Normally, the total number of voters in the updated electoral rolls of every state must be nearly equal to the adult population of the State. If a Census were held every ten years, the count of the adult population would be accurate.

State	Pre-SIR electors to population ratio	Final electors to population ratio*
Bihar	96.70%	90.70%
Chhattisgarh	99.5	87.3
Gujarat	96	82.7
Kerala	100.7	97.2
Madhya Pradesh	96	89.8
Rajasthan	97.2	91.2
Tamil Nadu	106.8	94.3
Overall	98.70%	90.30%

\* Population projections available in report of Technical Group on Population Projections, July 2020

The last Census in India, unfortunately, was held in 2011. However, there are advanced statistical tools to estimate the population, and these tools are employed by expert bodies. Therefore, it is logical to argue that the total number of voters in the updated electoral rolls of a State must be nearly equal to the estimate of the adult population of that State.

The post-SIR electoral rolls have revealed an unpleasant surprise. Mr Yogendra Yadav has demonstrated that the divergence between the number in the post-SIR electoral rolls and the estimated number of the adult population in

States is shockingly high — leading to the conclusion that the SIR was not inclusive and left out millions of adult citizens. Here is a tell-tale table (above):

**Perverse result**

Ideally, the last column in all the rows should be 100%, but we do not live in a perfect world. A small number of genuine adult citizens may be left out of the electoral rolls despite an earnest effort by the government, political parties and citizens groups. However, such an effort was conspicuously absent during the SIR exercise. Contrast with the effort made in the United States under the Civil Rights Act, 1964 to enroll black Americans who had been excluded on illegal grounds. The burden was on the ECI to ensure that persons were included in the electoral rolls on the basis of adult suffrage. On the contrary, under SIR, the ECI adopted a hostile attitude and cast the burden upon the voters to prove their citizenship; those who were unable to do so were promptly excluded from the electoral rolls.

As can be seen from the last column of the Table, millions of the adult population — on average 10% — are missing from the electoral rolls. Are the missing persons adult, yes. Are they citizens, yes, unless proved to the contrary. So, why are they missing? Instead of preventing proven non-citizens becoming voters, the ECI has 'succeeded' in turning millions of eligible citizens into non-voters.

(Next column: April 5, 2026)



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**INSIDE TRACK**
**COOMI KAPOOR**

**Mamata's Catch 22**

Mamata Banerjee declared victory after the Supreme Court decreed that judicial officers would decide on claims and objections in the ongoing SIR, not the Election Commission. But now that the election time schedule has been announced, it is unlikely that the scrutiny of the 60 lakh cases under adjudication will be complete by April 23, the polling date for the first phase. Banerjee is caught in a Catch-22 dilemma. If she insists that all disputed voter identity cases be cleared before the elections, then polls will have to be postponed and Presidential rule imposed in the state, as her term as caretaker CM expires on May 7, the EC's deadline for installing a new Assembly. The home ministry seems to have shrewdly envisaged this possibility by appointing as the new Governor the assertive R N Ravi, a former police officer and former Governor of Tamil Nadu. Banerjee is unlikely to create circumstances to call for Governor's rule during elections.

**Caste aside**

UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath was accorded a huge welcome when he presided as chief guest at Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, for a symbolic Jauhar ceremony honouring Rajput history and heritage earlier this week. Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat was also present. Both men addressed rallies honouring Rajput culture. Adityanath, was, however, quick to dispel the impression that the gathering was in any way a show of caste solidarity. A day later, at Sire temple in Rajasthan's Jalore district, he emphasised that he discouraged casteism and while historically the caste system had helped organise society, casteism only weakens the social fabric and divides the nation. Adityanath perhaps wanted to make his position clear since the party high command generally frowns on such gatherings. Last year, a senior party leader, who organised a meeting of BJP MLAs to assess the reasons for the poor performance of the party in 2024 in parts of UP, was chided for attempting to organise a ginger group of upper castes.

**Prescient prediction**

The tussle over the tenure of the chairperson of Tata Sons, N Chandrasekaran, and the recent contentious removal of Tata Trust members are indicators of a brewing power

struggle for control of India's premier corporate house in the wake of Ratan Tata's death in 2024. It is a scenario which the late Cyrus Mistry was prescient in envisaging. Mistry had warned Ratan Tata of the importance of institutionalising the Tata Group so that it was not run by any single individual as was possible in the past due to the sheer respect commanded by earlier chairpersons, J R D Tata and Ratan Tata himself.

Mistry believed a clear mechanism should be spelt out for handling a deadlock when disputes between members arose. When Ratan refused to take his suggestion seriously, Mistry himself drafted a corporate governance framework to clarify the roles of Tata Sons and the role of the operating companies. His apprehension was that after some years, the trusts "could be lost to the wrong people". He planned on introducing the preliminary draft of such a framework to a board meeting of Tata Sons on October 24, 2016. Minutes before the board meeting, Mistry was axed.

**What's in a name**

As a Parsi, I wince every time I hear an American on TV pronounce the name of the embattled global flash-point, the Strait of Hormuz, as if the word ending was a 'moose', the horned deer. Hormuz is another title for the Zoroastrian lord of light and knowledge, Ahura Mazda. Parsis are

likely to be the most familiar with the correct pronunciation of a name passed on by word of mouth for generations since the Zoroastrians' arrival in India in the 8th century. Hormuz is a common Parsi first name and appears frequently in Zoroastrian prayers. It predates the Arab invasion of Persia in the 7th century and is of middle Persian or Pahlavi origin, the liturgical language of the Zoroastrian scriptures. The present generation in Iran appears unaware that the spelling originally ended with a 'd' and should be correctly pronounced "Hormazd" or "Ohrmazd".

**Little eye contact**

Delhi BJP leader Vijay Goel does a disservice to his recently released biography of Atal Bihari Vajpayee by terming it a "coffee table book". Goel, who had a 50-year-long relationship with Vajpayee, has sifted painstakingly through photographic archives to compile a pictorial chronology of Vajpayee's life to accompany his text of the late prime minister's biography. And the camera does not lie. The fiery orator who could magnetise crowds with his words was surprisingly deadpan in displaying emotion while interacting directly with people and usually avoided eye contact. In fact, Vajpayee's face often displays more animation while speaking to Opposition leaders than to his own party colleagues.

# Mind & Games

SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2026

## The weather is getting wilder & there's a dire signal in the data

### Earth's systems are changing faster than predicted as global temperatures rise

DAVID GELLES

**S**CIENTISTS WHO STUDY global warming are currently wrestling with a question that, while seemingly technical, is profoundly consequential: Is climate change accelerating?

The debate spilled into the open this month, after new research found that the rate of global warming has nearly doubled over the last decade. The findings set scientific circles buzzing, and not all researchers agree on the conclusion.

Many of the consequences of global warming — such as more intense storms, warming oceans and melting glaciers — are arriving faster and more powerfully than many scientists had expected.

“Key impacts are exceeding what models predicted when it comes to extreme weather, the intensification of hurricanes, ice sheet disintegration and sea level rise,” said Michael Mann, a professor of environmental science at the University of Pennsylvania.

This week in the United States, extreme weather pushed temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the parts of California and the Southwest, even as it is still winter, and recent research has found that the duration and intensity of heat waves is accelerating. At the same time, blizzard conditions whipped the upper Midwest and severe thunderstorms moved east from Arkansas to the Gulf. Around the globe, anomalous weather and shattered records are sending new waves of concern through the scientific community, which was already well aware that some ecosystems are showing signs of intense stress.

“Things are getting really outside of what humans have ever seen,” said Friederike Otto, a professor of climate science at Imperial College London. “Almost every part of the world is experiencing these extreme events.”

#### The debate

Global average temperatures have already climbed nearly 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, a threshold that is seen as crucial for avoiding the worst effects of climate change.

A study about the pace of global



The melting Thwaites Glacier

NYT

warming, published on March 6, found that, even after accounting for other phenomena such as volcanic eruptions, solar radiation and natural variability, the rate of global warming has accelerated since 2015. “Over the last 10 years, the warming trend has been faster than in the previous decades,” said Stefan Rahmstorf, a climate scientist at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany, and one of the authors of the study, which appeared in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*. Dr Mann was among those who were unconvinced. He said the evidence for an uptick in the rate of warming was “not statistically detectable,” adding that “the anomalous warmth in recent years was due to a natural El Niño spike.”

El Niño is the warm phase of a natural climate pattern that shapes weather patterns worldwide, typically bringing wet and cool conditions with increased flooding to the southern United States, and warmer, drier winters to the northern United States and Canada. It appears that El Niño may return this summer, raising the prospect of even more extreme

weather in the months ahead.

#### Warming oceans

Ocean temperatures are hitting record highs around the globe, resulting in mass coral bleaching from the Caribbean to Australia, and a sharp decline in fish populations.

The oceans, which absorb more than 90% of the excess heat trapped in the Earth's atmosphere, are warming at an accelerating rate, leading to bathtub-like temperatures off the coast of Florida.

Each of the past eight years set a record for ocean heat, with the rate of ocean warming roughly doubling over the past two decades compared with the longer-term trend. Marine heat waves now affect more than half of the global ocean in a typical year, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The world experienced its fourth global coral bleaching event starting in 2023, with reefs across the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Oceans suffering extensive damage. It was still in progress in 2025.

**GLOBALLY, RATE OF SEA LEVEL RISE HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED SINCE 1993 WHEN MEASUREMENTS BEGAN**

#### Glaciers, ice and rising seas

As oceans have warmed, the North and South poles have both experienced abnormal heat, and in Antarctica, the Thwaites Glacier is melting at an alarming rate. If it breaks apart entirely, global sea levels could rise by two feet over the course of several decades, putting millions at risk.

Antarctic sea ice is also plummeting, with the four lowest readings in the 47-year satellite record all occurring over the past four years. “Sea ice loss in Antarctica is very concerning, because if it continues to melt, we risk self-perpetuating processes, whereby you expose more of the ocean, and that warms the surface of the ocean,” said Bethan Davies, a geologist at Newcastle University. “It’s a tipping point.” Outside the poles, other glaciers are also melting at an accelerating rate.

For the second consecutive year in 2024, all 58 of the main glaciers tracked by the World Glacier Monitoring Service across five continents lost mass, the greatest average ice loss in 55 years of records. The European Alps lost roughly 10% of their remaining glacier volume in just two years, while Venezuela became the first Andes nation to lose all of its glaciers. Worldwide, the rate of sea level rise is now picking up pace, more than doubling since satellite measurements began in 1993, leading to warnings about the fate of coastal cities from Miami to Jakarta.

#### Connected systems

The changes to Earth's natural patterns reveal an interconnected web of ecological systems that are undergoing profound changes beyond what many researchers have predicted.

Scientists say the culprit is clear: Ever since the Industrial Revolution, the relentless burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas has been adding heat-trapping gases to the atmosphere, leading to a sharp rise in global temperatures. The hottest year in recorded history was 2024, and each of the 10 warmest years on record have come in the past decade.

Since 1997, when nations agreed to limit planet-warming gases as part of the landmark Kyoto Protocol, humanity has released more greenhouse gases than in all prior history. The temperature rise associated with that growing volume of heat-trapping gas has kicked in, and is continuing to rise. Oceans, which have absorbed much of the carbon dioxide that humans have added to the atmosphere, are becoming less efficient at storing carbon. The same is true for forest and soils.

—NYT

## Tree rings reveal origins of some of world's best violins

### A study of over 275 violins suggests wood from northern Italy used by Stradivari

KATHERINE KORNEI

**EVERYONE WANTS A** piece of some of the world's famous violins. Switzerland, France, Slovenia and other European countries have all claimed that the wood used in the celebrated stringed instruments of Antonio Stradivari came from their forests. But now, a study of the tree rings in Stradivari violins, published in the journal *Dendrochronologia*, has revealed the most likely origin of some of the craftsman's violins: wood from trees growing at high elevation in northern Italy in the same valley that hosted part of the 2026 Winter Olympic Games.

Antonio Stradivari produced over 800 instruments in the 17th and 18th centuries, most of them violins but also cellos, guitars and a harp. A Stradivari instrument is treasured for many reasons, but most notably its superior sound quality. “It does everything better,” said Peter Beare, a director of Beare Violins in England, a company that restores, sells and authenticates high-end violins. The wood that goes into making a violin — particularly the front surface, known as the soundboard — is critical. Parameters such as wood density and stiffness all affect how a violin ultimately sounds. “The wood choice is very, very important,” Beare said. Stradivari is known to have favored spruce, but where exactly he sourced his wood has long been steeped in mystery. That's where the study of tree rings — dendrochronology — comes in.

Most trees produce a ring of growth each year, and the widths of those rings depend on environmental conditions. So a sequence of tree rings is like a bar code that records the conditions experienced by a tree year after year. Tree rings are easily measured on the soundboards of violins. That's what dendrochronologist and violin maker John Topham did over the course of several decades. Before he died last year, Topham shared

his meticulous measurements from 284 Stradivari violins with Mauro Bernabei, a dendrochronologist at the Italian National Research Council in San Michele all'Adige.

But those tree ring records don't reveal anything about where Stradivari sourced his wood. To that end, Dr Bernabei and his colleagues compared the patterns in the violins with tree ring records collected from over 6,000 sites around the world and recorded in the International Tree-Ring Data Bank. “Each forest or mountain range is going to have a slightly unique pattern of wide and narrow rings over time,” said Chris Guiterman, a dendrochronologist at the University of Colorado who helps to manage the databank and was not involved in the research. “Those peculiarities of those locations help you match up trees from an unknown location.”

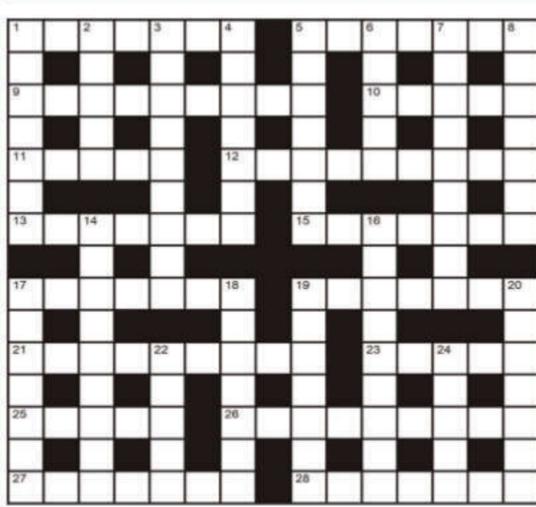
It was a challenge to find records stretching back to the time of Stradivari. “It's not easy to find old wood,” Dr Bernabei said. There was uncertainty in that process, Dr Bernabei conceded. “You don't know if a castle is made from wood from the forest surrounding it,” Dr Bernabei and his colleagues grouped together violin records that exhibited similar tree-ring patterns and assembled an average tree-ring sequence for each group.

When the team compared those averages with records from the International Tree-Ring Data Bank, they found that a little more than half of the violins in their sample didn't yield a conclusive match. It's nearly impossible to say anything about where the wood for those violins came from beyond saying it was probably Italy, Switzerland or Austria, Dr Bernabei said.

But the average tree-ring sequence for a sizable fraction of the violins in their sample correlated well with tree rings from near Trentino in northern Italy, and specifically the high-altitude reaches of the Val di Fiemme. And interestingly, those violins tended to have been produced during Stradivari's so-called “Golden Age” from roughly 1700 to 1725, a period noted for particularly high-quality Stradivari instruments. Perhaps Stradivari produced his best work when he found a source of wood in the Val di Fiemme and stuck with it, Dr Bernabei said. —NYT

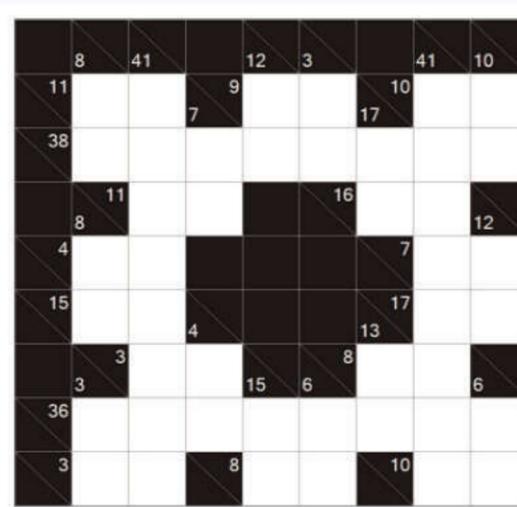


### CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 \_\_\_ an opponent: defeated opponents without giving them any opportunity to score? (7)
  - 5 Bows and \_\_\_: is obsequiously polite? (7)
  - 9 Concise statements of a precept or rule, maxims (9)
  - 10 Sweeps game (5)
  - 11 Ancient capital of Japan (5)
  - 12 \_\_\_ Rand Limited: multinational operating in India (9)
  - 13 Jailer? (7)
  - 15 A metal support for holding wood in the fire-place? (7)
  - 17 A device for catching an animal (3-4)
  - 19 “As brain” changes, you get her name? (7)
  - 21 \_\_\_ of Contract: the legal cancellation of a contract (9)
  - 23 Bellini opera - “Roman” anagram (5)
  - 25 Norwegian dramatist (5)
  - 26 “H” in HPCL (9)
  - 27 City near New York (7)
  - 28 Most humbly submissive (7)
- DOWN**
- 1 Angular support projecting from a vertical surface (7)
  - 2 Sneeze sound (5)
  - 3 Pune based industrial house (9)
  - 4 Fate (7)
  - 5 Company which was bought by Anil Agarwal's Vedanta Resources in April 2007 (4,3)
  - 6 Sovereign; head of state (5)
  - 7 Mixture of dried flower petals (9)
  - 8 Distended (7)
  - 14 Liquidator of rodents (3,6)
  - 16 Safety type of stock (9)
  - 17 Virtual \_\_\_ (VR in short) (7)
  - 18 Strikes with fists (7)
  - 19 Breastbone (7)
  - 20 Opposing (7)
  - 22 Impenetrable, obtuse (5)
  - 24 Knot again (5)

### KAKURO



In Kakuro sum puzzles, the numbers in the black squares refer to the SUMS of the digits, which you are to fill into the empty spaces directly below or to the right of the black square containing the number. No zeroes are used here, only the digits one through nine. An important point: A digit cannot appear more than once in any particular digit combination.

### BIZ QUIZ

1. Which German shipping company is planning a ₹20,000 crore investment in India?
2. Which major IT company has announced the launch of a new hub in Gujarat?
3. Which Indian gaming and sports media firm is about to acquire stakes in Spanish social gaming platforms?

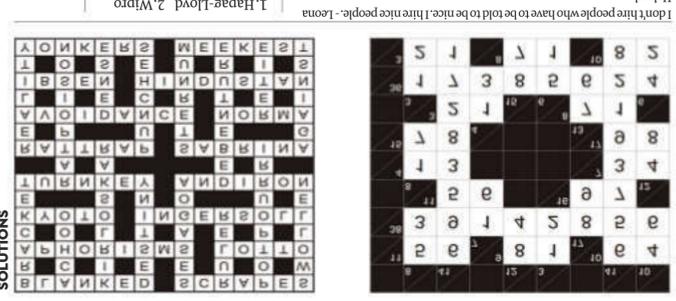
### BUZZ WORD

The Buzz Word is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Today's clue: VSX equals PEW

M pgi'n lmus vsqvwys xlg lnts ng as ngwng as jmsr. M lmus jmsr vsqvwys. - Wsgjo Lshqhwk.

### ANSWERS



### BRIDGE BOUTS L. SUBRAMANIAN

#### DON'T GET BLOCKED

We continue with our discussion on the play of the slam in last week's column. Suppose west leads a trump instead of the club. How should you play?

Dir: South	SKQJ4	S	N
Vul: Both	HKT83	1D	1H
	DQ4	1S	4S
	CKJ6	6S	pass

S52	N	ST73
HQ92		HA54
D96	S	DJ75
CT98743		CAQ52

SA986
HJ76
DAKT832
C-

Contract: 6S by south. West leads a trump. Can you find a play to avoid guessing in hearts.

Analysis: The lead has denied the club ruff in your hand at trick one. So, what do you do? You have to be careful.

Play: Win the opening lead in dummy and ruff a club. Play a diamond to the queen, and ruff one more club, this time with the ace! Play a spade and hope trumps are 3-2 and cash out the diamonds. How simple!

If you win the opening lead in hand, you will be poorly placed. Did you ruff with the SA, instead of a small ruff, to prevent the blocked situation? Great!

Bidding challenge: Enjoy the bidding sequence of an expert pair.

SAJ2	N	SQT4	W	E
H9752		HAKT643	1S!	2C
DT9	S	D732	2D	2S
CT432		C9	4S!	6S

Though minimum in high cards, west correctly opened her hand in first seat with a bid of 1S. Look at the pluses in her hand: Two good suits with two quick tricks. Partner responded 2C and she rebid 2D. Partner bid 2S. What is it? He is fixing the trump suit and showing a very good hand with slam potential, as he has already made a two over one. Since west has a minimum, she jumped to 4S to show she is not interested beyond game. Partner, however, has a splendid hand and he bid the slam.

# Well Being

SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2026



## URBANITES MORE VULNERABLE

According to Kantar's GLP-1 2026 Opportunity Index report, urban diabetes prevalence stands at 14.2%, which is close to 73 million individuals aged 15 years and above, while rural diabetes prevalence stands at 8.3%

# India's 'magic pill' moment

**How the rush to release affordable and accessible versions of weight loss drugs could reshape the fight against 'diabetes'**

SREYA DEB

**W**ITH INDIA PRIMED for newer and cheaper GLP-1 drugs, with some already having hit the market - thanks to the expiry of the patent on semaglutide, the molecule behind Danish drugmaker Novo Nordisk's blockbuster weight-loss drugs Wegovy and Ozempic, on March 20 - experts believe that the latest development could reshape the fight against 'diabetes' and ease the country's huge metabolic disease burden.

As per data from an Indian Council of Medical Research-India Diabetes (ICMR-INDIAB) study, about 101 million Indians are living with diabetes and 136 million with prediabetes. The same report also highlighted an enormous parallel burden of excess weight, estimating about 254 million people with generalised obesity and 351 million with abdominal obesity.

GLP-1 (Glucagon-like peptide-1) receptor agonists such as semaglutide are considered a highly effective class of drugs for managing type 2 diabetes and promoting significant weight loss. They are being hailed by many as game changers, as they have been found to offer results that other previous treatments could not match.

So far, prices of Ozempic and Wegovy, two of the currently available weight-loss drugs in the country, were priced anywhere ₹8,000 and ₹16,000 or more, besides Rybelsus, which is an oral tablet, coming for ₹2,300 to ₹3,300.

On Saturday, after the expiry of Novo Nordisk's patent, seven pharma companies launched generic, cheaper versions of semaglutide, ranging from ₹1,290 to ₹4,200 per month. These prices are nearly 65-90% cheaper than the patented drug that was available thus far.

As per Dr AK Jhingan, senior director, Centre for Diabetes, Thyroid, Obesity and Endocrinology, BLK-MAX Super Speciality Hospital, New Delhi, the high cost of treatment has remained a major factor leading to the lack of access, "which makes long-term therapy difficult for many patients in India".

Dr Saptarshi Bhattacharya, senior consultant, endocrinology, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, adds, "Some of the users have had to stop taking these medications due to the cost factors as well as unrealistic expectations."

However, the drastically reduced prices may now act as an incentive for many patients to begin these therapies, who could not afford them earlier. Pharma companies like Zydus Life Sciences, Sun Pharma, Cipla, Dr Reddy's Labs and Alkem, among others, have all thrown their hats in the ring, and have introduced semaglutide with much reduced prices - especially now that the main patent held by Novo Nordisk



## 'DIABESITY' RISKS

- Heart disease & stroke
- Chronic kidney disease
- Sleep apnea
- Retinal disease, vision loss
- Nerve damage, foot complications
- Higher surgical risk, slower recovery
- Increased risk of premature death
- Fatty liver disease, progression to steatohepatitis
- Worsening hypertension, dyslipidemia
- Reduced mobility, joint disease, poorer quality of life

## BULGING CONCERN

<b>101 mn</b> Indians living with diabetes	<b>136 mn</b> Indians living with prediabetes
<b>254 mn</b> People with generalised obesity in India	<b>4.99%</b> Percentage of urban Indians aware of GLP-1 therapies
<b>351 mn</b> People with abdominal obesity in India	

Source: ICMR-INDIAB study, Kantar

has expired.

With the entry of newer drugs, and generics set to get cheaper by over 50%, it will now melt the affordability barrier for many Indian patients, Dr Ambrish Mithal, chairman and head of endocrinology and diabetes at Max Healthcare, earlier told FE.

"Making GLP-1 therapies more affordable is a must, considering that obesity and diabetes are increasingly becoming major issues in our country. These two have a high probability of causing complications such as heart, liver and kidney problems," says Dr Bhattacharya, adding, "At present, due to the high cost of these medicines, only a handful of people have access to them. If made more affordable, it may be easier to manage these two conditions in a larger number of people."

As cost comes down, the number of

prescriptions for these drugs is also expected to increase gradually, he adds.

Dr Tarun Mittal, vice-chairperson, laparoscopic and robotic bariatric surgery, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, New Delhi, too, expects the demand for these drugs to increase significantly. "India has a very large diabetes and obesity burden, and with newer and potentially more affordable options entering the market, access is likely to expand beyond a small urban niche," he says. Improving affordability is essential "if we want meaningful impact at a population level rather than limiting access to a small segment", he adds.

### Healthy awareness is key

So far, so good. However, most doctors stress that considering cost alone is hardly enough to prescribe semaglutides

or GLP-1 therapies. "They are best suited for carefully chosen patients with type 2 diabetes, obesity, or obesity-related metabolic complications, after proper evaluation and counselling. With more options and improved affordability, their use is likely to increase but treatment must remain strictly physician-guided and not trend-driven, as these drugs have potential side effects that require careful monitoring," Dr Mittal clarifies.

Dr David Chandy, director of endocrinology and diabetology at Sir HN Reliance Hospital, says that while GLP-1 therapies are relevant in the current context of India's health standards, "they are still far from mainstream." Uptake is growing, especially after newer launches, but access, cost, awareness, and appropriate patient selection remain major barriers, he adds.

## HEALTH CAPSULES



### New tool to control blood pressure

The tool is called the UCWay Hypertension Medication Algorithm. It follows a stepwise approach to increasing medication types and doses, allowing clinicians to adjust treatment for individual factors and special populations. It has effectively lowered hypertension and prevented serious disease or death for thousands.



### Stricter warnings on contraceptive pills

The Drug Technical Advisory Board has recommended that the labels on emergency contraceptive pills be amended to include stricter warnings - that they do not protect against HIV or STDs, should not be taken more than twice a month, and advice for using other contraceptive means in consultation with a doctor.



### WHO gives Hep B&C elimination guidelines

The World Health Organisation has released the 'Consolidated guidelines and implementation handbook on Hepatitis B and C' to help countries to expand prevention, testing, treatment, service delivery and programme monitoring, through a comprehensive public health approach.



### Smartwatch data to track insulin resistance

A study done by scientists at Google Research proved that smartwatch data together with blood biomarkers can be analysed to predict insulin resistance - proved in the study by 1165 participants. Data from smartwatches can over time that reflect cumulative demands of metabolic regulation.

# Inflammation demystified

**Know what causes inflammation and how it affects the body**

FE FEATURES

**SOCIAL MEDIA IS** full of so-called experts advising lifestyle changes and diet to curb inflammation, which is being blamed for just about every malaise. But what exactly is inflammation? Dr Jyotsna Oak, consultant, internal medicine & rheumatology, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, Mumbai, says, "Most people only think about inflammation when something visibly goes wrong, a swollen finger, a tender joint, a wound that turns red around the edges. But the process starts long before any of that becomes visible, and it starts because the body is trying to help. When the immune system detects a problem, whether that is a cut, a pathogen, or damaged cells, it sends chemical messengers that pull blood and immune cells toward the affected area. That activity produces the warmth, redness, swelling, and pain

people associate with inflammation. Uncomfortable as those signs are, they exist for a reason. They are how the body concentrates its repair resources where they are needed most.

Short-term inflammation that resolves after healing is normal and necessary. The version that becomes a health concern is chronic inflammation, where the immune system stays switched on well past any actual threat, and over time starts working against the body's own tissues.

### What causes inflammation, and is it age related?

The triggers range from obvious to invisible. Bacterial and viral infections, physical injuries, chemical exposure, and autoimmune responses are among the most direct causes. What gets less attention is how everyday habits quietly drive chronic inflammation. A diet built around ultra-processed foods, refined carbohydrates, and added sugar keeps low-grade inflammatory activity ticking in the back-



Dr Jyotsna Oak

ground. Carrying excess weight, smoking, physical inactivity, poor sleep, and sustained psychological stress all contribute to the same problem. Age adds another layer. As the immune system gets older, it tends to lose its ability to fully disengage between threats, producing a subtle but persistent baseline of inflammatory activity that researchers call inflammaging. This state has been linked to cardiovascular disease, arthritis, metabolic disorders, and neurodegenerative conditions.

### How is inflammation diagnosed?

Acute inflammation is usually self-evident through heat, swelling, pain, and sometimes fever. Chronic inflammation is harder to catch because it often produces no obvious symptoms in the early stages. People may feel persistently tired or generally unwell and attribute it to stress or ageing rather than flagging it medically.

Blood tests are the standard detection method. CRP, a protein the liver produces during active inflammation, is one of the most commonly ordered markers. ESR



measures how quickly red blood cells settle in a sample, with faster settling pointing to elevated inflammatory proteins. Neither test identifies the root cause on its own, but both confirm whether inflammatory activity is present and whether further investigation is needed.

### Is inflammation curable?

For acute inflammation with a clear cause, yes. Treat the infection, heal the injury, and the response resolves along

with it. Chronic inflammation is a different matter. In most cases it is managed rather than cured, by addressing the underlying condition, adjusting lifestyle factors that feed it, and sometimes using medication to reduce immune overactivity. Caught early, the long-term damage it can cause is largely preventable.

### What lifestyle changes can help control inflammation?

Diet is the most direct lever most peo-

ple have. Vegetables, fruit, whole grains, nuts, and omega-3 sources like oily fish, flaxseeds, and walnuts provide the nutrients that help the immune system regulate itself. Regular moderate exercise improves circulation, supports metabolic function, and helps keep body weight in a range where excess fat is not chronically provoking immune responses. Sleep is underestimated in this context. Seven to eight hours of quality sleep each night is one of the main windows during which the immune system resets. Cutting it short regularly disrupts that process. Managing chronic stress, reducing tobacco use, and limiting alcohol consumption remove further inflammatory triggers from the equation.

### What are the adverse effects of inflammation?

Cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, and several cancers all have well-documented links to sustained inflammatory activity. There is also growing evidence connecting chronic inflammation to cognitive decline. It rarely announces itself until real damage has already accumulated. There is no single moment, just a gradual erosion happening quietly over years. That is why the habits that keep it in check matter most as prevention rather than as a response after the fact.

# Breaking the White Wall

The contemporary art gallery is a cultural hub that's moving beyond the white cube, driven by younger, digital-first audiences and experimental artists

**Nupur Amarnath**

In 2022, when finance professional-turned-gallerist Ayesha Parikh chose an old house in Bandra for her gallery, Art & Charlie, it raised eyebrows. Far from Mumbai's art districts of Fort and Colaba, Bandra was better known for its cafés and bars. Parikh also reimagined programming—not just talks or walkthroughs, but classical music, theatre, comedy shows and arcade nights. If something had even a 50% connection to an exhibit, she used it as a starting point, expanding the gallery into a more open, experimental cultural space.

At that time, she faced a lot of heat. People commented Art & Charlie was not a gallery because of these "cultural" programmes. But Parikh was certain that fresh programming would help her build audiences beyond the traditional collectors. "It was essential because it was a new neighbourhood and I had to build an audience from scratch." Four years and 30+ shows later, Art & Charlie has only widened the scope of its programming.

Parikh says the typical white cube model of art gallery has been primed for change for a while now. "There was the traditional white cube—a location with four white walls. That wasn't working. New collectors weren't coming in. It was becoming asilo and everybody was worried."

The white cube is the minimalist gallery aesthetic—white walls, neutral lighting, no distractions—designed to isolate and elevate art for pure viewing. Institutionalised by the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s New York and named by art critic Brian O'Doherty, white cube was once revolutionary but is now often seen as static and even alienating. The push to move beyond it isn't new. After the 2008 financial crisis, New York-based art curator Carrie Scott reimagined gallery as a hybrid model, arguing that art must exist in lived, real-world contexts.

Galleries in India too are busy rethinking and



**People engage with art in different ways. What is important is to create multiple entry points to the same material"**  
**VARUN NAYAR,**  
director, Impart

re-inventing for the new audience. For instance, Rina Upadhyaya, a newbie artist, looks out for well-curated, solo shows. Typographer Pooja Saxena enjoys visiting contemporary art galleries Akar Prakar and Pulp Society in Delhi where the focus is on graphic arts, printmaking, independent publishing, etc.

Pulp Society claims to be an approachable, anti-white cube gallery. Approachable and accessible are two traits most galleries are pursuing. A paper on young people's perceptions of the Auckland Art Gallery found that despite thousands passing by daily, few entered. It says cultural institutions, though publicly funded and free, often maintain the illusion of democratic access while catering to specific social groups. There may be no visible barriers, but many young people feel they do not belong.

**ACCESSIBLE ART**  
Parikh says these young people need to be wooed. Sahil Arora, founder of Method, a contemporary art gallery in Mumbai and Delhi, agrees and adds that he never saw the space as being restricted to visual art. He says, "If we enjoy music, spoken word or theatre, there's no reason why that can't exist in a gallery. It wasn't a conscious business decision as much as a natural extension of our own interests." Most galleries, he says, become a reflection of the people running them. "In our case, that meant focusing on young, emerging practices on the art side, but also building programming around film screenings, music and literature. The idea was to create a space that feels different—not just in what is shown, but in how people experience it."

He says that going to a gallery is becoming more of a social experience. "For us, it has always been about making art accessible to as many people as possible. Now a lot of new people are buying because they like something and it fits their budget." Social media has become a major discovery channel. "We are seeing younger collectors, people in their 30s and 40s, entering the market, and that's shifting how galleries think about audiences and engagement."

What's also changing is the nature of art, which is making galleries rethink. Roobina Karode, director and chief curator, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, says contemporary art is interdisciplinary in its outlook.



Apart from painting, sculpture and print, there are video installations, immersive performances and even temporary architectural structures. "All this changes the way art is showcased and even imagined by institutions."

**GALLERY VIEW**

Even traditional galleries are responding, like Delhi's Gallery Espace that has been around since the early 1990s. Founder Renu Modi says, "The largely informal art ecosystem has matured. The segmentation between galleries, auction houses, museums and art fairs is much more distinct. Today, galleries are a key link in the ecosystem."

She says even the physical space has changed as art requires more space. Space, for instance, now occupies a three-storey space. It is also looking at virtual spaces. In 2020, it held its Instagram-only exhibition "Abstract Notations". "During Covid, online viewing rooms or digital exhibitions were quite the trend. That hybrid model is here to stay."

Online community is the next hunting ground for collectors. Bhavna Kakar, founder of Latitude 28, says social media is important. With over 20,000 Instagram followers for the gallery, social media is critical not just for outreach but for shaping audience behaviour. At one of their recent openings, nearly 30% of the 500+ guests came through social media. "Digital platforms bring in a more diverse audience and change the energy of the space. While programming is not conceived for Instagram, there is an awareness of how work is encountered, shared and extended online. It is an added layer of visibility that galleries cannot ignore."

Kakar notes that

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Art should be an emotional

and lived experience, not

something that feels distant

or academic."

**STEP OUT OF THE FRAME**

The very idea of a gallery is

changing. Sikao is a nomad-

ic art gallery with no fixed

home. It thrives on the idea

that each time it arrives in a

new city, it brings the same

works into an entirely dif-

ferent context.

However, unlike Sikao, location is important

for others. Ashish Thapar, founder of the Thapar

Gallery in Delhi, says location plays a role in shap-

ing their programme: "It's not just the location—the

character of the building also matters."

He says galleries are not obligated to follow a

pattern of engagement to stay relevant. "Some

galleries respond more closely to collectors,

while others are led by artists. But the growing

emphasis on programming and experience

raises an important question of what is being

gained and what might be lost." He says galleries

need to walk a fine line. "Not everything needs

to serve interpretation. Perhaps enjoyment

plays a more central role now than it once did.

The risk, however, is that art becomes just one

element in a broader spectacle, rather than its

primary focus."

**A city like Mumbai is thirsty for interactions. When we animate exhibitions in ways appropriate to people, we keep alive the habit of coming to galleries"**  
**SHIREEN GANDHY,**  
creative director, Chemould Prescott Road

Kakar disagrees as she says that meeting audiences where they already are has worked for her. The modern-day art gallery wears many hats, including a hangout. There's no one traditional model to follow, it is a spectrum. As Parikh says, "It's not just about art anymore, it's about hanging out, immersion, community." The walls are still there, but the door is wide open.

**Even the physical space of the gallery has changed. Earlier, we needed less space as most works were paintings and drawings. Today we have digital works, installations, conceptual works, large sculptures and immersive practices. All of this requires more space"**  
**RENU MODI,**  
founder, Gallery Espace

gallery programming is conceptualised keeping the younger, under-45 audience in mind, but not at the cost of rigour. "The focus is on creating multiple entry points rather than simplifying content. The intent is not dilution but demystification."

Varun Nayar, director of Impart, an online art history platform by the Art & Photography Foundation, Bengaluru, says, "People engage with art in very different ways. Some prefer to read, others listen or watch, while some look for more interactive or hands-on experiences. What is important is to create multiple entry points to the same material." There's also a move towards participation. "The audiences are looking for ways to contextualise, question and build relationships with what they see," he says. Nayar says the big shift is that digital spaces have come into their own: "Digital allows for more flexible and ongoing engagement."

The gallery has moved from being a site of exhibition to an institutional role with residencies, publications, outreach, collaborations and programming. Koshni Vadehra, director of the Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi, says contemporary practices have pushed galleries to become more flexible and collaborative. "There is a strong move towards creating immersive environments, and artists often look to galleries as partners in enabling engagements and experiences," she says. The new art audience, according to her, seeks greater context and education.

Mumbai's legacy gallery Chemould Prescott Road has seen the artscape change since 1963. Creative director Shireen Gandhi says the experience of viewing is enhanced when art is seen in the company of poetry, prose, music and talk. Art galleries, she believes, are becoming spaces that people want to visit for a day out. "A city like Mumbai is thirsty for interactions. When we animate exhibitions in ways appropriate to them, we keep alive the habit of coming to galleries."

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creative director, Chemould Prescott Road

Kakar disagrees as she says that meeting audiences where they already are has worked for her. The modern-day art gallery wears many hats, including a hangout. There's no one traditional model to follow, it is a spectrum. As Parikh says, "It's not just about art anymore, it's about hanging out, immersion, community." The walls are still there, but the door is wide open.

**Even the physical space of the gallery has changed. Earlier, we needed less space as most works were paintings and drawings. Today we have digital works, installations, conceptual works, large sculptures and immersive practices. All of this requires more space"**  
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founder, Gallery Espace

gallery programming is conceptualised keeping the younger, under-45 audience in mind, but not at the cost of rigour. "The focus is on creating multiple entry points rather than simplifying content. The intent is not dilution but demystification."

Varun Nayar, director of Impart, an online art history platform by the Art & Photography Foundation, Bengaluru, says, "People engage with art in very different ways. Some prefer to read, others listen or watch, while some look for more interactive or hands-on experiences. What is important is to create multiple entry points to the same material." There's also a move towards participation. "The audiences are looking for ways to contextualise, question and build relationships with what they see," he says. Nayar says the big shift is that digital spaces have come into their own: "Digital allows for more flexible and ongoing engagement."

The gallery has moved from being a site of exhibition to an institutional role with residencies, publications, outreach, collaborations and programming. Koshni Vadehra, director of the Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi, says contemporary practices have pushed galleries to become more flexible and collaborative. "There is a strong move towards creating immersive environments, and artists often look to galleries as partners in enabling engagements and experiences," she says. The new art audience, according to her, seeks greater context and education.

Mumbai's legacy gallery Chemould Prescott Road has seen the artscape change since 1963. Creative director Shireen Gandhi says the experience of viewing is enhanced when art is seen in the company of poetry, prose, music and talk. Art galleries, she believes, are becoming spaces that people want to visit for a day out. "A city like Mumbai is thirsty for interactions. When we animate exhibitions in ways appropriate to them, we keep alive the habit of coming to galleries."

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Anand Vasu

It was from the sky that the worst of hellfire rained down.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had taken control of large swathes of land across borders. In the Syrian region of Deir ez-Zor in 2014, Maram, only 7, witnessed unspeakable horrors and barely escaped with her life. If some miracle ensured that she survived the ISIS, bombs targeting the occupying forces flattened the homes right next to hers. Forced to flee, Maram, like thousands of others, somehow made it to the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut.

Seven years later, Maram, in her early teens, was set to be married off. She was illiterate and had never seen the inside of a school. But at Shatila, she saw some children play a sport she did not recognise—cricket. Her curiosity about the boy hurling a ball with his “arm straight” and another hitting it “on both sides” was so sharp that she just had to try it for herself.

That marriage didn’t happen. Instead, Maram mastered the fundamentals of cricket and became proficient enough to take on the bigger boys and captain the girls’ team.

Mohammad Kheir, a Palestinian Syrian, is the coach who showed Maram the basics of the game. He is the cofounder of the Alsama Project—an NGO providing education to refugees in West Asia—alongside Meike Ziervogel, Kadria Hussien and Richard Verity. Ziervogel is a German-born novelist and publisher who once worked as a journalist; Hussien, a refugee herself, is a community leader who had the respect and trust of Shatila even before Alsama was founded; and Verity is a former McKinsey partner who worked in the global energy sector.

**LET'S PLAY**

Kheir is the backbone of Alsama’s cricket programme. It’s a matter of great pride to him that more than 800 people from the refugee camps play the game. More than 30 coaches, International Cricket Council Level 1 certified, grow the game, taking it beyond the camps. It’s a stunning achievement that Alsama organises an annual cricket tournament that features a joint Indian-Pakistani team, a Sri Lankan team and teams made up of locals. At these tournaments, cricket opens the door, but music and food follow, with each diverse group bringing to their fellow displaced what they miss most about home.

“People often ask me, Why cricket? Why not football? Or basketball? Cricket is unique,” says Kheir. “It’s a non-contact sport. This means boys and girls can play together and, through this, learn how to socialise. As a game, it is as much mental as it is physical, which means that even if you are younger or smaller, you can play against others. Also, in cricket, there are many events to celebrate—a wicket, a six, a four, a catch—while in football, the team comes together to celebrate only when a goal is scored. That may happen a few times in a match. But in cricket, there is always something to celebrate together.”

Initially, when Kheir and the kids started a street game of cricket, it was a curiosity to passersby. How do you know this game, they would wonder. “Cricket thus helps us understand their culture, and take our culture to them,” says Kheir. “In other countries, cricket is just one option. For us, cricket is a need. It is where the culture and values of Alsama come together as a curriculum.”

**LET'S STUDY**

Alsama does not exist to grow cricket although it does a fine job of that. Alsama’s schools help 950 students across four centres go from illiterate to university in six years. The core subjects are Arabic, English and maths, with

**More than 800 people in the refugee camps play cricket. There are over 30 coaches, with ICC Level 1 certification, to grow the game, taking it beyond the camps**

skill-based training in information technology, science, logical reasoning and professionalism. This, along with yoga, music and awareness, works to bridge the gap for these students, 60% of whom are girls.

The traditional timeline is compressed because many of the children in need did not get the start they needed and do not have the luxury of 12 years of continuity. Alsama’s rapid literacy programme, which covers the basics in just six months, won the 2024 International Prize of the Library of Congress Literacy Award and the 2025 Ockenden International Prize. Alsama has managed to deliver education at just 83% of Lebanon’s average cost for refugee education, according to UN.

Alsama relies on institutional and individual donations to fund its work. It’s small enough to be highly credible—81% of funds goes directly to student education—and large enough to warrant grants from the likes of the Altenburg Foundation and the Angus Lawson Memorial Trust in the UK and the Girls Opportunity Alliance of the Obama Foundation. It counts among its partners the Marylebone Cricket Club, which is an establishment as it gets.

Alsama’s funding has grown, from about £260,000 in 2021, its first year, to £755,000 in 2022, £815,000 in 2023 and £1.27 million in 2024, according to filings made to the Charity Commission for England and Wales.

This may sound like a lot of money, but it isn’t when there are more than 3,000 children on a waiting list, hoping that a fifth Alsama centre will open soon.

# Cricket’s Children in War-Torn Beirut

In the refugee camps of Lebanon, children who have escaped battles and bombing are coming together over a sport they have never known before, never played before—cricket. The non-contact game is bringing together boys and girls in the education centres of Alsama Project, offering them hope, joy, connection and a sense of identity

and it occurred to them that there might not be many significant milestones between then and death. “We looked back and there was success for each of us,” says Verity. “I had an impact, raising the share price of McKinsey clients, but on the wider world? I was in different to the people at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and it was here that I was drawn to those in the Lebanese refugee camps.”

Verity took what he learned in his job to his vocation: quality of processes. He also brought something that set Alsama apart from many NGOs: honouring data and using it to course-correct and make decisions.

**EDUCATION IS A PRIVILEGE HERE**

But Verity had to rethink some of the fundamentals in his new life. “The children we work with look different, have a different religion, language, culture and set of life experiences from my own,” he says. “But in these teenagers I could recognise the same foolishness, aspirations, strength, ability to grow and acquire new knowledge—there are ways in which all teenagers are the same, irrespective of context. My idea of how different they were, and how hard it would be to bridge the gap, was challenged. There is one significant difference: in the rich world, teenagers perceive education as an almighty chore imposed on them; at Alsama, teenagers realise it is a privilege, not a right. And that reflects in their attendance, discipline, work ethic and, ultimately, academic achievements.”

Alsama had one near-death experience in 2024, when the bombing of southern Beirut forced many students back to Syria, and embassies brought significant pressure on their nationals to leave. The teachers of Alsama stayed. Mobile phones and data cards were sourced and delivered so classes could continue on WhatsApp. A fundraiser paid for makeshift dormitories in the Christian quarter to ensure final-year students could stay and reach the finish line. Alsama registered their schools with the UN in the hope that if a foreign country bombed Beirut, they might avoid its coordinates. A worthy bet, but far from certainty in the times we live in.

Alsama had to do that, says Verity, to give students “the real certainty that we were committing to them and that if they committed to us, their education would continue”.

**THE ARC OF THE BALL**

So, where do you see yourself in five years? This overused question is not one you ask someone in a refugee camp. Shatila was set up in 1949 as a temporary settlement, but some of those who ended up there have grown up there. They are some of the most forgotten people in the world.

But Alsama has allowed Wissal, who has been there from the beginning and is now 18, the gift of dreaming coupled with a pathway. “When I was 11, ISIS forced me to wear a niqab,” she says. “Before Alsama and cricket, our families underestimated us because we were girls. They did not believe in us. Now, as we learn and grow from players to coaches, something has shifted. They see us. They value us. When a decision has to be taken about us, they ask us what we would do.”

Wissal, who likes watching English cricketers Sophia Dunkley and Jofra Archer, believes cricket and education are inextricably intertwined. “When I have spent the week, 7 am to 5 pm, preparing for the SATs, I need that

**Wissal, 18, says, “Before Alsama and cricket, our families underestimated us because we were girls. Now, as we learn and grow from players to coaches, something has shifted. They see us. They value us”**

game of cricket on the weekend to release stress, clear my mind and set goals for the next week. It looks like a day off, and it is, but it’s also not,” says Wissal. “I am Syrian by ethnicity, Lebanese by nationality, I speak English... as a refugee, I am everybody and I am nobody. But, because of cricket, I have an identity.”

Wissal wants to be a psychologist. “Cricket teaches you to listen; from listening comes understanding,” says Wissal, who is a child protection officer to whom young ones come with their problems—of school, friends, home. “I am from them, so they come to me. But they have the solutions. They just don’t know it. I listen, I speak and we unlock it.”

**CRICKET IS CONNECTION**

Wissal’s friend, Maram, whom they call the Iron Butterfly, says, “I am happy and at peace when I am on the ground. My teammates are the flowers I flit to so I am the butterfly.” She adds, “But if you hit me for a four or a six, I will keep bowling off spin to you till I get you out. Even if it takes 1,000 balls, I will bowl, so I am the iron butterfly.”

“The thing is, girls use their brains all the time,” she says. “Boys? They only use their brains when muscles don’t work. In one match, I got hit for a six by a good player. Everyone cheered and he felt like a king. I saw the crowd and said to myself, ‘This is the moment everything changes.’ Step by step, the butterfly made her move. I got him out. I won’t forget that moment. He won’t either.”

Maram likes Virat Kohli (obviously!), “adores” Smriti Mandhana and explains how cricket taught her equity. “How can you call yourself a member of the cricket community if you have gender bias?” she asks so stridently that it feels like she might pop out of the Zoom screen any moment.

“When I went back to my village, I had to teach a young girl how to bowl. I told her to draw the biggest circle she could with her arm, and from then on, it was straight. It takes a month to go from throwing to bowling, but she got there in two days,” recalls Maram. “I can talk to you about cricket for 100 years, but you won’t get it. Give me a ball and I can show you and you will learn. Cricket is connection: without that, would you and I be talking?”

It was initially hard to convince Maram’s parents that education was useful. “They thought I was studying to escape the family. Now they realise that I play, I learn and I will get a university degree to support my family,” says Maram, who has won awards, earned a place to finish her education in the UK, but chose to stay, because her ultimate goal is at home. “I want to bring the world to my village. They have no running water; no electricity; no technology—all the things we think are normal. I want to go back and build a small school because you have to start from zero. Then one and one make two, two and two four, and that’s how the world is built.”

There’s an idiom you do not use around the children of Alsama: the sky is the limit. In Arabic, alsama means “sky” or “heavens”. For the children of these camps, sky is merely the stepping stone to grow wings and fly.

The writer is former joint editor-in-chief, Wisden India



Children playing cricket in Beirut



Maram (left), a Syrian refugee, likes Virat Kohli and adores Smriti Mandhana



Mohammad Kheir, a Palestinian Syrian, is the backbone of Alsama’s cricket programme

**ROAD TO LEBANON**

Richard’s surname Verity blesses him with cricket pedigree—his distant relation Hedley was a legendary Yorkshire and England off-spinner, peerless in his time, with nearly 2,000 First Class wickets. Hedley, who died of war wounds in Italy in 1943, just shy of his 38th birthday, is remembered for exhorting his fellow soldiers to “keep going” even after being hit in the chest by a bullet. Richard and Hedley share more than a surname and bloodline.

It was a conversation with Ziervogel on a walk on the Scottish island of Coll in the Hebrides in 2017 that put Verity on the path to Lebanon. The two outdid each other in talking about how dissatisfied they were with their lives, which were utterly prosperous and outwardly enviable. Their kids had grown up,



Alsama Project provides education to refugees in West Asia



Before cofounding Alsama Project, Verity was a McKinsey partner

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: ALSAMA PROJECT

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



لا يشيب الرأس مجاناً  
كل خيط أبيض بثمن ...

(قصة العربي - كفاية)

#### YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

*One's hair doesn't go white for free;  
every hair has its own price.*

Fatima Al-Shuraiqi  
(Bylan writer)

# Opinion

## The global consequences of Strait of Hormuz closure

LUKE COFFEY



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Three weeks into the campaign of US and Israeli airstrikes against Iran and attention has shifted to the Strait of Hormuz and the closure of this vital waterway.

The Strait of Hormuz is 39 km wide at its narrowest point, but this does not fully capture how constrained transit is. The designated shipping lanes are only about 3.7 km wide in each direction. Through these waters pass about 20 percent of global oil consumption and roughly one-third of all seaborne oil trade, much of it destined for Asian markets, particularly China, Japan and South Korea.

Although the White House has suggested it was surprised by Iran's current closure of the strait, such a development has long been considered a plausible contingency by the policy community.

The US administration's response to the crisis has been inconsistent. At various points, it has stated that Iran could not close

the strait, expressed surprise that it had done so, called on European allies and other nations to assist in reopening it, and later suggested that such assistance was unnecessary. This lack of coherence in messaging has only added to the uncertainty in an already volatile situation.

What cannot be disputed, however, is that even a partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz will have significant consequences for the global economy. The US has long recognized the risk of disruption in the Gulf. This concern was a driving force behind the establishment of the Combined Maritime Forces, headquartered in Bahrain. Created in 2002, it was designed to promote maritime security across the Gulf and surrounding waters through a coalition of willing partners.

There is little doubt that the Combined Maritime Forces has planned and exercised for scenarios involving Iranian attempts to disrupt or close the strait. However, there are three reasons that help to explain the

perilous situation faced today.

First, it was likely believed by US military commanders that the multinational nature of the Combined Maritime Forces — and the broader network of partnerships built over years of joint training and operations — would provide a ready-made coalition capable of responding quickly in a crisis. European and Gulf navies regularly participated in Combined Maritime Forces missions, reinforcing the expectation that, in the event of conflict, a coalition would coalesce to keep the strait open.

That assumption now appears to have been overly optimistic. The US did not do sufficient preparatory work to ensure that such a coalition would be politically and operationally ready to act. Without this groundwork, expectations of rapid allied support were unrealistic.

Second, many in Washington believed that US naval superiority would be sufficient to deter or defeat any Iranian attempt to close the strait.

However, the strategic environment has evolved. Iran now possesses a far more capable and battle-tested arsenal of unmanned aerial vehicles and other asymmetric tools that did not exist at scale 15 or 20 years ago.

Finally, this challenge in the strait is further exacerbated by the fact that, in recent years, both the US and the UK have drawn down their dedicated mine countermeasure vessels in the Gulf.

While the US may not rely heavily on Middle Eastern oil and gas, the global economy and many American allies in East Asia do. Disruptions in supply will drive up prices, strain supply chains and create economic instability that inevitably affects the US.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz is not just a regional challenge — it is a test of American leadership, international coordination, strategic foresight and political will. The failure to prepare a credible coalition response ahead of time has left the US reacting to events rather than shaping them.

**The US did not do sufficient preparatory work to ensure that a coalition would be politically and operationally ready to act**



COURTESY: AMALIO HERNANDEZ/AL-JAWABAT

**This shift toward containment is not accidental. It reflects structural changes in the international system**

## Why the world is managing crises, not solving them

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM



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A quiet but consequential shift is underway in global crisis management. The international system is no longer organized around resolving conflicts or reversing humanitarian catastrophes. Instead, it is increasingly focused on containing them, geographically, politically and financially. From Myanmar to Gaza to Sudan, the priority is not durable solutions but limiting spillover. This may appear pragmatic in a fragmented world. In reality, it is a strategy that risks normalizing permanent crisis.

The evidence is increasingly hard to ignore. Start with funding. According to the UN, global humanitarian needs have reached record levels, with more than 360 million people requiring assistance in 2025. Yet funding is stagnating or declining in real terms. The World Food Programme, for example, has faced repeated shortfalls of billions of dollars, forcing it to cut rations across multiple operations. In

Bangladesh, monthly food assistance for Rohingya refugees was reduced from \$12 dollars per person to as low as \$8 dollars in 2023 before partial restorations, well below what is needed to meet basic caloric requirements. Similar reductions have been seen in Syria, Yemen and parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

This is not simply donor fatigue. It reflects a deeper recalibration. Faced with overlapping crises, constrained budgets and geopolitical competition, major powers are prioritizing the management of instability rather than its resolution.

Myanmar provides a stark example. Nearly a decade after the mass atrocities of 2017, more than a million Rohingya refugees remain in Bangladesh, with no viable pathway to safe and dignified return. Diplomatic efforts toward repatriation have stalled. Meanwhile, international engagement has shifted toward sustaining humanitarian operations in the camps and preventing onward migration. Even accountability

mechanisms, such as the case at the International Court of Justice, are proceeding at a pace that offers little immediate prospect of change on the ground. The crisis is being managed, not solved.

The same pattern is visible in Gaza. Despite repeated cycles of escalation, there is no serious international process aimed at a durable political settlement. Instead, the focus has been on short-term ceasefires, humanitarian access and reconstruction pledges, measures designed to stabilize

Sudan, now the site of one of the world's largest displacement crises, further illustrates this trend. With more than 8 million people displaced and famine risks rising, international efforts have centered on aid delivery and regional containment rather than a concerted push for a political settlement. Neighboring states are under pressure to manage refugee flows, while global attention remains fragmented. Again, the emphasis is on limiting regional destabilization, not ending the conflict.

This shift toward containment is not accidental. It reflects structural changes in the international system. First, the era of uncontested Western leadership is over.

What is needed is a recalibration. Containment may be a necessary short-term tool but it cannot be the end state. International actors must reinvest in political processes, however difficult, and link humanitarian assistance to credible pathways for resolution.

Regional powers, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, also have a critical role to play. As middle powers with growing influence, they are well positioned to broker dialogue, support reconstruction and push for solutions that external actors alone cannot deliver. The alternative is a world in which crises are indefinitely managed at the margins until they can no longer be contained.

The age of containment may be upon us. But if it becomes the default approach to global instability, it will not bring order. It will simply ensure that today's crises become tomorrow's catastrophes.

## Opinion

## Iran derails neighbors' de-escalation efforts

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**T**urkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan on Wednesday traveled to Riyadh, where Saudi Arabia hosted a meeting of foreign ministers from Arab and Islamic countries to discuss the US-Israeli war against Iran. The gathering was intended as a diplomatic effort to discuss ways to de-escalate the ongoing war.

During the meeting, Iran launched ballistic missiles targeting Riyadh and the Eastern Province. The Kingdom's air defenses intercepted the projectiles. Later, Iran launched a second wave of attacks, including a strike on a major gas facility in Qatar. It is hard to recall any moment in history when leaders convened for diplomacy and one party so effectively undermined it.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan stated that the attacks were not coincidental but rather deliberately planned to coincide with the meeting. In his remarks, he argued that the strikes reflected Iran's approach to diplomacy — one that undermines dialogue through escalation.

The Riyadh meeting was the first face-to-face ministerial gathering since the outbreak of the war. In a collective

effort to give diplomacy another chance, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, along with representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Türkiye, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon and Azerbaijan, gathered to reflect their common concern over the war's trajectory.

By targeting Riyadh while the meeting was ongoing, Iran bombed the tough path to diplomacy that regional states were striving to build. Any regional initiative aimed at avoiding or de-escalating this war has been disregarded by Iran.

By striking Riyadh, Iran has also damaged an already-fragile rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, which began with the Beijing Agreement of 2023. Trust, which was limited to begin with, has now been significantly undermined.

The timing of the attacks also adds a layer of symbolic contradiction: while Iranian officials frequently invoke themes of Islamic solidarity, the strikes targeted Muslim countries during the holy month of Ramadan. Thus, Iran is making a grave mistake in eroding its regional support base.

Amid the Riyadh attacks, Fidan — one of the few regional figures able to maintain direct communication with Iranian officials — held a phone call with his counterpart in

Tehran, Abbas Araghchi. With the tone of the conversation reported as being tense, the Turkish minister expressed frustration over Iran's actions. But this demonstrates that channels of communication remain open. The Turkish side reportedly signaled that, even as regional states approach the limits of their patience, they are still committed to pursuing diplomatic solutions.

Turkish officials believe that the Iranian regime is far from collapse and retains the capacity to sustain the war for months, which is a nightmare scenario that Ankara wants to avoid. The concerns over such a scenario forces Türkiye's continued push for de-escalation — but Türkiye's ability to act as an intermediary is constrained by structural challenges within Iran itself. It is increasingly unclear which actors within the Iranian system hold authority, particularly over missile attacks. This uncertainty complicates diplomatic efforts, as regional actors struggle to identify their counterparts in Iran.

Some observers have interpreted the Riyadh meeting as a sign of an emerging regional alliance. Just a few years ago, countries that were against each other,

such as Egypt and Türkiye, now find themselves on the same page. While these alignments are unlikely to constitute a formal military alliance, it reflects a strong alignment with political will behind it.

This political alignment is enough to cause concerns in Israel. Israeli officials have declared that Ankara is forming an axis "similar to Iran's." Tel Aviv's concern is that it is increasingly facing isolation in the Middle East, as all regional states are

against its hegemonic ambitions. Even so, the structural parameters for a solid defense alliance are not yet in place. For now, cooperation among regional actors is more likely to develop through bilateral ties and improved intelligence sharing.

Beyond security considerations, economic cooperation will be essential in mitigating this war. One critical issue is the disruption of energy flows, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz.

In sum, the Riyadh meeting reflected that there is a strong and clear appetite among regional actors to de-escalate the war. However, Iran — through its attacks — undermined this. If it continues to do so, it risks making a grave mistake that erodes its regional support base.

**By targeting Riyadh while the meeting was ongoing, Iran bombed the tough path to diplomacy they were striving to build**

**Even as regional states approach the limits of their patience, they are still committed to pursuing diplomatic solutions**

## Building the energy resilience ASEAN+3 needs

YASUTO WATANABE



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**E**nergy systems across ASEAN+3 (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plus China, Japan and South Korea) are under increasing strain. Climate shocks are threatening infrastructure and supply. The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure is driving a surge in electricity demand. And geopolitical tensions are adding new volatility to global energy markets.

Although the region is more resilient to energy shocks than in the past, these forces are creating new challenges for macroeconomic stability. Climate change is no longer only an environmental issue. It is increasingly testing energy systems — including power generation, fuel supply chains and electricity networks — with far-reaching effects on the broader economy.

Globally, natural disasters caused around \$320 billion in economic losses in 2024, with the Asia-Pacific region among the most affected. In Southeast Asia, floods and typhoons regularly disrupt food production, supply chains and infrastructure, including power systems and fuel transport networks that are critical to energy supply.

Such disruptions can spread quickly through the real economy. Damage to energy infrastructure can interrupt electricity supply and raise costs, while floods often push up food prices and disrupt logistics. Reconstruction then increases fiscal expenditures, while losses to businesses weaken balance sheets and increase credit risks for banks and insurers.

Managing climate risks therefore requires more than emergency response plans. It demands sustained investment in climate adaptation and stronger financial preparedness.

The UN Environment Programme estimates that East Asia and the Pacific needs about \$141 billion annually to finance adaptation — more than any other developing region. Yet disaster-related fiscal expenditures in many economies still tend to occur only after disasters occur.

Technological change is also reshaping global electricity demand. The rapid expansion of AI and digital infrastructure (data centers) is driving large increases in electricity consumption.

As digital infrastructure expands, electricity demand is expected to rise further. Power systems will need to increase capacity while remaining consistent with climate goals. Though renewable

capacity has grown, if generation cannot scale quickly enough to match rising demand, governments may face pressure to rely more heavily on fossil fuels to ensure a reliable power supply.

Finally, geopolitical tensions are adding another layer of uncertainty. Conflicts and trade frictions threaten to disrupt global energy supply chains, shift investment decisions and amplify volatility in fuel prices. These risks are particularly relevant for ASEAN+3 economies, many of which rely heavily on imported fuels, including liquefied natural gas.

When global energy prices rise sharply or become more volatile, the spillover effects often show up as higher inflation, increased fiscal pressures and wider external imbalances. Taken together, recent developments are adding to the stress on energy systems across ASEAN+3, underscoring the importance of enhancing energy resilience to safeguard the region's macroeconomic stability.

What can be done? For starters, investing more in climate-resilient infrastructure can reduce energy systems' vulnerability to natural disasters and help limit economic disruptions when shocks occur.

Second, expanding electricity generation capacity, strengthening transmission

networks and accelerating the deployment of non-fossil energy sources has become essential to meeting rising power demand and supporting climate objectives.

Third, ASEAN+3 countries can build greater resilience through financial mechanisms. Enhancing preparedness through new financial and insurance instruments and capital-market solutions can help governments manage the fiscal costs of climate shocks and support investment

in resilient infrastructure. Within the ASEAN+3 Finance Process (an important platform for regional financial cooperation), discussions are underway on a disaster-risk financing initiative aimed at strengthening fiscal risk management and expanding financial instruments for disaster response.

Strengthening energy resilience is not only an energy policy priority, it is a macroeconomic imperative. ASEAN+3 economies stand at the intersection of climate risk, technological change and geopolitical uncertainty. By investing in resilient, sustainable energy systems and strengthening regional cooperation, we can better navigate these challenges while supporting stable and inclusive economic growth. The latest wave of global turmoil has only lent more urgency to the task.

**If generation cannot scale quickly enough, governments may face pressure to rely more heavily on fossil fuels**

**Strengthening energy resilience is not only an energy policy priority, it is a macroeconomic imperative**

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**ARAB NEWS**  
is a daily international newspaper published by the  
SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1975 by  
Hisahm & Muhammad Ali Hafiz

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TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440078

PRINTED AT: HALA 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

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## OPINION

## An Ally's Guide to Understanding Trump

By Brian Lee Crowley

Ottawa

President Trump this week complained that America's allies hadn't stepped up to help break the Iranian blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. "Some are very enthusiastic about it, and some aren't," he said on Monday. "Some are countries that we've helped for many, many years. We've protected them from horrible outside sources, and they weren't that enthusiastic. And the level of enthusiasm matters to me."

Some U.S. allies—including my country, Canada—have enthusiastically antagonized Mr. Trump's America. In last April's Canadian federal election, Prime Minister Mark Carney's rallying cry was "Elbows Up, Canada"—a hockey term that means an aggressive style of play. That resonated with voters, who handed Mr. Carney's Liberals a victory in a contest they had long been expected to lose.

To understand how Mr. Trump is reshaping Western alliances and why the Canadian attitude is a mistake, it's worth stepping back and looking at the broader historical context. We are in the twilight of the postwar era, which began with the world divided into two camps—the democratic, freedom-loving West and the Soviet bloc, which sought to expand by subversion and intimidation.

### His tactic is to provoke negotiating partners into losing their cool. Canada falls for it every time.

In 1945 America was wealthy and powerful, Europe impoverished and weak. The U.S. accounted for half the world's gross domestic product, while much of the Continent was a smoking ruin. Europe's recovery might not have been possible without U.S. generosity. The Marshall Plan used America's wealth to rebuild its defeated former enemies. The U.S. opened its markets to imported goods, often on much more favorable terms than American exports got in return. And America took on the responsibility of defending the West from communism. In 1950, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization comprised a dozen countries, and the U.S. spent more than twice as much on defense as all the other members combined.

America helped make Europe wealthy again. The U.S. share of global GDP is down to 26%, while the European Union produces a respectable 14%. The NATO alliance has grown to 32 nations, but America still accounts for two-thirds of their total defense spending. U.S. allies grew handsomely—and, freed from the need to defend themselves from external threats, they spent much of their newfound wealth expanding their welfare states.

Europe and Canada kept relying

on American generosity long after the justification for it became obsolete. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Russia's share of global GDP is a mere 3.6%, while China has climbed to nearly 20% and is America's chief ideological, economic and military competitor.

The failure to rebalance the costs and benefits of the Western alliance created an accident waiting to happen. Presidents going back decades have asked NATO allies to bear more of the defense burden. The difference is that America no longer asks nicely. That Europeans and Canadians resent being spoken to in this way is self-indulgent on our part. Mr. Trump seems to revel in giving offense, but he isn't wrong in returning to America's allies some of the contempt and condescension to which we have subjected America.

His offensive style is part of his strategy. "Sometimes it pays to be a little wild," he wrote in "The Art of the Deal." He relies on negotiating partners' taking his behavior at face value, losing their nerve and getting emotional. Driven to distraction by his outrageous statements, they lose the capacity to focus on their own interests. Canada has repeatedly fallen into that trap.

Mr. Trump has at least three priorities. If you follow their logic and make allowances for his bombastic style, there is little that can't be understood about Mr. Trump and his actions.

First, America must be the Top Nation, not merely "the dominant member of the Western alliance." China is the only serious rival and the main preoccupation in the White House.

Second, allies and friends have taken America for granted, with the collusion of past presidents and other Washington insiders. From illegal immigration and inadequate defense spending to organized crime and cozying up to China, Mr. Trump and his circle are determined that any accommodations granted to other countries be matched by concessions to the U.S. of at least equivalent value.

Third, at the forefront of Mr. Trump's political priorities are the Americans who have paid the price for decades of sacrificing the country's interests in the name of the "rules based" postwar order. These are the people immortalized in Vice President JD Vance's memoir, "Hillbilly Elegy," and derided by Democrats as "deplorables" who "cling to guns or religion." They regard Mr. Trump as their tribune, and he will move heaven and earth not to disappoint them.

With them in mind, he wants to bring about an American economic renaissance, so that Americans who want work are able to get it and the despair that has fueled the fentanyl scourge is replaced with hope and optimism. That goal informs his tariff policy, however counterproductive it may be. Even more central to his economic agenda is the free flow of energy—the lifeblood of the economy and a source of growth that has been



Justin Tang/Associated Press  
Canadians demonstrate in Ottawa, March 9, 2025.

obstructed by a green ideology propagated by the elites Mr. Trump rejects.

To build on this foundational analysis of Mr. Trump's worldview, consider his policies toward Iran, Mexico and Greenland.

Iran illustrates how different he is from the old "neocons," who sought to replace dictatorial regimes with democratic ones. Mr. Trump, by contrast, starts by appealing to the self-interest of antagonistic leaders, as he has also done with Venezuela and Cuba and more tentatively with Russia and China. He offers them a chance to make a deal that leaves the regime in place and opens the door to American trade and investment in exchange for dropping hostility to America and ending policies that damage American interests. His appeal amounts to saying: Let's get rich together.

Many commentators see his practice of making nice with bad regimes as weakness. I venture to say that Nicolás Maduro disagrees. So would Ali Khamenei if he could.

As Daniel McCarthy has written, in Mr. Trump's second term he has developed a new activist ideology marked by a willingness to use military force to compel adversaries into making deals. His aim is to bring about their submission to America's interests, not to its ideals. His offers to make nice with nasty regimes carry the implied threat that he can engineer the replacement of leaders who resist with more compliant ones.

Lurking in the background is Mr. Trump's long-term aim of weakening China and cementing America's status as Top Nation. China's greatest allies have been Russia, Venezuela, Cuba and Iran. Not only are these regimes either decapitated or on notice; they are also losing their ability to supply heavily discounted oil, and it is becoming clear to them that Beijing's patronage is no guarantee of regime survival. The clear superiority of American arms against forces wielding Russian and Chinese weapons has severely undermined Beijing's prestige and authority.

As for Mexico, the U.S. recently opened negotiations on the renewal of the free-trade arrange-

ment between the two countries. Pointedly, America hasn't opened formal talks with Canada. Why? Because Mexico has learned not to get distracted by Mr. Trump's showmanship, threats and disrespect. Its leaders have instead focused on its national interests and shown respect and even deference to Mr. Trump. Mexico's cooperation in challenging drug cartels and even taking out one of their principal leaders was a price Washington exacted and Mexico willingly paid.

Under previous U.S. administrations, Mexico's attitude toward the U.S. was far more elbows-up than Canada's. But Canada has swallowed the Trump shtick and fallen into the trap of being offended and outraged by his negotiating strategy—never mind that we need America far more than it needs us. For the U.S., Canada is nice to have. For us, the relationship is existential, and no trade mission to China or fanciful talk of EU membership will change that.

Economists have concluded that about 80% of trade is explained by proximity. All the countries with which the Canadian government is desperately trying to expand trade are thousands of miles away. Moreover, the bulk of trade across the Canada-U.S. border is intra-firm trade, in which different parts of the same company trade with each other. These trading relationships are quite indifferent to any trade-opening efforts with other parts of the world.

Yet even though our two countries are inextricably bound together, and despite the existential nature of Canada's reliance on the U.S. market, we have maneuvered ourselves into a self-defeating elbows-up mentality. When we are offered an opportunity to do something that Mr. Trump would really value—like backing his Iran campaign by sending a frigate or even simply offering unequivocal rhetorical support—we can't deliver and end up prevaricating all over the place.

Even if we get our act together on Iran, we have already confirmed Mr. Trump's view that we are a weak and unreliable ally that has little in the way of hard military power and that has squandered its energy potential over a decade of climate obsession. We

reap what we have sown.

In the case of Greenland, the crucial point isn't that Mr. Trump offended allies or displayed historical ignorance, although he did. It is that what he was willing to settle for was far less than what he initially demanded. He neither invaded nor annexed Greenland. He has more or less carte blanche to use the Danish territory for security purposes and simply stopped talking about it. He doesn't give a damn about the hurt feelings on the other side, and NATO allies now tread even more gingerly around the White House, which suits him fine.

Canada has a lot to offer America—if only we had a government clever enough to do so. We could make it clear to Mr. Trump that we want to work with him to make North America the world's dominant energy power. That would relieve our partners in the Indo-Pacific region from reliance on dangerously unstable and vulnerable sources in the Middle East. It would reduce Russia's ability to finance mischief in Europe. It would make possible a massive shift from coal to clean natural gas in Asia.

If the U.S. had to supply its own oil needs entirely from domestic production instead of getting 4 million barrels a day from Canada, it would have to cut its exports and their geostrategic weight nearly in half. At a time when the fracking revolution's increase in U.S. oil supplies may be tapering off, the Canadian oil sands' exceptional longevity would go a long way to fulfilling Mr. Trump's dream of world energy dominance.

We could add to that an offer of a comprehensive bargain codifying Canada's commitment to resolve the full range of issues that plague the Canada-U.S. relationship: compliance with our NATO commitments, becoming the indispensable partner in defending the Arctic, tightening our border security, ending Canada's status as a money-laundering haven for organized crime, and ending our toleration of terrorist movements and nefarious activities by authoritarian states on our territory.

Canada is both blessed and cursed by its proximity to America, but we have little practical alternative to making the best of our relationship. Donald Trump's America isn't isolationist—on the contrary, it seeks escape from reliance on unwieldy alliances so that it can act unencumbered on the world stage, with the support of willing allies when possible. If Canada establishes itself as a reliable and committed partner and refuses to be bamboozled by the president's bombast, it could set an example for the rest of the free world on how to deal with America and Mr. Trump.

*Mr. Crowley is managing director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. This article is adapted from a speech he delivered to the Energy Security Forum March 9 in Ottawa.*

## Why Won't Mamdani Take On Educational Redlining?



CROSS COUNTRY  
By Derrell Bradford

Opponents of private education and school choice like to say that public schools are open to all. A public school "welcomes everyone," Diane Ravitch has written. "It unifies community. It is the glue of democracy." This generally isn't true—and it's a myth that keeps families from better educational opportunities for their children. In most places, students are arbitrarily assigned to a school on the basis of geography. This policy has its roots in "redlining"—the outlawed practice of keeping disfavored racial groups out of certain neighborhoods.

In the 1930s, the federal Home Owners' Loan Corp. issued color-coded maps identifying neighborhoods with high concentrations of

### Neighborhood school zoning has its origins in the 1930s practice of residential discrimination.

minorities. People who lived there were denied access to mortgages. The Federal Homeowner's Administration also declared that if children were "compelled to attend school where a majority or a considerable number of the pupils represent a far lower level of society or an incompatible racial element, the neighbor-

hood in question will prove far less stable and desirable."

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 outlawed residential discrimination, but residential assignment for schools lives on—and it often follows the old racial redlines.

The continued use of these neighborhood lines in New York state is the focus of a new report called "And Stay Out!" published by the nonpartisan watchdog Available to All. It shows how children are prevented from enrolling in better public schools—in some cases, schools closer to their homes—

solely because of attendance zones. These better schools, typically majority white and Asian, have attendance zones that box out lower-income families.

As in the civil-rights era, defenders of the status quo oppose efforts to allow families access to better schools. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, speaks of equity and fairness even as she defends the primacy of "neighborhood schools"—the legacy of these exclusionary maps.

New York Mayor Zohran Mam-

dani, who now controls the nation's largest school system, decries the socioeconomic and racial divisions in the public schools. New York has "the most segregated school system in America," he has observed, echoing a conclusion from a 2014 report by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. Mr. Mamdani blames gifted-and-talented programs—which don't discriminate by race and have been getting more diverse in recent years—while ignoring exclusionary school zoning based on housing.

If New York's political and educational leaders really care about edu-

cational equality, they could undertake an analysis of every enrollment zone to identify insidious redlining boundaries. They could ensure that district-run schools as well as charter schools, magnet schools and gifted-and-talented programs are truly open to all. Democracy depends on public schools that pay more than lip service to welcoming everyone.

*Mr. Bradford is the president of 50CAN, a national educational advocacy organization and chairman of Available to All.*

## When McDonald's Was an Inexpensive Treat

By Bob Greene

We carried the empty paper bag home with us on the plane, taking care not to rip it, and then pasted it into our scrapbook.

Our father and mother, in the spring of 1958, had taken my sister, my brother and me to Florida. We saw flamingos and acrobatic water skiers for the first time, but all we could chatter about on the flight home to Ohio was the exotic new place where we had stopped on our way to the Tampa airport.

The white takeout bag was proof we had been there, in case our friends back home doubted us. On it was a cartoon likeness of a smiling, winking chef with a face shaped like a hamburger bun and, in big red letters, the word "McDonald's."

Like most Americans, we had

never seen a McDonald's, though rumors of their existence were rampant. The Tampa Tribune, when the city's outlet opened that March, reported that there were 80 of them in the U.S. (compared with about 13,500 today). Food already cooked and waiting as you walked up to the counter, prices so low as to be irresistible—and here a McDonald's was, right on South Dale Mabry Highway as my dad drove us by in our rental car. He hit the brakes.

In the scrapbook we would write: "We had 6 hamburgers, 4 cheeseburgers, 4 orders of french fries and 3 milkshakes." Total cost of dinner for our family of five: \$2.66.

That was the gimmick, the talked-about secret to McDonald's growing success: 15-cent hamburgers, 19-cent cheeseburgers, 10-cent fries, 20-cent milkshakes, ready for your arrival. The cartoon chef's name was

Speedee, and "Speedee Service" was the McDonald's promise.

This month, across the U.S., McDonald's is introducing its largest burger ever. Called the Big Arch, the double-patty burger packs 1,020 calories and sells for around \$9, or more than five times the price of that original 1958 hamburger after inflation, though prices vary by location. Because of its eye-popping cost, the new burger is drawing considerable attention.

Great ideas dazzle once and only once—the first time you experience them—and McDonald's great idea, brilliant in its simplicity, was rock-bottom prices and the assembly-line efficiency that offered exactly nine items, six of them drink. You knew as you rolled up what you were getting and that it was going to be so inexpensive you didn't have to think twice.

Walk into a McDonald's today and you'll find a menu with around 140 items, including combo meals. Yet somehow there's no dazzle in the experience. The \$9 Big Arch is more likely to prompt an arch of the eyebrow—a decidedly nongolden arch. McDonald's rightfully became McDonald's because of its founding, world-changing idea, and all this is distant from that.

Our part of Ohio didn't get a McDonald's until the early 1960s. But my sister, my brother and I felt like pioneers. We had come across something that felt entirely new and brought the evidence home from far-away Dale Mabry Highway to preserve in that scrapbook. A white paper bag, Speedee the chef and a bedazzling roadside memory.

*Mr. Greene's books include the novel "All Summer Long."*

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Late Mail Ballots at the Supreme Court

Mass mail voting has been bad for public confidence, and on Monday the Supreme Court can help. Mississippi law says absentee ballots that are postmarked on time are valid even if officials don't receive them from the mailman until a week later. Other states have similar rules. The question for the Justices: Does accepting tardy mail votes violate the federal law that sets a uniform Election Day?

In a series of provisions beginning in 1845, Congress fixed federal elections on a Tuesday in early November. No problem, the state argues in *Watson v. Republican National Committee*: "Mississippi requires that ballots for federal offices be cast—marked and submitted to election officials—by federal election day." If early voting is fine, and if the counting process can go on for days after the polls close, then why not the arrival of absentee ballots that were marked and mailed on time?

Mississippi suggests that once the U.S. Postal Service takes custody of any outstanding ballots, then the election's winner is already determined, however long it takes the mail to arrive and the result to become clear. "An election occurs when the voters have cast their ballots," the state says. "The voters have then chosen and their choice is conclusive: the election is over. An election thus does not depend on when ballots are received."

This is giving the reliability of the post office too much credit. In 2024 the National Association of Secretaries of State complained to the USPS that "officials in multiple states report receiving anywhere from dozens to hundreds of ballots 10 or more days after postmark."

Another flub is when ballots show up without any legible postmarks. Sometimes judges rule that if they arrive two or three days after Election Day, it can be simply presumed they were mailed on time.

In a close election, the winner might turn on

these kinds of postal hiccups and the ensuing litigation. Mississippi's definition, that a vote is "cast" when it's given to the USPS, creates a Schrödinger's ballot box: The state might say the election is finished, but some candidate's political career could be both alive and dead, depending on how much mail gets misdelivered that week or whether the postmark process malfunctioned.

By the way, what makes the USPS so special? Mississippi's position lacks a limiting principle, as the challengers to its late-ballot law explain. "A State could say that a ballot is timely cast once the voter hands it over to a family member or a party operative to deliver," the Republican National Committee argues in its brief. Could states that allow ballot harvesting offer those crews a two-day grace period, as long as they quit collecting on Election Day?

The other interpretation is more straightforward. "The 'day for the election' means the day that election officials close the ballot box," the RNC says. Voting in person was historically the norm, and a ballot isn't cast until officials have it: "That was the ordinary meaning of 'cast' for decades after Congress enacted the election-day statutes, and even long after absentee voting had become ubiquitous."

Absentee voting is occasionally a necessity, and in modest numbers it isn't a difficulty, but widespread mail ballots and lax deadlines have introduced slack into the election system. Calling races in California can take nearly a month, and at some point control of Congress could depend on its dreadfully slow tallying.

Opposing that transformation of American elections doesn't require buying into President Trump's wildest fraud claims, and it needn't be partisan, since Monday's case pits the Republican Party against GOP-leaning Mississippi. If the Justices rule that federal law means the ballot box is shut on Election Day, it won't fix all of this. But it would be a start.

## Election Day is set by federal law. Is that also an absentee deadline?

## Cuba and New York Vie for Floridians

What do Cuba and New York state have in common? Answer: They are both eager for former residents now living in Florida to return and bring their money. Kathy Hochul, meet Raúl Castro.

Ms. Hochul, the New York Governor, was asked at a Politico forum recently about raising taxes, as New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani wants. She replied, with a hint of sarcasm, that "maybe the first step should be to go down to Palm Beach and see who we can bring back home because our tax base has been eroded." Good idea, Governor.

But she may have to compete with Cuba, whose deputy prime minister Óscar Pérez-Oliva Fraga last week made the same pitch to Cuban exiles in the U.S. The regime in Havana is in economic trouble and wants its emigres back. It's even promising protection for private property, which will take some convincing after 67 years of Communist expropriation.

New York isn't Communist, but New York City's new mayor is an avowed democratic so-

cialist and is acting like it. The Tax Foundation has New York state dead last among the 50 states for tax policy competitiveness.

We doubt investors will flood back to Havana or New York simply because their governments now recognize they need the money of those they caused to flee with their destructive policies.

When the Cubans first fled to Florida, Fidel Castro called them *Gusanos*, or worms. Meanwhile, in 2022, when she first ran for Governor against Republican Lee Zeldin, Ms. Hochul told her opponents to "jump on a bus and down to Florida where you belong." Many continue to take her advice, as she is now belatedly admitting.

Hard to believe, but it's possible Cuba could decide to change for the better before New York does. President Trump is putting the squeeze on Cuba's ability to get free oil from Venezuela, which has been the regime's lifeline. Who knows if the Communist regime will fall. As for New York, the socialist left seems to be growing in political dominance.

## Both places want their emigres to return—and bring their money.

## Iran Attacks the Gulf. Will It Fight Back?

After Iran hit Qatar's Ras Laffan gas hub with ballistic missiles on Wednesday, the Gulf monarchy expelled military attachés at the Iranian embassy. But not the ambassador. He can stay, which raises an uncomfortable question: What would it take for America's Gulf allies to stop hedging their bets?

The Gulf Arab caution is in one sense understandable. These states are on the front lines of Iran attacks, and they have to live in Tehran's neighborhood after the bombing stops. The U.S. isn't always dependable—see Joe Biden's denunciation of the Saudis. The United Arab Emirates joined the Abraham Accords and seems to be getting targeted for it.

Yet Iran's attacks on the Arab states mean they have a new and higher stake in defeating Tehran. Gulf energy isn't getting to market through the Strait of Hormuz, and an Iranian veto over oil transport is a direct threat to their economic future. They could do more to help the U.S. win.

To start, seize the regime's illicit financial assets across the Gulf. Why should Tehran be allowed to attack "the idea of Dubai" while using the Emirate as the financial hub of its global sanctions-evasion network?

In the first week of Iran's wild attacks on its neighbors, the Journal reported, "The United Arab Emirates is weighing freezing billions of dollars of Iranian assets." What's to weigh? The Emiratis acted against a Hezbollah money-laundering network Thursday, but they can also seize assets of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Unlike the supportive U.A.E., Oman has condemned the U.S.-Israeli campaign and congratulated Mojtaba Khamenei, Iran's new Supreme Leader. This hasn't stopped Iran from attacking Oman's ports and killing its citizens. Why, then, does Oman allow sanctioned Iranian banks to operate on Omani territory?

Gulf states can also join the coalition to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, and use their diplo-

matic leverage as energy suppliers to get others to join. Clients such as Japan, South Korea and India owe it to their Gulf suppliers to help restore freedom of navigation.

Gulf states can also lean on China to stop Iran's attacks on Hormuz and not to rearm the regime after the war. Beijing might comply if the U.S. stopped allowing Iranian oil tankers safe passage.

Financial and diplomatic moves should be the easy part. How about retaliatory strikes? There's no rule that Arab states must only play defense, swatting down Iranian drones and missiles with U.S. help, and taking hits to their most important economic assets. Saudi Arabia spends nearly \$80 billion a year on its military—much more than Iran. Let's see those F-15s in action.

On Thursday the Saudi Foreign Minister said his country reserves the right to act militarily against Iran. Is it waiting for Iran to knock out its backup pipeline to the Red Sea? Riyadh has threatened several times to retaliate, but Iran continues to get away with striking Saudi refineries and oil fields.

The U.A.E. has an even more advanced and experienced air force, sporting F-16s. Air superiority has already been established in Iran, and the Gulf Arab militaries are integrated with U.S. Central Command. They use U.S.-made jets with U.S.-trained pilots and U.S.-made munitions. It would not be too difficult to provide targeting for their aircraft.

This could increase the rate of strikes on Iran—for a war in which every day counts—and send a true deterrent message. It would also tell Tehran, and the IRGC that uses the Iranian state as a piggy bank, that there can be no return to business as usual so long as this regime reigns and refuses to change.

No one is asking the Gulf states to be Israel. All the U.S. needs is for the Gulf Arabs to stand up for themselves. If Mr. Trump can show them that he will see the war through, they can stop hedging their bets.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Ben Sasse's Legacy of 'Civic Transmission'

In Tunku Varadarajan's Weekend Interview with Ben Sasse ("A Public Servant Faces a Public Death," March 14), who has been diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer, readers learn Mr. Sasse is receiving a drug called Darax-onrasib, currently in clinical trial. Coincidentally, on the following page was yet another editorial regarding the Food and Drug Administration's latest efforts to needlessly stymie promising drugs and therapies, in this case eye drops that have been shown to slow the progression of pediatric myopia. Though Mr. Sasse was given only "three to four months" to live when he was diagnosed on Dec. 14, he says, "The trial's going really well. I would love to see the kickoff of Nebraska's football season." The Cornhuskers begin their next season Sept. 5. While Mr. Sasse is resolved to the idea that his life will soon end, he nonetheless takes comfort that he may live longer than expected because of his access to the type of promising, life-extending drug for which the FDA, particularly under the regrettable leadership of biologists chief Vinay Prasad, has routinely changed its clinical trial standards and arbitrarily denied approval. I hope Mr. Sasse's public and coura-

geous reflections on his terminal illness will help to compel the FDA to overhaul its dysfunctional drug approval protocols for rare diseases and more broadly.

MARK GODES  
Chelsea, Mass.

Mr. Sasse deserves thanks for sometimes choosing working for us over spending more time with his family. I understand his regret for that now and all I can offer him is that his sacrifice was worth it, that his work has mattered more than he may think, that he has made a large contribution to many of us.

I can't claim to know every decision he made as a public servant, nor that I agree 100% with him on everything, but I do know that many times, after reading his opinion, I found myself thinking, "Why can't we have more people like him representing us?"

His ideas helped me shape my ideas, and I shared those for better or worse with my family and friends. Mr. Sasse's hours at work drove the sort of "civic transmission" he mentions well beyond his own actions or words.

LUIS AVILA-MARCO  
Johns Creek, Ga.

## There's No Judicial Climate Science Scandal

I cannot disagree more strongly with your editorial, "A Judicial Climate Science Scandal" (March 14), which raises the incorrect claim that my co-author Radley Horton and I committed academic misconduct in connection with the climate science chapter that we wrote for a federal evidence manual.

The editorial cites an assertion by American Enterprise Institute senior fellow Roger Pielke Jr. that parts of the chapter were ghost written by our colleague Michael Burger. None of the text was written by Mr. Burger. As disclosed in the chapter, we did excerpt and adapt some content from a 2020 law review article that we co-authored with Mr. Burger. All of that content came from scientific sections that were written by Mr. Horton and myself.

The editorial also describes the chapter as a "brief intended to influence judges to think every harm from climate change is the result of fossil fuels." The chapter we wrote is objective and rooted in settled science. The chapter acknowledges that fossil fuel emissions

add to climate change, which has negative impacts. These findings reflect scientific consensus and are based on multiple lines of evidence.

The chapter underwent an extensive and rigorous peer review process. The National Academies of Sciences has stood by its decision to keep the chapter in its version of the manual, even as the Federal Judicial Center bowed to pressure from Republican state attorneys general and removed the chapter from its version. The chapter has also received support from various scientific societies including the American Meteorological Society, which defended the chapter as "consistent with all other comprehensive, robust, and rigorous assessments of the science" with which AMS is familiar. The chapter also has the support of top legal and scientific experts and other contributors to the manual.

JESSICA WENTZ  
Non-resident senior fellow  
Sabin Center for Climate Change Law  
Columbia Law School  
Santa Rosa, Calif.

## One More Flaw in the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal

In addition to the many flaws of the 2015 nuclear deal that you enumerate in your editorial "The Real Nuclear History of Iran" (March 16) rebutting that withdrawing from the deal led to the current conflict, there's another defect which led directly to the current military action. The deal effectively ended the restraints on Iranian ballistic missiles, by terminating the United Nations' binding prohibition of Iranian ballistic missile activity and substituting a nonbinding U.N. "call" for Iran to refrain from such activity.

A 2025 Washington Institute report recounts what happened next. Iran accelerated its missile program,

tested dozens of new and upgraded ballistic missiles, placed them in hardened underground bases, produced an arsenal capable of hitting not only Israel but the entire Arabian Peninsula and southeastern Europe, launched hundreds of missiles into Syria, Iraq, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and transferred missiles to Hezbollah and the Houthis. The 2015 deal not only failed to limit Iran's strategic missile threat; it facilitated it.

The continuing expansion of Iran's missile program represented an existential threat to Israel, other U.S. allies and American bases. In the negotiations this year, Iran refused to discuss its missiles, requiring military action whose principal objectives, Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated, include to "destroy their ballistic missile capability and make sure they can't rebuild it."

RICK RICHMAN  
Resident scholar  
American Jewish University  
Los Angeles

## Endless Negative Nattering

Regarding Mark Penn and Andrew Stein's op-ed "On Iran Is Only Bad News Fit to Print?" (March 17): Here we are almost 56 years after the Sept. 25, 1970 speech by Vice President Spiro Agnew (penned by the brilliant speechwriter William Safire), yet the media's "nattering nabobs of negativism" carry on. Sadly, some things don't change.

DAVID MCCANN  
Akron, Ohio

## Free Expression From WSJ Opinion

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## Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"First we do no harm. Of course that depends on your definition of harm."

OPINION

The Economics of Regulating AI

By Roland Fryer

The most consequential technology of our lifetimes is being regulated by people who can't agree on what it is. Several states and the European Union have enacted sweeping rules governing artificial intelligence. Illinois prohibits using AI in hiring decisions with discriminatory outcomes—a reasonable goal—but defines AI so broadly that nearly any recommendation system, including statistical methods that go back centuries, may be implicated. New York's RAISE Act requires developers of "frontier" AI systems to report safety incidents within 72 hours. The EU AI Act imposes penalties of up to 7% of global revenue for violations. The regulatory architecture is vast, fragmented and largely incoherent. But the greatest harm may not be what these systems fail to prevent. It may be what they cause.

I'm working with companies that have abandoned hiring algorithms that produced more meritocratic outcomes than human judgment

Government often tries to make rules for industries it doesn't understand. There's a better way.

alone—not because the algorithms were flawed, but because the legal exposure wasn't worth it. The regulation designed to reduce discrimination is, in practice, increasing it. The hardest part of regulating isn't deciding what you want. It's figuring out how to get it. The basic challenge is one of asymmetric information. A regulator—a federal agency, a state legislature or an attorney general—wants a certain behavior from an AI developer, a police department or a hospital. But the regulator often can't observe the

agent's true costs, underlying motivations, or day-to-day behavior. And the agent, knowing this, behaves strategically.

David Baron and Roger Myerson tackled this problem in a 1982 paper that I read in graduate school and which forever changed how I look at regulation. They asked: How do you design rules for people who know more than you do? The answer most legislators default to is more surveillance. Audit harder. Hire more inspectors. Messrs. Baron and Myerson showed this intuition is completely wrong.

Rather than demand information (which agents can falsify), you should offer a menu of regulatory options. Each is designed so that firms—high cost or low, safe or risky—find it in their self-interest to choose the option meant for them. The trick is to make truthful revelation the rational choice and misrepresentation unprofitable.

Every risky firm has an incentive to claim it is safe. A well-designed menu removes that incentive. The "safe" track carries strict liability for any harm, which is cheap for a genuinely safe firm but ruinously expensive for a risky one. The risky firm rationally self-selects onto the oversight track.

Consider the Illinois law. A company uses a résumé-screening algorithm. Under the new statute, it must send applicants a notice: "We use AI in our hiring process." The regulator learns nothing. The applicant receives no meaningful protection. The algorithm may or may not discriminate. The regulation does nothing to find out—and creates no incentive whatsoever for a risky system to reveal itself.



CHAD GROHNE

Now consider an economic approach with a menu designed to incentivize firms to self-identify. Option A—full transparency to a certified auditor, lighter compliance requirements, and no penalties unless harm is documented. Option B—no transparency required, but strict liability for any documented discrimination, with penalties calibrated to actual social cost. The distinction is deliberate: Option A trades scrutiny for relief; Option B trades opacity for exposure.

A risky firm pretending to be safe faces ruinous liability under Option A, where an auditor will find what it is hiding. It self-selects Option B, accepting liability exposure in exchange for opacity. The safe firm chooses Option A and earns its lighter burden honestly. Every AI law currently on the books creates none of these incentives. They create paperwork.

One shortcoming, by the way, of this menu is it works best for estab-

lished firms that know what they've built. Newer entrants may still be learning their own systems. A fuller regulatory mechanism would need a provisional track—reduced liability in exchange for mandatory monitoring and transparency. Baron and Myerson were writing about monopolists, not startups. Extending their logic to dynamic markets is the next frontier of this research.

The problem compounds when an agent's actions, not just its type, are unobservable. My research on policing illustrates the point. The Justice Department, unable to observe officer type or effort, writes a rule triggering a negative consequence—investigation—for a certain pattern of complaints. But a bad cop in an easy situation can produce identical statistics to a good cop in a difficult one. Economist Tanaya Devi and I found in a 2020 study that federal investigations caused police effort to collapse. Officer-initiated contact with civilians in Chicago fell 89% in

a single month. Officers rationally reduced effort to minimize risk. We estimated nearly 1,000 excess homicides, predominantly black lives, in the next two years. Not because of bad actors. Because of bad design.

Economists Jean-Jacques Laffont and Jean Tirole extended the Baron-Myerson framework to address exactly this combination of hidden type and hidden action. Their insight: Outcome-based penalties only work when embedded in a menu that first induces honest self-selection. Get the menu right, then let liability do the work. The same patchwork of state mandates that purports to make AI safer is guaranteeing we learn less about the systems being

deployed, not more. Regulators are always in the dark, at least a little. The question is whether they build systems that reveal information or bury it deeper. If we want to regulate complex, fast-moving domains like AI—or even persistent ones like policing—we have to start with humility. We don't know what's happening inside the black box. But with the right tools, we can coax it to open just enough to align incentives, discourage harm and reward truth. In regulation, the greatest danger isn't bad actors. It's being arrogant enough to design policy as if we have perfect information when we don't.

Mr. Fryer, a Journal contributor, is a professor of economics at Harvard, a founder of Equal Opportunity Ventures and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

Peggy Noonan is away.

The U.S. Ammo Shortage Is Worse Than You Think

By Seth G. Jones

The conflict with Iran is an urgent reminder that the U.S. needs a defense industrial base that can wage a high-intensity war against American adversaries—especially China. The Trump administration has taken important steps to increase production of some munitions, reform an antiquated acquisition system, and establish incentives for private-sector innovation. It is critical now to accelerate these changes.

There have rightly been growing calls to increase stockpiles of long-range munitions for precision strikes, as well as munitions for Patriot, Thaad, and other air-defense systems. But the challenge is much bigger than Iran. The U.S. lacks enough munitions to support its war plans if a protracted conflict with China, Russia or North Korea arises.

Military planners should be particularly worried about China, which has vastly superior capabilities to Iran. The Chinese industrial base, which is on a wartime footing, has produced thousands of hypersonic, cruise and ballistic missiles capable of precision strikes, along with millions of drones. U.S. bases, aircraft, naval vessels and other infrastructure operating within the First Island Chain—which extends south from Japan through Taiwan, the northern Philippines and Borneo—are highly vulnerable to attack.

The Chinese threat makes it essential that the U.S. have enough long-range munitions and unmanned systems to strike ships, aircraft and land targets from a distance. The U.S. military also badly needs more air-defense systems and equipment to defend critical infrastructure. Empty bins won't deter China.

The Trump administration has started to address some of these problems. The Pentagon has committed to rebuilding what it calls the "arsenal of freedom" and placing the defense industrial base on a

wartime footing. Deputy Defense Secretary Steve Feinberg established a Munitions Acceleration Council in 2025 to increase production of 12 critical weapons, from Patriot interceptors to Long Range Anti-Ship Missiles. He has also spearheaded efforts to reform a woefully slow acquisition system, minimize stifling regulations, and take advantage of an innovative private sector.

But more needs to be done—and fast. The Pentagon should urgently focus on fully funding multiyear contracts for several critical munitions that Congress has already authorized, such as the Joint Air to Surface Standoff Munition, Standard Missile 6 and Patriot Advanced Capability 3. It should also fund research, development and production of cheaper alternatives. The Pentagon has sometimes reached strategic framework agreements—not contracts—with defense companies. But these aren't binding obligations. The lack of firm com-

mitments creates unnecessary risk for companies that have to report to their shareholders.

Multiyear contracts can help strengthen a fragile supply chain. Production is limited, and there are

Congress and the Pentagon need to revitalize the U.S. defense industry base—and they need to act fast.

too few suppliers for solid rocket motors, castings, forgings and seekers for munitions. Longer-term commitments are essential for defense companies to fund their suppliers adequately and reliably.

Another priority should be maintaining aircraft and ship readiness. The U.S. has heavily used F-35 stealth fighters, B-2 bombers, C-17 transport aircraft, Arleigh Burke-class destroyers and other aircraft

and ships against Iran. These are even more vital in other theaters, particularly the Indo-Pacific. The Pentagon and Congress need to work together to authorize and fund multiyear contracts to maintain aircraft and ship readiness.

In addition, Iran has conducted missile and drone strikes against U.S. bases and critical infrastructure—and other adversaries would do the same. U.S. bases and installations throughout the Indo-Pacific—such as in Japan, the Philippines and Guam—are in desperate need of hardened aircraft shelters, air defenses, reinforced munitions storage bunkers and fuel bladders. Congress should increase the Pentagon's facilities sustainment, restoration and modernization funds to address these gaps.

A Pentagon supplemental request to Congress is the most immediate solution to secure funding, and the Defense Department is reportedly planning to ask for \$200 billion. The administration shouldn't pitch

its request just as support for the Iran war, but rather as an investment to revitalize the lagging U.S. industrial base.

In the longer term, the administration should make good on President Trump's pledge to increase the defense budget by \$500 billion for fiscal 2027. The Pentagon should use the money to procure systems necessary to support Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. Samuel Paparo's Hellscape concept, which uses a mix of drones, long-range missiles and other capabilities to target Chinese forces attacking Taiwan.

The Iran war is the latest wake-up call to revitalize the defense industrial base. It is time to move faster.

Mr. Jones is president of the Defense and Security Department at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and author of "The American Edge: The Military Tech Nexus and the Sources of Great Power Dominance."

Why the Trump FCC Cares About Your Sports Viewing



BUSINESS WORLD By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Obama administration's Tom Wheeler and his embarrassing net neutrality reversal of 2014. But Mr. Carr has turned expectations on their head. He has used the novel tack of publicly proclaiming his lack of independence to enlarge himself.

Hardly a minute passes without Mr. Carr energetically pursuing some Trump interest, whether advancing the media mergers of the

president's allies or bashing late-night hosts who make fun of Mr. Trump. This week Mr. Carr threatened the broadcast licenses of outlets that report skeptically on the Iran war.

Then there's the intrusion that needs a little explaining. The FCC Media Bureau recently launched an inquiry into competition from streaming giants for sports broadcast rights.

Those of ancient lineage may be thinking of the infamous LBJ phone call badgering the head of ABC to get college-football broadcasts for Lady Bird's TV station. They'd be on the right track. In the Trumpian mindset, local news is more "main street" and more MAGA than broadcast networks, Hollywood or (heavens) PBS. Hence FCC pressure on sports leagues, the NFL most of all, to keep supplying major events to local stations for the ad windfalls they generate.

And it works. Leagues comply partly because they fear a politicized revisiting of the 1961 law granting them an antitrust exemption to negotiate TV rights on behalf of their member teams.

You might doubt such an exemption is necessary. I do. There's a world of competition over what to watch and what to do instead of watching. Netflix says its biggest competition is sleep. A sports league is simply a business with franchises, in competition with infinity of entertainment choices.

But never mind. Amazon is obligated by contract to make Thursday night football available to local broadcasters, but Amazon might do so anyway for a technical reason—

to avoid egg on its face if local bandwidth infrastructure isn't up to delivering an unbuffered game to neighborhoods with the most concentrated and engaged viewership, say Philadelphia during an Eagles game.

Unhappily for the FCC, the same force helping to keep the big game on local TV in the short run is undermining it in the long run. Right now, even without congestion, streaming delivers the game 45 seconds or more later than

Its irrepressible chairman never runs out of ways to advance the president's political interests.

broadcast, which is about 15 seconds behind real time. Yuck. The streaming viewer isn't only subject to social-media spoilers, but the lag undermines the most lucrative kind of gambling: in-play betting on the next pitch, free throw, snap, etc., which already accounts for a reported 50% of betting revenue.

Sports bookies are reduced to fan-frustrating fiddles to prevent betting on plays that already happened. Consider the conundrum presented by the courtside fan wagering on his phone. A bookie needs to close the betting window to this fan while keeping it open an optimal bit longer for fans watching on a screen.

In-play betting is nirvana for the leagues and their TV partners. It

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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Rupert Murdoch Chairman Emeritus, News Corp Emma Tucker Editor in Chief

Robert Thomson Chief Executive Officer, News Corp Almar Latour Chief Executive Officer and Publisher

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EDITORIAL AND CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS: 1211 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y., 10036 Telephone 1-800-DOWJONES

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## COMMENT

Sun Jiashan

## Chinese games shift focus to innovative cultural experiences

China's game developers are becoming a more visible part of the global games market — not only through downloads and revenue, but through the everyday cultural details that players encounter in-game. A recent report by the mobile analytics firm AppsFlyer, the State of Gaming for Marketers 2026, notes that Chinese game companies' overseas user-acquisition spending rose 22 percent year-on-year and made up 35 percent of global game-app acquisition spend. Those numbers point to a simple reality: going abroad is no longer an occasional experiment for leading studios. It is becoming a regular line of business — supported by clearer policies, more specialized services and a growing ecosystem.

Policy support has been an important ingredient. In April 2025, China's Ministry of Commerce and other departments released the Work Plan for Accelerating the Comprehensive Pilot Program for Expanding Opening-up of the Service Sector, which explicitly called for developing game exports and building a full chain from intellectual property creation to development, publishing and overseas operations.

The next month, four departments jointly issued the 2025-26 catalog of key national cultural export enterprises and projects, which included major game companies and a list of featured titles. There were 98 game-related companies in the list, alongside 15 flagship titles designated as key export projects. These measures provide policy certainty and channel capital, talent and services toward the sector.

Local governments have followed suit. Guangdong province has promoted industry alliances and export-oriented clusters. Zhejiang province has introduced measures that cover approval efficiency, compliance guidance and intellectual property protection. Beijing has explored dedicated service zones and streamlined pathways linked to export-related approvals. Together, these layered policies form a practical support system for Chinese games entering global markets.

But policy alone does not explain the appeal of Chinese games abroad. Games are powerful cultural carriers. In recent years, a large number of Chinese titles featuring traditional cultural elements have been exported, making cultural empowerment a real competitive edge.

*Genshin Impact*, for example, introduced the "Lantern Rite" festival inspired by Chinese New Year and the Lantern Festival, updating it annually with storylines and gameplay rooted in traditional customs. For global players, it has become a highly anticipated in-game celebration — one that introduces Chinese culture through experience rather than explanation.

Similarly, *Black Myth: Wukong* chose cultural confidence over convenience in its overseas localization. Instead of translating "Wukong" as "Monkey King", the game retains the pinyin "Wukong", prompting many players to seek out the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* on their own. In this way, Chinese games are moving cultural exports from content delivery to innovation in narrative and presentation.

Success abroad also requires sensitivity to cultural diversity. Chinese developers increasingly embrace a localization strategy. Companies such as 37 Interactive Entertainment tailor distribution and operations by region, emphasizing different genres in different markets. Its studios adapt seasonal content to fit local holidays such as Christmas. Deep localization has proven decisive.

The world-building in *Genshin Impact* illustrates the point. Its fictional continent, Teyvat, includes regions inspired by different cultures — drawing from medieval Europe, and blending motifs from South Asia, North Africa, and beyond. Players worldwide find something familiar, while the game keeps a coherent identity.

Others take similar approaches. Moonton's *Mobile Legends* brings Chinese mythological heroes into the same arena as characters inspired by Southeast Asian legends. Attention to regional preferences — embedded in characters, visuals, music and events — helps Chinese games connect with players across cultures.

At the same time, some challenges remain. Tighter regulations on user protection and content compliance are major obstacles. Talent shortage, especially people who combine cultural literacy, technical skills and global experience, also constrains growth, as do gaps in digital distribution capabilities in some markets.

Looking ahead, the next wave of expansion will come from refined operations in emerging markets, genre hybridization and micro-innovation, and above all, AI-driven development and marketing.

Game exports have already become a meaningful pillar of China's cultural trade. In 2025, overseas sales of China's self-developed games reached \$20.46 billion, up 10.23 percent year-on-year, exceeding 100 billion yuan (\$14.52 billion) for the sixth consecutive year. Mobile games contributed \$18.48 billion, growing 13.16 percent.

As gaming converges with AI, engines and virtual reality, its impact will extend beyond entertainment. Through "games + AI + diverse industries", Chinese game exports may become a bridge between the virtual and real-world economies while opening new pathways for Chinese culture to engage the world in the digital age.

The author is a researcher at the Central Institute of Socialism.

The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Antonio Donato Nobre

## Forests forge path to a green future

The idea of an ecological civilization reflects a profound shift in how development is viewed. It recognizes that the industrial model that powered global prosperity over the past two centuries has also pushed the Earth toward dangerous limits. Climate change, biodiversity loss and the destabilization of water cycles are no longer distant environmental concerns — they are intensifying constraints on long-term economic stability.

Responding to these challenges requires more than incremental environmental policies. It calls for rethinking the relationship between industrial development and the biosphere. The global forest economy offers a particularly important opportunity for such a transition.

Demand for timber and wood products continues to grow as construction, packaging and engineered biomaterials expand worldwide. China has become a central actor in this sector, both as a manufacturing powerhouse and as a leader in advanced wood-processing technologies. Yet parts of the global timber supply chain still depend on logging in primary forests, including those in Southeast Asia and Siberia.

These forests perform functions that extend far beyond the production of timber. Primary forests regulate atmospheric circulation and rainfall patterns, stabilize regional climates and sustain extraordinary biodiversity. Their ecological roles operate at continental scales and over long time horizons, making them essential components for the stability of the planet.

Protecting these remaining forests is therefore not only a conservation priority but also an investment in global resilience.

At the same time, technological progress in wood engineering has transformed the requirements of the timber industry. Modern materials such as laminated veneer lumber, cross-laminated timber and other composite products allow high-performance construction materials to be manufactured from relatively smaller trees grown in short cycles. The future of wood manufacturing no longer depends on harvesting large trees from ancient forests.

Instead, a new model is emerging: ecological silviculture established on degraded landscapes and previously cleared lands. Large areas contain

extensive degraded lands where restoration and productive forestry can advance together. Mixed-species plantations and carefully designed agroforestry systems can produce timber in cycles of five to 20 years while restoring soils, stabilizing water cycles and supporting biodiversity recovery.

When linked to advanced wood-processing industries, these landscapes can form the foundation of a modern bioindustrial system: high-productivity ecological forestry feeding sophisticated manufacturing that produces structural materials and engineered wood

products with high added value.

For China, supporting such a transition offers a strategic opportunity. The country has already demonstrated global leadership in sectors such as renewable energy and electric mobility. A similar leadership role could emerge in sustainable forest bioindustries — combining ecological restoration, advanced materials science and international cooperation.

Such a strategy would deliver multiple benefits. Remaining primary forests would be preserved as vital ecological infrastructure. Degraded landscapes across the Global South could be restored while generating sustainable economic activity. China could help set a new global standard for a forest-based bioeconomy consistent

with the principles of an ecological civilization.

The next phase of development will not be defined simply by how much humanity produces, but by how intelligently production systems interact with the living Earth. Protecting primary forests while building a new generation of productive, restored forest landscapes offers a practical step toward that future.

The author is a retired researcher from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research and is now the scientific director of the nonprofit institute Biotic Pump Greening Group in Brazil. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.



SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY



Lu Jie

## Scripting a false South China Sea drama

The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, a project of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, recently released a report claiming that the number of Chinese so-called "maritime militia" vessels in the South China Sea reached a "record high" in 2025. The report is filled with charts and coordinates, presenting an image of "irrefutable evidence". However, beneath this technical veneer is a carefully orchestrated campaign of perception warfare. Using magnifying glasses to count Chinese fishing vessels in satellite images is a strained attempt to portray fishermen's livelihoods as evidence of threats to regional peace.

AMTI has long been eager to pose as an "authoritative arbiter" on South China Sea issues, yet its underlying nature has never changed. As a subsidiary of the CSIS, its operational logic and funding are deeply intertwined with the military-industrial complex of the United States. In essence, it functions as an "issue factory" serving the US strategic competition with China.

Reviewing its reports over the years — from early hype over "island militarization" to the present fixating on fluctuations in the number of Chinese fishing vessels — the core narrative remains consistent: all lawful activities by China in the South China Sea are labeled as "expansion", and the normal operations of Chinese fishermen are portrayed as "military threats". Its "research" is driven by a predetermined agenda and deviates from objectivity because it merely searches for material to attack China under a microscope.

The most misleading aspect of the report is the forceful labeling of Chinese fishing vessels as "maritime militia". It uses a sophisticated technique to manipulate the narrative. First, it uses a military term to create a cognitive anchor. Then it interprets the fishermen's traditional work as "paramilitary activities". The reality is far simpler than what the elaborate charts in the report suggest. The South China Sea is the "ancestral sea" of Chinese fishermen. Areas such as Meiji Jiao and Niu'e Jiao are not only traditional fishing grounds but also natural safe havens for fishermen during storms.

Fishermen set sail for a good catch, not for the "surveillance and confrontation" speculated in the report. Fishing vessels anchor near islands and reefs for shelter and rest, not for the "deployment and buildup" hyped by the organization. Linking a livelihood passed down through generations to "military expansion" is both a profound disrespect to Chinese fishermen

and a blatant disregard for the fundamental spirit of the international law of the sea.

The report claims the number of militia vessels reached a "record high" in 2025 — a startling statement that falls apart under scrutiny of its flawed methodology. The report implicitly acknowledges that this year's statistical scope included new locations such as Chigua Jiao. It's a simple statistical trick that inflates the denominator to manufacture growth in the numerator, but it is sufficient to fabricate a false news narrative of a "soaring threat" in the public opinion arena. Furthermore, the activity of fishing vessels fluctuates between high and low seasons and follows fishing seasons and moratoriums. These seasonal variations are common knowledge, yet AMTI packages them as so-called "deployment peaks". This data manipulation, essentially drawing a target after shooting the arrow, reflects not a tense situation in the South China Sea, but the narrative anxiety certain institutions painstakingly cultivate to generate issues.

If AMTI genuinely cares about peace in the South China Sea, why does it turn a blind eye to the frequent military exercises conducted by extra-regional countries in these waters? Why does it selectively ignore the efforts of regional states to properly manage differences through bilateral negotiations? The answer lies between the lines of the report. It deliberately conducts comparative analyses of locations such as Meiji Jiao and Ren'ai Jiao, attempting to implant a cognitive framework of a

"China threat" among regional countries. Its fundamental purpose is not to maintain stability in the South China Sea, but to provide rhetorical ammunition for deeper US involvement in regional affairs and to bolster US "Indo-Pacific" strategy. This divisive tactic — hyping fishing vessels into warships, portraying fishing nets as cannon muzzles — is nothing new and is aimed at sowing seeds of distrust and confrontation at a time when China and the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are actively advancing consultations on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The ebb and flow of tides in the South China Sea bear witness to the generations of coastal fishermen who have worked these waters, not to the false narratives concocted by external forces. China's activities in the South China Sea, whether the lawful operations of fishing vessels or the legitimate patrols of its coast guard, are rights within its sovereignty. For certain institutions, satellite imagery might offer a convenient illusion of insight. But the real understanding of these waters begins not by counting boats, but by engaging with their history. After all, the tracks of fishing vessels cannot draw a threat; the real risk stems precisely from those attempting to script a drama from satellite images.

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## WORLD

## Tehran warns of 'zero restraint'

Iran says it will amp up response if Israel attacks infrastructure further

By JAN YUMUL in Hong Kong and CUI HAIPEI in Dubai, UAE

Tehran has warned of "zero restraint" if Israel attacks Iran's infrastructure again and demanded that any end to the fighting must address damage to its civilian sites as the United States-led conflict drags on.

Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi said in a post on X on Thursday that his country's response to Israel's attack on its infrastructure "employed a fraction of our power".

"The only reason for restraint was respect for requested de-escalation. Zero restraint if our infrastructures are struck again. Any end to this war must address damage to our civilian sites," said Araghchi.

He added that they "are only three weeks into this war of choice, imposed on both Iranians and Americans".

"This \$200b is the tip of the iceberg. Ordinary Americans can thank Benjamin Netanyahu and his lackeys in Congress for the trillion-dollar 'Israel First tax' that's about to hit (the) US economy," said Iran's foreign minister.

Araghchi was referring to US media reports that the Pentagon has asked the White House to approve a request to Congress of more than \$200 billion to fund the fighting.

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth confirmed this during a news conference, adding that the \$200 billion figure "could move" and that he did not want to set a definitive time frame for the conflict, which has no end in sight.

Dina Yulianti Sulaeman, director of the Indonesia Center for Middle East Studies, said Araghchi's statement demonstrates Iran's stance.

"Iran doesn't actually want to attack civilian infrastructure, but if Iran is attacked again, it will respond with a much more massive response. This attitude shows that Iran is still very confident and ready to continue the war," Sulaeman told China Daily.

"Meanwhile, the \$200 billion request shows that the US is trapped in a war without a clear exit strategy," she said.

In other developments, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps announced on Friday that its spokesman, General Ali Mohammad Naini, was "martyred in an aerial aggression" that day, Iran's Mehr News Agency reported.

Iran has also started moving toward a "selective blockade" of the Strait of Hormuz in recent days, allowing ships from selected countries to pass through the strategic waterway, Al Jazeera reported.

It cited Lloyd's List, a maritime news and analysis service, which said that at least nine ships had transited through a corridor passing by Iran's Larak Island as of Wednesday.

Across the Gulf region, which has suffered widespread collateral damage as a result of the strikes, civilians celebrating Eid al-Fitr and performing prayers have been told to stay indoors.

Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates told worshippers not to gather outdoors or at prayer grounds where thousands typically attend Eid prayers marking the end



Iranians shop for flowers at a market in Tehran on Thursday, on the eve of Nowruz, the Persian New Year. This year, Iranians celebrate the festival amid US-Israeli strikes against the country. AFP

of the holy month of Ramadan.

The UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain all reported Iranian drone and missile attacks early on Friday, before the start of the Eid al-Fitr holiday at sundown.

Iran has renewed fire on Israel after a brief lull, The Times of Israel reported. A ballistic missile launch from Iran was "detected by the IDF,

targeting central Israel and the Jerusalem area", it added.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in his statement to the foreign press that "Israel and the United States are protecting America, Israel, the entire Middle East, but I venture to say the entire world".

Netanyahu's remarks came just days after Joe Kent resigned from his

position as director of the US National Counterterrorism Center in opposition to the US military action against Iran. Kent said Iran "posed no imminent threat" to the US, pinning the blame on "Israeli pressure" and Tel Aviv's "powerful American lobby".

Contact the writers at [jan@chinadailyapac.com](mailto:jan@chinadailyapac.com).

## Megaproject expected to unlock vast potential

By VICTOR RABALLA in Narok, Kenya [victor@chinadailyafrica.com](mailto:victor@chinadailyafrica.com)

Kenya has launched one of its largest infrastructure projects, a transformative railway development expected to unlock the vast economic potential of the country's western region, where millions depend on agriculture, livestock and fishing for their livelihoods.

The project aims to enhance connectivity, lower the cost of moving goods and open new market opportunities for farmers, pastoralists and fishing communities along the northern corridor, which also links Kenya to Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi.

The 263-kilometer Standard Gauge Railway links Naivasha to Kisumu, connecting to the existing Chinese-built Nairobi-Mombasa line completed in 2017, which connects the capital to the port city of Mombasa, extending the modern railway deeper into the country's agricultural heartlands and toward Kisumu, a regional trade hub on Lake Victoria.

Speaking during the launch on Thursday, Kenyan President William Ruto said extending the railway to Kisumu and eventually to Malaba at the Uganda border will consolidate Kenya's role as the logistics backbone of East and Central Africa.

"A railway that terminates at Naivasha is incomplete because it does not reach the major production zones of western Kenya or connect with the lake transport ecosystem in Kisumu," Ruto said during the launch in Narok on Thursday.

He noted that cargo from the Port of Mombasa reached 7.37 million metric tons in the first half of 2023, with nearly 70 percent destined for neighboring Uganda, yet goods still take up to 80 hours to reach Malaba and over 100 hours to Uganda's capital Kampala due to slow transport links.

The railway will link Nairobi's industrial corridor to key agricultural zones such as Narok, Bomet, Kericho and Nyamira before reaching the commercial hub of Kisumu.

## Job opportunities

Western Kenya is a major producer of tea, maize, sugar and rice, while the Lake Victoria basin supports a vibrant fishing industry. Ruto said the new railway will lower transport costs, increase freight volumes, create jobs during construction and decongest roads by shifting cargo from trucks to rail.

"The corridor holds immense economic potential. By linking production zones directly to the railway network, we transform the SGR into a two-way economic system that moves imports inland and exports outward," he said.

Construction will be undertaken by China Communications Construction Company, whose chairman, Song Hailiang, said the project, part of the Belt and Road Initiative, reflects deepening infrastructure cooperation between China and Kenya.

Building on the experience of the Mombasa-Nairobi SGR, the chairman pledged to build a greener and more inclusive railway that will adopt higher environmental and sustainability standards.

The Nairobi-Mombasa wildlife corridors and ecological protection measures have been recognized by the United Nations Environment Programme as a model of environmental cooperation between China and Kenya.

"Green design and low-carbon construction will be implemented along the entire route, while the railway alignment will be optimized to avoid ecologically sensitive areas," Song said at the launch ceremony.

Kenya's Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi described the railway as a critical project for regional integration and the advancement of the African Continental Free Trade Area, noting that improved connectivity will strengthen trade across East and Central Africa.

Zhang Chi contributed to this story.

## OpenClaw sparks hot debate over promise and peril at GTC

By LIA ZHU in San Francisco [liazhu@chinadailyusa.com](mailto:liazhu@chinadailyusa.com)

The rise of OpenClaw, the open-source autonomous AI agent that has taken the tech world by storm, was a hot topic at Nvidia's annual conference this week, with industry leaders hailing it as a landmark shift in artificial intelligence while issuing clear warnings about the security risks it carries.

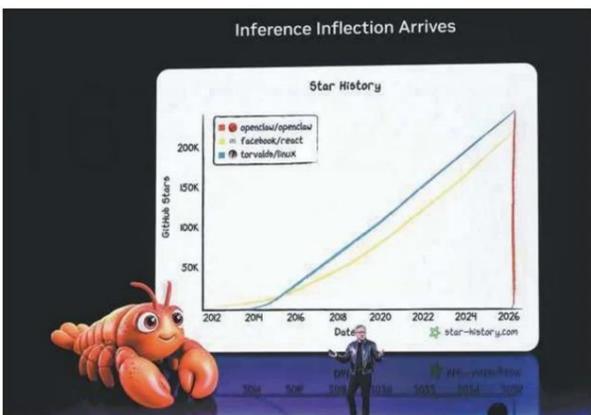
Held from Monday to Thursday in San Jose, California, Nvidia's GPU Technology Conference, or GTC, brought together some of the most influential voices in the global AI industry. Across panel discussions and keynote stages, industry leaders said OpenClaw is advancing AI capabilities significantly, from answering questions to taking action.

Launched in November 2025 by Austrian developer Peter Steinberger, OpenClaw is capable of handling daily tasks, such as clearing inboxes, sending emails, managing calendars and checking users in for flights. It has since become one of the fastest-growing projects in the history of GitHub, the world's most widely used developer platform. It's also gone viral globally, including in China, where users coined the phrase "raising a lobster" to describe training the AI assistant.

"There's been a lot of developer creativity coming out of that community. It's been something that's absolutely fascinating," Ali Golshan, a senior director of AI software at Nvidia, told China Daily at GTC when asked about how he viewed the "raising lobsters" phenomenon in China. "I think from our perspective, it's been phenomenal, because it's generating these very valuable use cases in the community," he said.

He said this kind of moment is similar to what happened when the web was created, when people suddenly found remarkably creative ways to build entire businesses, new products, and fresh ways to reach an audience.

Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang told an open models panel on Wednesday that "in a lot of ways, OpenClaw



Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang gives the keynote address at the company's annual GTC developers conference in San Jose, California, on March 16. JOSH EDELSON / AFP

"I think any technology has to be smart and make sure it's secured. So there's nothing wrong about making sure that you're putting some kind of governance."

Amit Zavery, president and chief product officer of ServiceNow

is bringing agentic systems to the consumer mindset". Harrison Chase, co-founder and CEO of LangChain, echoed, saying at the same panel that OpenClaw represents a transition in what AI can be.

OpenClaw, Chase said, exemplifies a shift that began with professional software tools last year and is now reaching a larger population, which has transformed AI from something that simply responds to queries to something that takes real-world action on a user's behalf.

He predicted that this year would bring a new wave of personal productivity agents capable of autonomously handling more complex, longer-running tasks.

Yet the excitement has been tempered by serious caution. An earlier panel on AI agents in enterprise software drew broad agreement among participants that the technology's expanding capabilities demand equally robust safeguards.

Elia Zaitsev, chief technology officer of cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, described AI agents

as "a devil's bargain". The greater the power the technology offers and the more use cases it can solve, the greater the risks it introduces, he said.

That tension between capability and risk has already drawn regulatory attention in China. The Chinese authorities have issued several alerts warning that OpenClaw could expose organizations and individuals to significant cybersecurity vulnerabilities. In response, Tencent Cloud on Wednesday unveiled an upgraded enterprise-grade solution aimed at making AI agent deployment safer and more scalable.

Nvidia also unveiled "NemoClaw" at GTC, an open-source stack designed to layer privacy and security controls onto OpenClaw, a direct response to the growing concerns surrounding the technology.

Golshan of Nvidia framed the security challenge in terms of a maturity journey, comparing the road ahead for agentic AI to the path once traveled by the web and internet browsers. That journey, he said, ultimately requires the construction of a trust layer, which means focusing on the privacy and security controls that can help developers get started safely.

"I think any technology has to be smart and make sure it's secured. So there's nothing wrong about making sure that you're putting some kind of governance," Amit Zavery, president and chief product officer of ServiceNow, told China Daily.

He said organizations must remain alert to technological transformation and take responsibility for managing both data and security. "As long as you are making sure it's secured and putting some governance, it's a valuable thing as part of the enterprise," he said.

## Vietnam to break ground on new high-speed rail line

By YANG HAN in Hong Kong [kelly@chinadailyapac.com](mailto:kelly@chinadailyapac.com)

Vietnam will begin construction of a major high-speed railway next month, a project expected to boost socioeconomic development and enhance transport connectivity with China.

A groundbreaking ceremony for the Hanoi-Quang Ninh high-speed railway project is scheduled to take place on April 12, according to Vietnam News Agency.

Famous for the UNESCO World Heritage Site Halong Bay, Quang Ninh is a port city in Vietnam that shares a land and sea border with South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

Spanning about 120 kilometers, the fully electrified, standard-gauge railway will feature double tracks and can reach a top speed of 350 kilometers per hour. It will become one of only two high-speed railway lines in the country, alongside the North-South line from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, scheduled for investment before 2030.

It will run through four cities and provinces, namely Hanoi, Bac Ninh, Hai Phong and Quang Ninh. Travel time between the national capital Hanoi and Quang Ninh will be cut to as little as 30 minutes, compared to up to three hours by road.

Leading investment and construction is VinSpeed, a high-speed rail subsidiary of the Vietnamese conglomerate Vingroup. It is slated for completion and operation by 2028.

The company has signed a framework deal with the German company Siemens for the supply of

rolling stock and respective subsystems for the rail projects Hanoi to Quang Ninh and Ben Thanh to Can Gio.

In December last year, construction began on the first phase of the Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong railway, a single-track railway that connects with China's railway network.

To Lam, general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee, said on Thursday that infrastructure connectivity, especially railway links, between Vietnam and China must be identified as a strategic breakthrough in bilateral economic ties.

Chairing a meeting with representatives from relevant ministries, agencies, and localities at a railway station in Lang Son Province, near the Vietnam-China border, To Lam said enhanced rail ties are important for driving bilateral trade ties into a new stage that is more substantive, effective and sustainable.

He said railway cooperation between Vietnam and China is both an imperative and a major opportunity for the coming years, serving as a powerful lever for the Southeast Asian country to modernize infrastructure, cut logistics costs, expand global reach, and gradually build capacity in a new foundational industry.

Apart from economic benefits such as lower logistics costs and shorter transit times, To Lam said there are also long-term benefits, including the emergence of logistics hubs, integration into the broader Asia-Europe rail network, and elevating Vietnam's standing within Asian supply chains.

## High waters



People waded through a street in Karachi, Pakistan, on Thursday. Heavy rain and strong winds left at least 18 people dead in the city. XINHUA

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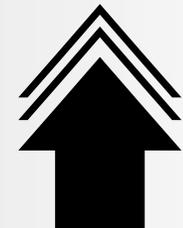
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# Iran conflict will scar the global economy

## Scenarios that markets and policymakers hoped to avoid are now materialising

The Iran war is metastasising into a global economic calamity. Ever since the US and Israel launched strikes on the Islamic republic on February 28, financial markets have been lulled by the belief that the conflict would not last long. In turn, they have discounted the threat of a severe disruption to the Strait of Hormuz, through which around a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas is shipped. But hostilities are entering a fourth week and the prospects of de-escalation seem to wax and wane every 24 hours. In recent days Israel and Iran have also each inflicted lasting damage on critical regional gas facilities. The worst-case scenarios for investors and policymakers are now coming into view.

In volume terms, a prolonged closure

of the strait would amount to a greater oil shock than those triggered by the Yom Kippur war and the Iranian Revolution in the 1970s. The global economy today depends less on oil for energy, but the fuel is still important in transport and industry. Oil prices have risen around 50 per cent to over \$100 a barrel since the war started. As traders increasingly assume the region's oil supply will be locked up for a long time, analysts reckon the price could exceed \$150, a level which, if sustained, would raise the probability of a worldwide recession.

The threat to global gas supplies has also become more real this week. Qatari officials said retaliatory Iranian attacks on Wednesday had caused years-long damage to its Ras Laffan LNG plant, the world's largest, which had already ceased production since March 2 due to earlier drone strikes. Gas prices have surged across Europe and Asia. The blockage of fertiliser, helium and sulphur supplies in the strait is also

alarming industries from chipmaking to farming.

Central bankers are in a bind. This week the US Federal Reserve, European Central Bank and Bank of England all reasonably chose to keep interest rates on hold as they evaluate the conflict. The longer energy prices remain elevated, the greater the risk that higher inflation expectations become embedded. But higher rates alongside global economic uncertainty have knock-on consequences too. Equity markets could face a severe correction. Frothy private markets could experience further strain. Sovereign bond yields may also creep higher, as governments contemplate economic support.

Some economies are more vulnerable than others. European nations have swapped dependence on Russia for fossil fuels, with the US. Many have limited fiscal buffers with which to cushion households and businesses from higher global energy prices. They must also compete with Asian nations such as

The longer energy prices remain elevated, the greater the risk that higher inflation expectations become embedded

South Korea and Taiwan — which are heavily dependent on the Middle East for oil and gas, and have limited reserves. Developing nations are also facing weaker remittance flows from the Middle East and food shortages. Though America is a net energy exporter, it will not be spared from higher energy prices, particularly with demand surging from data centres.

The longer the conflict goes on, the worse the shortages, price spikes and supply chain disruption will be. Markets and governments cannot quickly adapt to the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz. Even if the war miraculously ends soon, there will be ongoing questions over the security of the waterway. If it survives, the Iranian regime and its supporters know the region can be weaponised any time that tensions with the US and Israel return. Trade, transport and investment in the Gulf won't be the same again. However it ends, Operation Epic Fury will leave an indelible mark on the world's economy.

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## Opinion Society

# Quiet rituals of survival in Tehran



A stallholder at a bazaar in Tehran selling dried fruits — West Asia News Agency/Reuters



The sweetest things arrive at the most brutal moments. In Tehran, under bombardment, the craving comes almost instantly — after the blast, after the tremor, when someone reaches for something sugary. Jam appears. A piece of pastry is broken in half and shared.

It sounds surreal to speak of desserts in a city under sustained air strikes. But the body insists. There are quiet rituals of survival, ways of telling yourself you have endured another explosion, and you are still here.

Since February 28, when the US-Israeli war on Iran began, these small rituals have been holding a fragile line against panic.

There is nothing abstract about fear. In the heaviest strikes, every cell in your body shakes. The sound does not

The first need after every explosion is confirmation: we are all alive — so far. Phones light up with text messages. Calls from friends and relatives overlap. Voices tremble with relief. "We're OK."

Supermarket shelves remain stocked and people reassure each other: there is food, there is bread, there is enough. But immediately another thought follows: for whom? You eat and wonder who cannot. You sit at a table and think of families struggling to put even a simple meal in front of their children. In a stagnant economy, those who live on daily wages are pushed further to the edge.

There are moments that reveal a kind of dignity that feels almost unbearable to witness. The roads are dangerous, the bombs unpredictable, but people are still insisting on coming to work. It is both humbling and devastating to see how hard people fight for the most basic needs, how much harder life becomes for those already carrying their heaviest burdens.

What makes this war harder to comprehend is not only its violence but its immediacy. This is a modern city, in the present day. War feels like something that should have been left behind, a brutal inheritance of another century.

There are no sirens to prepare you. The first notice is the explosion itself and then the most humiliating feeling one can experience.

The psychological toll extends into the glow of television screens, into competing narratives. Channels are flipped rapidly: state broadcasts declaring resilience and victory, opposition voices predicting the imminent collapse of the regime. Underneath it all, people absorb not only the shockwaves of bombs but the distortions of information, unsure where the truth resides.

Beyond the borders, the world is watching. So is the Iranian diaspora. Some even celebrate. There are images of expatriates dancing, convinced that this war will bring transformation, that destruction will clear the way for something better. It is a distant optimism that feels incomprehensible from within the blast radius. Support for war becomes something else entirely when the missiles land close enough to rattle your windows.

Responsibility dissolves in the noise. Every side deflects blame. Meanwhile, ordinary people stand in the middle, absorbing the consequences. For now, life is measured in small intervals: between explosions, between cups of tea, between messages confirming that another loved one has made it through another night.

A friend who sells organic food says she sold more raspberry jam in the first two weeks of war than in the entire previous year. Bakeries remain open, their ovens working through the bombardment, filling streets and homes with the smell of fresh flatbread. These are signals that the city is still alive.

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## Letters

# Everyday savers should be able to invest in private markets

William Clayton's concerns regarding private market investment in 401(k) retirement savings accounts are misplaced (On Wall Street, FT Weekend, March 7). He dismisses potential benefits to everyday savers while overemphasising potential risks. In doing so, his assessment fails to accurately reflect the realities of today's public and private markets.

Public markets have served savers well for decades, but even Professor Clayton acknowledges they now offer

fewer options. Today, there are half as many publicly traded companies in the US as there were two decades ago. Because companies stay private longer, everyday savers miss out on early, exponential growth. Private equity investments consistently outperform other asset classes over the long-term — net of fees and adjusted for risk, according to the University of North Carolina's Institute for Private Capital. Research from Georgetown University's Center for Retirement

Initiatives found that including private investment in a diversified 401(k) would increase the average retiree's annual income by \$2,400.

"Diversified" is a keyword here. No one is advocating 401(k) savers put 100 per cent of their savings into private investment. Rather, it should be one option available to savers working with their highly qualified asset manager to build a balanced portfolio that meets their needs.

Expanding 401(k) access to private

markets is a matter of expanding investor choice. Public pension funds greatly benefit from access to private equity and private credit. The same investment options that support 35mm pensions for teachers, firefighters, and public servants should be available to all. Everyday savers deserve to enjoy the strengths of private and public markets alike.

**Will Dunham**  
President and CEO, American Investment Council, Washington, DC, US

## AI weapons are no longer the stuff of science fiction

Stanislaw Lem's farsighted 1964 science fiction novel *The Invincible* presciently explored some of the "truly horrific" ways in which autonomous intelligent weaponry, once unleashed, might evolve ("Iran and the rising perils of AI in warfare", The FT View, March 14).

Lem reminded us that nonliving matter might also evolve under Darwinian pressure and that intellectually superior life forms do not necessarily dominate. The prospect of unintelligent machines combining to create "intelligent" swarms might once have seemed far-fetched, but with increasing frequency we see them in our night skies, replacing traditional firework displays.

**Martin Westlake**  
Brussels, Belgium

## The Baltic Germans summoned home by Hitler

Ian Thomson's interesting piece (Books, Life & Arts, March 14) about the history of the Baltic Germans makes one critical error. He states "Baltic German social dominance of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania lasted seven centuries until 1939". However, that loss of influence occurred two decades earlier. For instance, in Latvia, where the short period of Soviet rule in 1919 dislodged the "Baltic Barons", they were completely emasculated by the dismembering of their "latifundia", or farm estates, in the land reforms of the nascent Latvian democracy in 1920. Hitler's call for the Germans to return to the "Fatherland" in 1939 was simply the final nail in their Baltic coffin.

**Agris Krumins**  
Founder of DOCs+ (a community documentary film screening organisation); Oundle, Northamptonshire, UK

## Trump's unhappy lot at movie memorabilia auction

Re your article about movie memorabilia (Art, March 11), you report that the ruby slippers from the Wizard of Oz were sold for \$32.5mn at Heritage Auctions in 2024. The slippers also set a record at a 1988 sale.

At a separate auction that year one of the pianos "played" by Dooley Wilson (Sam) in *Casablanca* also came under the hammer. It was bought on behalf of a Japanese collector. The underbidder was none other than one Donald J Trump. Legend has it that he was so incensed by the nationality of the buyer that the incident laid the seeds of his campaign against foreigners taking over America.

Maybe we should focus on losing bidders in high-stakes auctions just in case they carry long-term grudges into future positions of power. Coincidentally, the buyer's US representative was a Mr Vance!

**John Wyn-Evans**  
London E8, UK



The US president was underbidder on one of the pianos from 'Casablanca'

## It's a brave reader who dares to take on Kant

Sheila Hayman, in her discussion of Michael Pollan's book *A World Appears* ("German Romanticism: inventing the artist as hero", Letters, FT Weekend, February 28), seems to support the idea of the artistic imagination that, in Immanuel Kant's words — in his *Critique of Judgment* — "bridges sense and understanding".

Not without trepidation I suggest that the great German philosopher was talking nonsense.

We may have sensations of the underlying reality of the universe, but can never have any understanding of it. Any bridge we may think we see is as illusory as the rainbow bridge of EM Forster's "only connect" idea.

Words such as "sense and understanding" are conventions that have somehow been useful to our evolution — perhaps by giving us the illusion of control over the world within, and around, us.

Our conscious mind, and so any "insights" it may have, can only be some sort of feedback process in our brain's workings.

But "we" (whatever is meant by that slippery word) can have no say in — nor any conception of — all that. To think that we can understand what our mind tells us about itself or the world around us is like asking water to explain H<sub>2</sub>O.

But let us not dismiss insights. Any mistake as to their value is of little importance to the pleasure they give. From the tired and threadbare plot of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare, seemingly out of nowhere, produced Prospero's Act IV speech, and in a mere 11 lines reminds us that "the great globe itself, / Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve, / And . . . leave not a rack behind."

He created unparalleled beauty out of ordinary words and also presaged the world of quantum physics and all the uncertainty that goes with it.

**David Boorer**  
Llandover, Carmarthenshire, Wales, UK

## Dating the English fondness for boarding schools

In "The slow death of the English boarding school" (Life & Arts, March 14) Henry Mance describes the fondness of the English for sending children away from home at an early age, and gives this practice a start date around the time of the publication of *Tom Brown's School Days* in 1857.

The exact date may in fact be a good deal earlier. Ernest Barker's compendium *The Character of England*, published in 1947, includes a chapter on "Children and Education" written by Lady Violet Bonham Carter. She too gives prominence to the peculiarly English custom of sending children away, but she gives it a longer history, quoting the comments of an Italian visitor written as early as 1500. The comments make interesting reading, and were as follows: "The want of natural affection in the English displays itself specially in their conduct towards their children; for having kept them at home till they arrive at the age of seven or nine years at the utmost, everyone, however rich he may be, puts away his children into the houses of others."

When you consider how long this has been the accepted social attitude, Mance is clearly right in predicting the death of the English boarding school will probably be a slow one.

**Sir John Waite**  
Orford, Suffolk, UK

## ChatGPT's Excel moment

Tim Harford is right that layering AI on top of existing work creates overload, and his historical examples support this ("What if AI just makes us work harder?", Spectrum, March 7). But he chose the wrong precedents.

The more useful question is not how people use a new tool in its first years, but what the tool eventually becomes. The photocopier, PowerPoint and email were end-user tools that stayed that way. Excel started there and became something else entirely. Most people used it superficially — pasting data, writing a "sum" formula, never going further. And yet spreadsheets transformed how organisations make decisions, not through individual productivity gains but through models and databases built by a small number of people, invisible to everyone else.

ChatGPT is the Excel moment. Accessible to everyone, used superficially by most. Harford's overwhelmed workers are a rerun of that early adoption curve, not a glimpse of where this ends.

The real transformation, when it comes, will look like the databases that followed Excel. Built properly, maintained centrally, invisible to the people whose decisions they quietly power. Most employees will never know they are there.

**Ulrik Soeraas**  
London KT2, UK

## Let's hear it for herrings

In response to Tim Hayward's enlightening story about how Waitrose has become the first supermarket to suspend the sourcing of mackerel over sustainability concerns ("How mackerel became Schrödinger's fish", Opinion, FT Weekend, March 7), I would ask "where are the herrings?"

As a young wife in the 1960s, I would buy herrings for a cheap and nutritious supper. Duly rolled in oatmeal and served with mustard sauce or tart gooseberries. As time went by we were able to upgrade to trout. I suspect the profit margin on both mackerel and herring is negligible.

**Monica Potts**  
Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, UK

## A gentleman relished

This is a letter to mourn the passing of what was, for me as an American, the Britain I love.

I write in reference to Henry Mance's musings after his "wet lunch" at Bellamy's with hereditary peer Lord Mancroft ("They don't care about fox hunting. It's about us", Lunch with the FT, Life & Arts, March 7).

Of particular interest was the reprinting of the menu — with the prices. So thank you for that!

Then there was Mancroft's comments about Bellamy's ("a proper old-fashioned, English-French restaurant. It's the only restaurant that the late Queen ever came to. She adored it!"), on addition ("it's exhausting"), on matters sartorial ("gentlemen don't wear white shirts") and his views that the banning of fox hunting hasn't even worked for the foxes ("If I die as quickly as that, I'd be jolly pleased," he says in reference to the kill, adding that "hounds are the most wonderful creatures on the planet.")

Who would not want to be invited to such a lunch?

Oh England, please don't drain the bathtub too fast! The wit, opinions and persuasions of such peers have been a saving grace for your countryside.

Your "tweeded" gentlemen deserve a "woof of thanks" for their years of service that we, in America, salute.

**Ned MacDonald**  
San Francisco, CA, US

## Correction

● The World Health Organization estimates that interior air quality contributed to 154,000 premature deaths in Europe in 2023, not 180,000 as wrongly stated in an article in House & Home on March 14. The International Well Building Institute's WELL certification was launched in 2014, not 2016. In 2024 the first WELL for residential certification was awarded for a single-family home, not the first residence.

## Opinion

## History is tragically repeating itself in Lebanon

## MIDDLE EAST

Kim Ghattas



Three weeks into what feels like a mini-third world war for many in the region, the world's attention is rightly focused on Iran, the Gulf, oil prices and the Strait of Hormuz while trying to decipher the intentions of US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

But my focus is on Lebanon not only because I'm Lebanese but because the genesis of today's conflagration lies in 1980s Beirut, when the 1979 Iranian revolution collided with the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. How the tiny Mediterranean nation emerges from this sixth Israeli military campaign against it could determine the shape of the region

for years to come — regardless of the outcome in Tehran.

In 1982, after Israel's invasion forced into exile the Palestinian militants launching rockets at it from Lebanon, Benjamin Netanyahu — then Israel's deputy ambassador to the US — boasted of "victory". Ali Khamenei, then Iran's president, was a key proponent of Tehran's project of backing Shia proxy militias. He encouraged a contingent of Iranian Revolutionary Guards to go to Syria, then on to Lebanon, just days after Israeli tanks had rumbled across the border. There the Iranians set up Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militant group. The costly 18-year Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon ensued.

In 1982, the US had quietly acquiesced to the Israeli invasion, then tried to stabilise the chaos by sending the Marines to Beirut. In walking into the Lebanese quagmire, America became a target of bombings for the first time in the Middle East. The US also pushed Lebanon into signing a security agreement with Israel. The move backfired, the Lebanese

Army splintered and the country, eight years into a civil war, descended further into the abyss.

The echoes with today are almost too much to bear: Netanyahu proclaims he has dreamt of this war for 40 years and his arch-nemesis Khamenei is now dead, killed by Israeli bombs. In Lebanon, the same politicians who sank the 1983 agreement with Israel are threatening a replay. Across the country, an old debate is playing out. Some insist that if the Palestinians then, and Hezbollah today, had not launched rockets at Israel, Israel would not be bombing Lebanon. Others claim that if it weren't for the deterrent of such guerrilla militants, Israel would have already levelled Beirut. This argument holds little sway now as Israeli bombs strike central Beirut daily. Meanwhile, the US is once again deploying Marines to the Middle East.

In this circular, traumatic history, two things have changed. First, Syrian president Hafez al-Assad once pulled all the strings in Lebanon as the senior partner in a joint venture with Iran. But in

today's Damascus, president Ahmed al-Sharaa is deeply opposed to Iran and keen to make sure Hezbollah militants don't cross into his country.

In Lebanon, meanwhile, the president and government have taken several historic steps — outlawing Hezbollah's military and security and arresting a handful of its armed members. State media

**How the nation emerges from all this could determine the shape of the region for years to come**

have been instructed to stop referring to Hezbollah as a resistance group. Crucially, the president and prime minister have offered direct talks with Israel, breaking a decades-long taboo.

Israel and the US consider all this to be too little too late — but they are wrong. A clear indicator of the significance of these moves by the Lebanese state is the

threats of violence Hezbollah has issued, accusing it of being a Vichy government.

For decades, Arab countries saw Lebanon as a convenient battleground far from their own borders where, together with the US and Europe, they often forced Beirut into compromises, first with the Palestinians, and later with Hezbollah or Tehran in the hope of containing Iranian influence within Lebanon. Lebanon has often been guilty of letting itself be used but the political moves it is making today are an attempt to reverse five decades of impotence.

While Lebanese authorities clearly have not done enough to neutralise Hezbollah since the November 2024 ceasefire, Israel did not respect it either, conducting hundreds of strikes. This deprived the Lebanese state of the diplomatic and political breathing space it needed to assert control.

The Lebanese government cannot allow local politicians to dominate the discussion about talks with Israel with their bickering about sectarian representation. It should instead present a

clear strategy for the negotiations with goals and parameters to convince the nation and the international community of its resolve.

Trump should work with European allies to shore up the Lebanese president and government, despite their shortcomings, and provide urgent aid for a country in which a quarter of the population is displaced. This will help the state to protect and support its citizens, especially those in the Shia communities that have in the past felt Hezbollah was their only recourse.

Netanyahu offers perpetual war to his citizens and the region, a logic that aligns with Iran and Hezbollah's interests. The US must therefore ensure Israel does not occupy or control territory in southern Lebanon, which will give a renewed raison d'être to Hezbollah for years to come. The only exit from this cycle is a Lebanese state capable of offering a credible path away from endless war.

*The writer is author of 'Black Wave' and an FT contributing editor*

As Trump ratchets up pressure, the grandson of Raúl Castro is fronting negotiations, write *Geoff Dyer and Jude Webber*

In some countries, power comes not from a job title, but from appearing in the right photos.

Last Friday, Cuban leader Miguel Díaz-Canel used a meeting of senior officials to publicly confirm the government was holding talks with a Trump administration that has boasted Cuba will be its next target. Sitting in the front row was 41-year-old Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro. When Díaz-Canel later gave a press conference, Rodríguez Castro, sporting a crisply ironed blue shirt and neat haircut, was once again in the official delegation.

For Cubans, Rodríguez Castro is hardly a new face — he is, after all, the great-nephew of Fidel Castro and the grandson of Raúl Castro who at 94, and despite having retired five years ago, is still believed to be the ultimate political authority on the island.

Yet Rodríguez Castro — widely known as Raúlito, or less flatteringly as "El Cangrejo" (the crab) because of the unusual shape of his finger — does not hold a senior position in either the government or Communist Party. His main claim to fame has been occasional social media revelations about his party lifestyle.

Nonetheless he has emerged as the leading interlocutor in talks about opening up Cuba's economy and politics, a role first reported by Axios. On the US side they are being led by Marco Rubio, the Cuban-American secretary of state who has made deposing the Castro family his defining political mission.

Raúlito's presence is a reminder that while Díaz-Canel has been head of the Communist Party since 2021 and is surrounded by a generation of officials with hardline views on the US, many of the political roads in Havana still go through the Castro family.

"The fact that El Cangrejo is a leading figure in this entire drama and not the head of the Communist Party or the president of the country is a signal that you are watching a family dynasty seeking to survive and to keep their privilege, their power," says Orlando Pérez, a professor at the University of North Texas at Dallas. Cuba's Communist Party regime and the Castros have been deeply intertwined ever since the 1959 revolution.

Cuba's economy has been in crisis since Covid battered its tourism industry and it has deteriorated recently after the Trump administration imposed an energy blockade. Diplomats report widespread hunger and medical services breaking down. On Monday, a power outage plunged the entire country into a blackout.

While the country has survived crises before, there have been flashes of what could happen if the current situation continues. Last Friday, demonstrators in the town of Morón set fire to the Communist party headquarters. Washington is openly taunting Cuba's leaders. On Monday, Donald Trump said he could have the "honour" of "taking Cuba in some form".

This is not the first time that Washington has tried to work through a younger Castro. The Obama administration held



Person in the News | 'Raúlito' Rodríguez Castro

## Cuban scion leading talks with the US

secret talks with Alejandro Castro Espín, Raúl's son and Raúlito's uncle, in preparation for the 2015 attempt to normalise relations — which fizzled during the first Trump term.

Ricardo Zúñiga, one of two US officials involved in those, says that "reaching out to Raúlito makes some sense". He adds: "It might seem a strange choice given his background and lack of experience, but he obviously talks a lot to Raúl."

Raúlito's main role has been to act as head of personal security for his grandfather. Through his father, a former general who ran Gaesa, the main state-owned company conglomerate, before he died in 2022, he has a network in the military and business.

But he has also featured in émigré websites that seek to expose the lifestyles of the Cuban elite — partying on a luxury yacht or, on one occasion, pouring a drink on his head in a nightclub while wearing a personalised New York Yankees jersey.

Michael Bustamante, an expert on Cuba at the University of Miami, says Raúlito's image is of someone who has "enjoyed the nightlife in a way that looks more like an imitation of Miami than revolutionary Havana". He adds: "He doesn't scream to me as somebody who's really invested in the

**'You are watching a family dynasty seeking to survive and to keep their privilege, their power'**

system, but in his own interest in self-protection."

Nor is Raúlito the only Castro newly in the limelight. In a bid to show Cuba is opening its economy, the government said on Monday that Cuban nationals living abroad could now invest there. The announcement was made by Oscar Pérez-Oliva Fraga, the vice-prime min-

ister who is a great nephew of Raúl and Fidel Castro. (Because of the blackout that day, many Cubans could only find out about it on their radios.)

One risk of dealing directly with the Castros is a backlash among Cuban-Americans in Florida, Rubio's home community. María Elvira Salazar, who represents south Miami in Congress, has been blunt: "The Castros and their thugs don't have any role in the future of Cuba," she says.

Zúñiga, the former Obama official, says it could also be a mistake to overstate the Castro family's influence within the regime. Obama's experience showed that "you have to deal with the entire leadership".

"We dealt with Alejandro and through him, with Raúl, but the hardliners defeated them. It was a revelation for everyone involved," he says. "It is not the same as it was in Fidel's time, or even Raúl's time. It is now a consortium."

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## The war over tail risks is in full swing

## FINANCE

Gillian Tett



When the gasfields in Iran and Qatar were bombed on Wednesday, markets gyrated wildly as investors confronted the long-term threats to energy supplies — and growth. Inside the maritime insurance world, however, officials blanched for another reason: such attacks show that the boundaries of this war are expanding in unpredictable ways.

In financial jargon, insurers are now grappling with rising "tail risks", or the danger that low-probability but highly damaging events might occur. Thus the questions hanging over the Strait of Hormuz: how can anyone now calculate these risks? Is it the job of governments? Or of the private sector?

And while the primary concern remains the human dangers arising from any Iranian attack on ships, for insurers there is an added financial twist: the EU implemented the Solvency II regime a decade ago, which sharply raised the level of capital reserves that insurance companies need to retain to protect against possible losses.

So this war is not just creating new geopolitical strife; it is pitting the world view of earnest European actuaries against an impetuous American president who wants to bend financial gravity and geopolitics to his will. This financial contest lacks the drama of a kinetic battle, but it matters deeply — not least because it will shape the path of future inflation and business confidence.

Until recently, the answer to the insurance battle largely revolved around the complex ecosystem that is the Lloyd's of London marketplace. This has provided much of the world's hull insurance, protection and indemnity insurance that ship owners need — backed by reinsurance.

But when the Iran war started, numerous maritime insurance contracts were cancelled. Some Trump acolytes accused Lloyds of playing geopolitics, and suggested America should try to grab this business instead.

However that criticism is unfair: the cancellations arose from that tail risk problem — and how insurance companies must treat this under Solvency II. Thus while new insurance is still available for ships, the price has soared fivefold since the start of the crisis.

This makes it uneconomic — as well as unsafe — for most ship owners to move their vessels. "It's impossible to make these prices work for us," I was told by one at a shipping meeting in Scandinavia this week.

So it is no surprise that Lloyd's List Intelligence told a private briefing on Thursday that there had been only 105 transits of the strait since the start of the war, a minute fraction of normal traffic. It also says that two dozen ships have suffered hits, or near-misses.

Trump is now trying to offer a solution: two weeks ago he announced that Washington's Development Finance Corporation will "provide political risk insurance and guarantees for the Financial Security of ALL Maritime Trade" at "a very reasonable price". US officials are reportedly now urging ships to use this, with a naval escort.

But reality does not match rhetoric. The DFC insurance scheme is apparently \$20bn in size and supported by Chubb. However, JPMorgan calculates that what is really needed to get ships moving is "\$352bn of maximum insurance coverage that private markets are not presently providing", while the DFC only has "\$154bn of remaining headroom" to use, unless Congress changes its mandate.

Scott Bessent, US Treasury secretary, rejects these calculations as "terrible" and "completely irresponsible". And the gap in numbers seems to reflect the fact that Bessent's plan is limited in scope and just, say, covers hull damage inside the strait and the Gulf region, rather than full liability.

"The administration didn't create universal, cheap, direct insurance for all shippers — it improvised a narrower backstop," says Tad DeHaven of the Cato Institute think-tank. But the advent of cut-price drones makes it easier for Iranians to attack ships from all over the place. Hence the need for protection against tail risk.

Perhaps Bessent and Trump will now demand that Congress expand the DFC

**While new insurance is still available for ships, the price has soared fivefold since the start of the crisis**

remit by many more billions. Other governments might also step in. (China has recently been developing its own mutual reinsurance groups.)

There are three points to note. First, anyone who thought that Trump's decision to eviscerate the USAID agency would presage a wholesale cull of such state bodies in Washington was wrong: groups like the DFC are becoming more, not less, important, as tools of foreign policy. Second, the reason why such groups matter is that Trump's naked embrace of geoeconomics is producing more government intervention.

Third: when it comes to a battle between Trump and the actuaries of the world, it is not always clear he will win; or not in relation to tail risk. Hence why those ships are stuck.

"If Hormuz transit is not restored to something resembling normal commercial risk," says Craig Tindale, an Australian analyst closely followed in Trump circles, "the [global economic] system shifts from price to rationing, from just-in-time to strategic hoarding and from global optimisation to bloc logistics protected by military force." In plain English: that means higher inflation — and lower growth.

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