

Limits of the casting vote at Tata Sons

On September 17, the board of Tata Sons voted on a third five-year term for N. Chandrasekaran as Executive Chairman. Mr. Chandrasekaran abstained from voting voluntarily and the recorded result was four to one. Within hours the Tata Trusts, owners of about 66% of Tata Sons, called the decision legally void. The claim rests on how several provisions of the Articles of Association, the company's rulebook, fit together.

With a 66% share, the Trusts could have packed the board. Instead, under Article 104B, the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the Sir Ratan Tata Trust act jointly and nominate one-third of the directors. So now, on a board of six, two seats are held by Nod Tata and Venu Srinivasan.

Article 121 gives these seats their weight; any matter the board decides by majority requires the affirmative vote of a majority of these nominated directors. If the votes are equal, the chairman has a casting vote.

The chairmanship is built in steps. A person must first be a director. A new Chairman of the Board is appointed under Article 118, subject to the voting requirement in Article 121 (whether it also governs a reappointment is disputed). Only a Chairman may be made Executive Chairman under Article 105(b).

On September 17, the nominees split – Mr. Srinivasan for and Mr. Tata against. Harish Manwani, an independent director chairing the item in Mr. Chandrasekaran's place, reportedly used a casting vote in favour.

In the Cyrus Mistry litigation in 2019, the



Prasanth Raju

Advocate practising in the Bombay High Court. Views are personal

National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) called the nominees' affirmative vote indispensable, which the top court later upheld in 2021. Neither court had to decide whether a casting vote can cure a split between the two nominees.

Where the readings part Tata Sons relies on two legal opinions. Senior advocate Sudipto Sarkar has advised that a casting vote can break a tie between the nominees as well as a board tie – that whoever presides may use it because Article 121 says Chairman, and not Chairman of the Board. Justice B.N. Srikrishna, a former Supreme Court judge, agrees and advised that since no majority could be found between the nominees, the casting vote ended the deadlock. However, the Trusts referred to a contrary opinion held by former Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud.

The company's reading has a textual footing; the words about equal votes do not say whose votes are meant. But Article 121 has two parts and they must be read together. The first sets a condition: a majority of the Trusts' nominees must support the decision. The second breaks a tie when the board is evenly split. The board as a whole was not evenly divided; the only split was between the two nominees. With two nominees, a majority means both. When Justice Srikrishna says no majority could be found, it means that the condition was not met. The company's reading uses the tie-break to make up for it. The Trusts' reading gives each part its own role. If both nominees support a decision and the other four

directors divide evenly, the board is tied three all, and the casting vote settles it.

Other parts of the rulebook support this reading. Articles 104B, 86 and 118 resolve any difference between the two Trusts by a majority of their trustees, never by the chair of a board meeting.

Defending these rules against Mr. Mistry in 2019, Tata Sons itself argued that where the Articles require the support of particular directors, a decision passes only if those directors agree. Here, those are the two Trust nominees. Mr. Manwani is an independent director, on the Trusts' reading, his casting vote cannot stand in for their agreement. The minutes of the meeting Mr. Tata has produced record the February 2022 extension of Mr. Chandrasekaran's tenure as made under Article 118, and Article 118 is itself subject to Article 121.

The advisers argue, with some force, that no selection committee was needed for a reappointment, and that Mr. Chandrasekaran's August letter (wherein he detailed he did not wish to hold the post) did not bind him. Neither point changes Article 121's arithmetic: with both nominees present, the required majority was two.

Only a director can be chairman, so directorship matters. The August general meeting was adjourned for want of a quorum before shareholders could consider Mr. Chandrasekaran's reappointment.

The Trusts are weighing legal proceedings. A mutual settlement is preferred to a lengthy litigation, which could spiral into uncertainty about the group's leadership.

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Delhi's infra-governance problem

Every year, news of an infrastructural disaster in Delhi takes precious student lives across the nation. Investigations into enforcement of building bye-laws, suspension of officials, and arrest of landlords gain momentum for some time and slowly settle down until yet another year invokes a fresh infrastructural horror. It is Satya Niketan now, it was a flooded basement in Rajinder Nagar two years ago. Delhi houses millions of students who move to the city either to join premier institutes or to prepare for competitive government exams. This influx of students has created a sprawling ecosystem of largely unregulated Paying Guest (PG) accommodations and coaching centres.

PGs have over time transformed from an extra room in a house rented out for extra cash to full-blown commercial establishments. Moreover, several coaching centres also operate in certain floors of buildings marked as residential establishments. This changes the nature and use-type of the building from residential to partly or wholly commercial and ideally makes them subject to a completely different set of safety norms. Municipal laws, regulations and bye-laws govern safety norms for residential and commercial buildings in the Union Territory but there is a significant enforcement gap which is unable to identify/accommodate these hybrid establishments. Regulations that would typically apply to similar establishments such as schools and college hostels are not directly applicable



Kartavi Satyarthi

Senior Resident Fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

to these establishments. Therefore, PGs and coaching institutes need to be recognised as a separate category of mixed-use educational buildings under municipal and urban local body regulations.

Delhi's regulatory framework is split across the Master Plan of Delhi (MPD), the Unified Building Bye-Laws (UBBL) and the Ministry of Education's 2024 coaching centre guidelines. Together, they create an odd mismatch between the law on paper and the way it actually functions. The MPD does not specifically mention PGs, and while the UBBL recognises coaching centres as an educational building, development controls prescribed under the bye-laws are not applicable to coaching centres. The Guidelines lack teeth and cover only broad infrastructural requirements. Thus, the regulatory landscape falls severely deficient in accounting for the on-ground realities of the city, especially student-focused areas such as Rajinder Nagar, Mukherjee Nagar and Satya Niketan.

The road ahead

The regulatory landscape needs to solve for two gaps – one, the absence of substantive safety standards for mixed-use educational buildings, and two, the lack of routine enforcement. Both the Delhi Development Authority and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi need to acknowledge coaching centres and PGs as a separate category of land-use. Specific standards applicable to such mixed-use educational buildings need to be developed prescribing requirements such as appropriate protection

against fire hazards, safe exits, minimum floor area per person, maximum capacity of a mixed-use building etc. Individuals aiming to open a PG or coaching centre may register the building in this separate category.

To enable enforcement, it is essential to note that the prescription of blanket minimum standards with little recourse for correction may encourage rent-seeking and by-passing of regulatory requirements through illegal means. Accordingly, an enforcement mechanism needs to be established which provides support to building owners to enable them to ensure compliance with the prescribed minimum standards. The following process may be followed to ensure compliance: a building safety task force or district-level committee with State oversight must be created consisting of representatives from urban local bodies; periodic audit of mixed-use educational buildings must be conducted; a compliance resolution plan which highlights compliance gaps and whether such gaps are capable of being addressed should be drawn up (in cases where the flagged gaps are alarming the building may be shut down immediately); and periodic annual reports must be submitted by the safety task force to the State government showcasing the number of buildings shut down and the number of buildings rehabilitated.

It is time to re-evaluate urban governance models and regulatory infrastructure; preferably before the next headline of an infrastructural disaster devouring young lives.

The backdrop in which the U.S. Fed raised interest rate

Inflation in the U.S. hit a peak in May, at 4.2%, after which it climbed down to 3.4% – far above the Federal Reserve's target of 2%

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis

On September 16, the U.S. Federal Reserve raised the short-term interest rate – its main policy rate, broadly comparable to the Reserve Bank of India's repo rate – for the first time in three years, by 25 basis points from a range of 3.5% to 3.75% to a range of 3.75% to 4%.

Chart 1 shows the short-term interest rate, also called the federal funds rate, seeing its first increase this month after being brought down a few times since 2023.

Coming ahead of the mid-term polls in the U.S., the interest rate hike disappointed supporters of President Donald Trump as his current Chair Kevin Warsh was hand-picked by Mr. Trump, who has been vociferous in his opposition to increases in the interest rate.

Soon after the announcement about the increase, Mr. Trump took to Truth Social to register his opposition and said the interest rate "should be 1% or less" and argued that higher rates have allowed other countries to benefit. However, multiple indicators that influence each other show that the increase was almost inevitable. The key indicator is the inflation rate that has not come down to acceptable limits since the beginning of the war the U.S. and Israel started with Iran earlier this year. Long-term bond yields, pushed up by inflation fears and by heavy government borrowing, added to the pressure on the Fed as holding the rates risked signalling that it was going soft on inflation.

Need to bring down inflation Mr. Warsh, along with 11 members of the Federal Open Market Committee, made this decision to combat inflation. "The plain fact is that inflation is too high and has been for too long," he said at a press conference.

As per the Consumer Price Index data released for August, overall inflation in the States continued to be at 3.4% in August. Chart 3 depicts the U.S.'s rate of inflation throughout 2026.

The sharpest jump in inflation took place in March, after the beginning of the U.S.-Israel war with Iran in February.

Inflation in the U.S. hit a peak in May, at 4.2%, after which it climbed down to 3.4%, still far above the Federal Reserve's 2% target, which it measures using the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) price index.

Meanwhile, the benchmark 10-year Treasury bond yields also started increasing after the Iran conflict, resulting in higher borrowing costs for the government. Chart 2 shows the increase, which was seen in other major economies as well. While the chart shows monthly data till August, the yield on the 10-year bonds crossed the key threshold of 5% on September 14.

Rising debt

One of the factors influencing the markets to drive the long-term bond yields up is the public debt of the U.S., which is increasing at a rate faster than the growth of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The country's debt-to-GDP ratio saw sharp rises in 2008, during the housing finance crisis, and its highest jump of more than 25 percentage points was in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chart 4). As of the first quarter of 2026, debt was 122.6% of the country's GDP. This ratio is nearly twice of what it was just 20 years ago, in 2006.

The cost of servicing the increased debt is so high that the net interest payments by the U.S. government (Chart 5) is higher than its spending on Medicare, health, and interestingly even defence – which according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute accounts for one-third of global military spending.

Putting out fires

The data for the charts were sourced from Federal Reserve Economic Data (by the Research Department at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis) and USA Spending.gov



Tough times: U.S. President Donald Trump shakes hands with Federal Reserve Chair Kevin Warsh in the White House in Washington, D.C. REUTERS

Chart 2: The long-term bond yields of some other key economies have also gone up along with that of the U.S. Japan's yield hit 2.94%, the highest since 1998



Chart 4: The U.S.'s public debt is increasing at a rate faster than the growth of its Gross Domestic Product

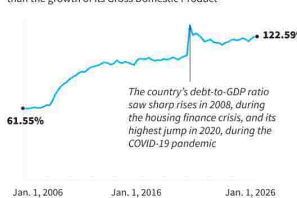


Chart 1: The increase in the short-term interest rate by the U.S. Federal Reserve for the first time since July 2023

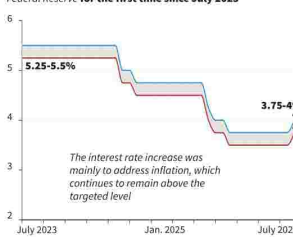


Chart 3: As fuel prices soared after the war began, inflation in the U.S. accelerated and hit retail and food prices, and is much higher than the Fed's target of 2%

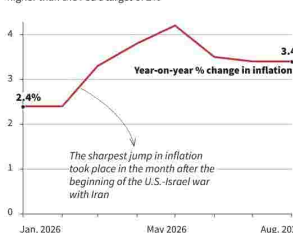
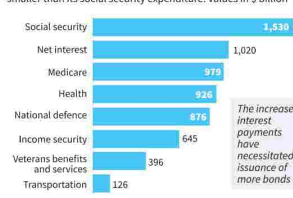


Chart 5: Net interest payments by the U.S. government is only smaller than its social security expenditure. Values in \$ billion



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 24, 1976

Mars may have more water than Earth

Pasadena (California), September 23: Mars is like a giant ice-lollipop packed with vast quantities of frozen water – and it might even possess more water than earth, according to U.S. scientists.

Viking project scientists here said the martian north polar cap had been found to contain huge amounts of water ice and the rest of the red planet's rocky surface might be a thin blanket over an enormous ice sheet.

The announcement of the Viking space probe findings ended a long-standing dispute over whether martian polar caps might be composed of frozen carbon dioxide instead of water ice.

The experts made it clear at a press conference there was more water on Mars than they ever expected.

"Mars can perhaps be described as an iceberg floating in a sea of rock and the north pole is the top," said Dr. Barney Famer, head of the Viking Water Vapour Mapping Team.

Dr. William McElroy, an atmospheric scientist, said it was possible there was more water in various forms on Mars than on earth. "Everywhere you look on Mars you see water," he said.

"There was a time when we thought there was no water on Mars," Viking project scientist Gerald Soffin told reporters. "Now we find there are massive amounts of water frozen in the north polar cap."

The discovery was made when the orbiting vehicle which carried the Viking landing craft from Mars made low, temperature reading passes over the north pole.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 24, 1926

New cure for Malaria

Berlin, September 23: A new cure for Malaria, by means of a synthetic preparation "Plasmochin", was explained at the Scientists' and Doctors' Congress at Dueseldorf. It was claimed that it was more effective than quinine. Experiments were at first conducted by Professor Shell on lunatics who were specially infected with malaria germs, after which "Plasmochin" was successfully tested by Professor Muchlens of Hamburg Tropical Institute on over a hundred victims of malaria from various parts of world. In many cases, permanent cure is believed to have been effected.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Cost of Chandni Chowk's Town Hall redevelopment

225 in ₹ cr. Redevelopment proposal for the Town Hall situated in Delhi's Chandni Chowk has been initiated with an estimate cost of ₹225 crore. An MoU was signed between the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. **PH**

Daily fuel losses faced by oil firms as crude prices surge

530 in ₹ crore. Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd are losing ₹8 a litre on petrol and ₹9 on diesel, while under-recoveries on LPG stand at about ₹300 a cylinder. The daily loss to OMCs is estimated at ₹530 crore. **PH**

Percentage growth recorded by retail sector in August

10 in per cent. India's retail sector maintained a steady trajectory in August, recording a 10% year-on-year pan-India growth, according to a survey. Building on July's recovery, stable consumer demand across regions and categories indicates strong industry preparation for the festive peak. **PH**

Decline in seafood export value from Odisha to West Asia

14.5 in per cent. The export value of fish, shrimp and other seafood items from Odisha to the West Asia region declined by 14.5% in 2025-26, resulting in a loss of approximately ₹23.40 crore, Minister Gokulananda Mallik said on Wednesday. **PH**

Percentage hike in DA for employees notified by Punjab govt.

8 in per cent. The Punjab government notified an 8% increase in dearness allowance for government employees and pensioners. This reflects the government's commitment towards the financial well-being of its employees and pensioners, a statement said. **PH**

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How are road accident claims decided?

Who can file a motor accident claim? Who is liable to pay? When can an insurer be directed to pay and recover? Who can claim compensation for a deceased person? What are the four heads of compensation in a death case?

EXPLAINER

Kartikee Singh
Barkha Dwivedi

The story so far:

India has the world's largest road network, spanning about 6.7 million kilometres, larger than the U.S.'s 6.59 million km and China's 5.49 million km, but it also records the world's highest road fatalities.

Over-speeding and reckless driving, poor road upkeep, inadequate driver training, and weak emergency and trauma care continue to make road crashes a severe public-safety crisis.

According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' Road Accidents in India 2024 report, 4,87,707 road accidents in 2024 claimed 1,77,175 lives (about 485 deaths a day or 20 an hour) and injured 4,71,441 people. With road crashes estimated to cost around 3.14% of India's GDP, their impact extends beyond lost economic productivity, falling most heavily on dependants of those killed or permanently disabled. Yet, for many claimants, courts' quantification and compensation awards remain difficult to navigate.

What is the legal framework?

The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 (MV Act) is the principal law governing motor-accident compensation. The MV Act creates a statutory scheme covering the entire accident chain, from regulation and driver and owner duties to insurance, liability, investigation, and compensation. For adjudicating claims, Section 165 empowers State governments to constitute Motor Accidents Claims Tribunals (MACTs) for specified areas to determine claims arising from motor-vehicle accidents.

Under Section 166, a claim may be filed by the injured person, the owner of damaged property, or, in case of death, by all or any of the deceased's legal representatives (LRs). The insurer, owner, and driver are ordinarily parties to the proceedings, as the Tribunal must determine both the amount of compensation and the party liable to pay it. The claim is ordinarily first heard by the MACT, which is the primary fact-finding and compensation-awarding forum. An appeal under Section 173 may be filed before the High Court within 90 days, subject to the depositing of ₹25,000 or 50% of the awarded amount, whichever is less. In determining liability, the Tribunal typically examines the FIR and chargesheet, site plan, Mechanical Inspection Report, post-mortem report or medical/disability records, insurance policy, and the depositions of eyewitnesses and the investigating officer, etc.

Importantly, the same accident may generate two distinct proceedings: a criminal case for offences such as rash or negligent driving, and a separate MACT claim for compensation. As held by the apex court in *Reena v. Managing Director, KSRTC* (2026), an acquittal in the criminal case does not affect the MACT proceedings, since the two operate in distinct legal spheres and apply different "standards of proof".

Who is liable to pay the compensation?

Liability initially attaches to the negligent driver and, vicariously, to the owner of the offending vehicle. Where the vehicle is insured, the insurer generally satisfies the award. Section 146 mandates compulsory third-party insurance, while Section 150 requires insurers to satisfy awards arising from third-party risks,

The compensation formula

The Supreme Court's framework breaks down compensation into four heads before the final amount is calculated

Step	Head of compensation	Formula	Result
1	Loss of dependency (Loss of income)	[(Annual income + future prospects) - deduction] × multiplier	(A)
2	Loss of estate	Flat conventional figure (base: ₹15,000; currently after 10% increase per 3 years: ₹18,150/-)	(B)
3	Funeral expenses	Flat conventional figure (base: ₹15,000; currently after 10% increase per 3 years: ₹18,150/-)	(C)
4	Loss of consortium (spousal/parental/filial)	Flat conventional figure (base: ₹40,000; currently after 10% increase per 3 years: ₹48,400/-) × Number of claimants entitled to consortium	(D)
	TOTAL COMPENSATION		(A) + (B) + (C) + (D)

Prepared as per the framework laid down by the Supreme Court in *Sarla Verma* (2009) and *Pranay Sethi* (2017)



Under Section 166, a claim may be filed by the injured person, the owner of damaged property, or, in case of death, by any of the deceased's legal representatives

subject to limited defences under Section 150(2), including specified policy breaches, unauthorised use, driving without a valid licence, and non-disclosure or misrepresentation in obtaining the policy. Even where a defence is established, courts may apply the "pay and recover" principle, directing the insurer to pay the victim/LRs first and recover the amount from the owner or driver thereafter.

A separate "no-fault liability" route dispenses with proof of negligence and provides compensation of ₹5 lakh for death and ₹2.5 lakh for grievous hurt (post the 2019 amendment), payable by the owner or authorised insurer, without proof of negligence.

How to calculate compensation in accidental deaths?

Money cannot substitute for a life lost, but motor-accident compensation seeks to ease the financial burden on the deceased's dependants. Section 168 of the MV Act requires an award of "just" compensation. Through landmark decisions such as *Sarla Verma* (2009) and *Pranay Sethi* (2017), the top court has evolved standardised formulas and foundational principles for giving effect to this requirement. Once "rash and negligent" driving is established, the quantum can broadly be understood as a three-stage exercise: first, establishing the foundational facts; second, applying them to the prescribed heads and formulae; and third, aggregating the amounts to arrive at the final award.

The first stage is to establish three facts: (1) the deceased's age at the time of the accident, (2) annual income and (3) number of dependants. "Age" can be established, among others, from the date of birth recorded in the school-leaving certificate and not from the Aadhaar card, as was ruled in *Saroj* (2024) by the Supreme Court. "Income" means actual income less income tax paid (as per *Pranay Sethi*). The Supreme Court in *Rashmirekha Tripathy* (2026) held that, for salaried persons, the ITR of the immediately preceding assessment year should ordinarily be considered, while for self-employed persons or business owners, the Tribunal should take the average income reflected in the preceding three years' ITRs, subject to the circumstances. Where income cannot be proved, the applicable State-notified minimum wage for the relevant time for unskilled, semi-skilled or skilled category is used. The LRs, including married and earning sons and daughters, are entitled to claim compensation, regardless of financial dependency on the deceased, as settled by the Supreme Court in *Jitender Kumar* (2025).

The second stage is to translate these three facts into the four heads under which compensation in a death case is computed: (A) loss of income/dependency, (B) loss of estate, (C) funeral expenses, and (D) loss of consortium. The major component is "loss of income", which represents the financial loss suffered by the dependants on account of the victim's death. For the first head, the calculation begins with the deceased's "annual income" to which the prescribed percentage towards "future prospects", having regard to the deceased's age and nature of employment, is added. From the resulting figure, the prescribed "deduction" towards the deceased's personal expenses

is made, and the balance is multiplied by the appropriate "multiplier" to arrive at the "loss of income". The aforesaid three components perform different functions: "future prospects" account for the career growth the deceased would reasonably have received had they survived. As delineated in para 61 of *Pranay Sethi* (2017), for a person in a permanent government or salaried job with assured career progression, 50% is added where the deceased was below 40 years, 30% where aged 40-50 years, and 15% where aged 50-60 years; no addition is made above 60 years. For a self-employed person or one on a fixed salary, the corresponding additions are 40%, 25% and 10% for these three age groups, respectively, with no addition above 60 years.

Further, the "deduction" recognises that a portion of the deceased's earnings would have been spent on their own personal living expenses. As per *Sarla Verma* (2009), for a married deceased with two to three dependent family members, the standard deduction is one-third (33%); where there are four to six, it is one-fourth (25%); and where there are seven or more, it is one-fifth (20%). In the case of a bachelor or unmarried deceased, the usual deduction is one-half (50%) where the parents or other dependants are the claimants, although courts may reduce the deduction where the number of dependants is particularly large. Lastly, the "multiplier" represents the deceased's remaining active working life and is determined solely with reference to age. According to *Sarla Verma*, the multiplier is 18 for ages 15-20 and 21-25; 17 for 26-30; 16 for 31-35; 15 for 36-40; 14 for 41-45; 13 for 46-50; 11 for 51-55; 9 for 56-60; 7 for 61-65; and 5 for 66-70 years.

The remaining three are conventional heads and, unlike "loss of income", do not depend on the deceased's profession or actual earnings. Under *Pranay Sethi* (2017), (i) "loss of estate" was fixed at ₹15,000, representing the loss of savings, investments and accumulated assets that the deceased could reasonably have built up and left for the heirs; (ii) "funeral expenses" at ₹15,000; and (iii) "loss of consortium" at ₹40,000 for each eligible family member, recognising the emotional trauma and loss of companionship, love, care and guidance. Consortium includes spousal consortium for the surviving spouse, parental consortium for surviving children, and filial consortium for parents who lose a child. Each eligible family member is independently entitled to the standard base amount, and therefore the applicable consortium amount is multiplied by the number of eligible dependants.

These three conventional amounts are to be enhanced by 10% every three years, as directed by the Supreme Court in *Pranay Sethi* (para 61).

The third stage is simply to aggregate the four heads to arrive at the compensation payable. Additionally, the court may also grant interest under Section 171, typically ranging between 6% and 9%, depending on the facts of the case.

In a significant judgment recently, in *Shishu Pal* (2026), a case involving the accidental death of a homemaker, recognising that household work, including cooking, cleaning and caregiving, supports the paid workforce, the Supreme Court fixed a minimum notional income of ₹30,000 per month under a new head of "loss of domestic care", with a 10% cumulative enhancement every three years. (Kartikee Singh and Barkha Dwivedi, lawyers based in New Delhi)

THE GIST

▼ The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 provides the legal framework for motor accident claims, with MACTs determining compensation and liability, while insurers generally satisfy awards subject to statutory defences

▼ For fatal accidents, compensation is calculated using the deceased's age, income and number of dependants, with future prospects, personal-expense deductions and an age-based multiplier applied to determine loss of income

▼ Courts also award compensation under conventional heads such as loss of estate, funeral expenses and consortium, with interest where applicable; a recent ruling has also recognised loss of domestic care for homemakers

BIBLIOGRAPHY



GETTY IMAGES

When midlife feels like a crisis, it may actually be a chance to begin again

Margie Lachman's new book, alongside two novels, looks at midlife through questions of ageing, identity, relationships and fulfilment; they also point to midlife as a time of possibility, when familiar roles shift and there is room to begin again

Pragya Mittal

Generally, by the time people reach their 40s, they may feel like things are falling apart. They experience what is often termed a 'midlife crisis'. It is not always easy to say what really is falling apart, and there may be no single reason. This period can be accompanied by a strange sense of unhappiness: a feeling of missed opportunities, of a life unlived, and of an uncertain future.

Several things may be true at once. There may be enmity with a familiar role or relationship. Often, a career that felt promising may suddenly begin to feel like a dead-end. Responsibilities tend to add up, as both older and younger people increasingly depend on middle-aged people. Then, there is also the shock of staring into the mirror and seeing more grey hairs, a visible paunch, wrinkles on the face - all reminders of a youth gone by.

But what feels like one big crisis may actually be an accumulation of smaller doubts that have been building over the years and have simply not been acknowledged.

An opportunity

In her recent book, *Primetime: A New Vision for Midlife* (Simon and Schuster), however, lifespan developmental psychologist Margie Lachman tries to change the way we look at midlife. First, she refutes the stigma attached to age. She says there are many types of age - biological, social, and psychological. Biological age refers to our physical



health and the ageing process of our bodies. Social age refers to the roles we take on, such as being a parent, caregiver, partner, or professional. Psychological age is arguably the most personal - it's about how old we perceive ourselves to be. As she writes, "Individual markers of midlife can fluctuate over time."

Second, far from a crisis, Lachman, who has said in interviews that she "loved midlife", believes that this time of life can in fact be a blessing in disguise. She writes that it is a period for us to learn from older people's mistakes and help the younger people avoid the same mistakes. She stresses the point that midlife is actually our "primetime" and regards the concept of age as subjective.

Middle age in literature
The phenomenon of the midlife crisis is

not just a modern shorthand for the stress of adulthood. Many works of fiction have captured the restlessness associated with this stage of life. Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973; Vintage) is one such book. A 40-year-old mother of four, Kate Brown finds herself strangely unmoored when her family goes away for the summer and the roles that had defined her begin to loosen. Her encounter with the much younger Maureen further places two stages of womanhood side by side. Kate's crisis, then, is not simply about how old she is, but about how old she feels and who she is when the familiar roles of wife, mother, and caregiver begin to shift. In many ways, Kate embodies what Lachman calls social and psychological age in *Primetime*: chronological age alone cannot explain the midlife experience. Perhaps midlife becomes a crisis not when life changes, but when the identities that once made sense of it no longer do.

The midlife crisis is often seen as a gendered idea and is mostly associated with women. But men, too, find themselves caught in the same uncertainties: about ageing, relationships, work, identity, and the lives they have built. Benjamin Markovitz's *The Rest of Our Lives* (2025; Faber and Faber), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2025, gives the male midlife crisis both a literal and metaphorical U-turn. At 55, Tom Layward experiences emotional turmoil: a strained marriage haunted by his wife's betrayal 12 years earlier, and a controversy over pronoun use at his university that unsettles his career. His

health, too, poses concerns, with unexplained symptoms such as palpitations, fatigue, and facial swelling. For Tom, the crisis involves several problems unfolding at once. And what does he do to deal with all these problems? He takes to the road.

Room for experimentation

Each of the three titles has a common running theme: the lack of fulfilment, but also rays of hope.

The Summer Before the Dark uses summer as a motif for the period before the darkness sets in - it is a space of transition and possibility. The title of Markovitz's book - *The Rest of Our Lives* - itself carries the feeling of possibility: there is still a 'rest' of our lives, and perhaps still time to decide what kind of life we want to live.

Primetime, of course, completes the circle. Lachman asks us to embrace midlife not as the beginning of a crisis, but as an opportunity to begin again. She emphasises that there are nonnormative influences - experiences that affect an individual but are not common to everyone - and contextual influences, such as one's environment and culture. Midlife, she says, can be a stage when we are relieved of certain responsibilities and find room for experimentation - in a relationship, a career, a new hobby, and new friendships. It could be the period when our lives take a turn for the better - and hence, midlife can simply be our primetime.

(Pragya Mittal is a Delhi-based editor and writer)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of "feel good factor"? (K. Jitendra, Ranchi)

This is an expression that has been around since the 1970s. At first it was generally used to refer to something that creates a sense of well-being in people - their emotional state, physical state, financial state, etc. Since the 1990s, however, the "feel good factor" has become somewhat restricted in its meaning; it's become an expression, which is mostly employed by economists and financial pundits.

These days it is extensively used to refer to a sense of financial and material well-being - not necessarily physical or emotional.

A well known economist believes that the feel good factor will not return to the country before the end of the decade.

No matter what changes the government makes, the feel good factor will be slow to return.

The opposite of "feel good factor" is "feel bad factor".

Do you congratulate someone "on" getting a job, or do you congratulate him "for" getting a job? (K. Balasubramanian, Chennai)

One usually congratulates someone "on" getting something, and not "for".

Neha and Raju congratulated Atul on his brilliant performance.

Vishnu congratulated Laya on winning the lottery.

What is the word for a child who is born after his father's death? (A. Vijayaraghavan, Bangalore)

I don't know of any specific word that would refer to such a child. Generally we talk about a child being born posthumously. The word "posthumous" means something that happens after an individual's death. The "o" in the first syllable is like the "o" in "pot", "hot", and "cot" and the "h" is like the "y" in "yes", "yet", and "yeast". The following "u" can be pronounced either like the "u" in "put", "pull", and "full", or like the "a" in "China". The final "ous" sounds like the "ous" in "famous", "dangerous", and "generous". The main stress is on the first syllable. This is just one of the ways of pronouncing the word. Here are a few examples of how to use the word.

The soldier was awarded the medal posthumously.

Nandita wanted her memoirs to be published posthumously.

What is the difference between "ornamental" and "ornate"? (M. Damodhar, Vellore)

When you say that something is "ornate," what you are implying is that the object has been decorated excessively or elaborately. There is too much decoration and as a result it is showy or gaudy; the word generally has a negative connotation. The main stress, by the way, is on the second syllable "nate", which rhymes with "eight", "bait", and "hate".

The word "ornamental" also means decorative, but unlike "ornate" it isn't associated with anything negative. When you say that something is "ornamental," what you are implying is that the object has been designed to be decorative without being too vulgar or ostentatious. The stress in this word is on the third syllable, "men".
Published in *The Hindu* on January 29, 2002

Word of the day

Churlish:
rude and boorish

Synonyms: clownish, classless, discourteous

Usage: The shopkeeper became churlish when I asked for a refund.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/churlish

International Phonetic Alphabet: /tʃɜːlɪʃ/

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THE DAILY QUIZ

Test your knowledge of historic Mars Orbiter Mission, which made India the first Asian nation to reach Mars orbit and the first nation globally to succeed on its maiden attempt

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1

On what exact date did the Mars Orbiter Mission (Mangalyaan) successfully enter Mars orbit?

QUESTION 2

What was the name of the launch vehicle used to carry the spacecraft into Earth orbit?

QUESTION 3

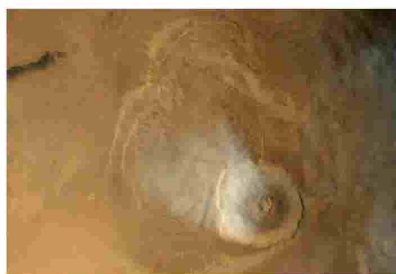
Which instrument captured the iconic full-disk images of Mars and its moons, Phobos and Deimos?

QUESTION 4

Who served as the Project Director for the Mars Orbiter Mission?

QUESTION 5

India became the fourth space agency to reach Mars. Which three agencies had achieved this before ISRO?



Visual Question:
Identify this large shield volcano on Mars, as captured by the Mars Orbiter Mission. ISRO

Questions and Answers to the previous day's

daily quiz: 1. Which planet's irregular orbital motion led astronomers to hypothesise the existence of another, more distant planet? **Ans: Uranus**

2. On which dates in September 1846 was Neptune first successfully observed? **Ans: September 23-24, 1846**

3. Which astronomer had observed Neptune in 1612-13 without recognising it as a planet? **Ans: Galileo Galilei**

4. What was the name of the star chart that helped Johann Gottfried Galle and Heinrich d'Arrest identify Neptune? **Ans: Hora XXI**

5. Approximately how close was Neptune to Uranus at the Verrier's predicted position when Galle found it?

Ans: Less than one degree

Visual: This image of Neptune was taken by which NASA space probe, and when? **Ans: NASA's Voyager 2 on August 25, 1989**

Early Birds: Samrat Halder | Gursharan Lal Vadhwa | Sitaram Saharaj | Sonali Das | Varghese Joseph

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

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

POLICY

Tulu's 'official' tag in Karnataka: What this means

Akram M
Bengaluru, September 23

THE D K Shivakumar-led Congress government in Karnataka last week decided to accord Tulu the status of second additional administrative language in two districts of coastal Karnataka: Dakshina Kannada and Udupi. The announcement came during a special state Cabinet meeting in Mangaluru.

A Dravidian language

Tulu is classified among the five Dravidian languages, the others being Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. It is spoken mainly in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in Karnataka, and parts of northern Kerala. The language has a strong oral tradition, rich folklore, and cultural practices like Yakshagana, Bhoota Kola, and others. Although it had its own script, today it is largely written using the Kannada script.

Although there has been migration of the Tulu-speaking population to metros such as Mumbai and Bengaluru, around 1.8 to 2 million people are native speakers.

Behind the demand

The special status for Tulu means government offices in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts can now use the language for official communication alongside Kannada. The state Cabinet also decided to grant Rs 82 lakh every year for translation, training, and activities related to language use to facilitate implementation.

WHO SPEAKS TULU?

- Tulu is spoken mainly in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in Karnataka, and parts of north Kerala.
- Although a large number of the Tulu-speaking population has migrated to metro cities, around 1.8 to 2 million people are native speakers.

Over the years, several legislators from coastal Karnataka have raised the demand in the legislature. Among the key arguments is that Tulu speakers were not granted a separate linguistic state during the reorganisation of states in 1956, as it was done for other Dravidian languages. There has also been a sustained social media campaign by Tulu speakers for recognition.

Challenges in implementation

Official status also allows for including Tulu in education, signage, and cultural promotion. As of now, only a few signs in the region are in Tulu. The primary challenge in implementation is that not many know the Tulu script. Although it has been revived in recent years, the language is not taught in schools and colleges, making it harder for the general populace to read it.

Political significance

For years, coastal Karnataka has been the BJP's bastion and is known for its communally charged politics. Efforts by the Congress to make inroads into the region by consolidating castes have been futile. The decision to hold a Cabinet meeting in Mangaluru to accord Tulu the special status is seen as an attempt to reach out to voters by appealing to their cultural heritage and practices.

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Jaipur	23 सितंबर 9:00-12:00	21 सितंबर 11:00-2:00

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POLITICS

4 states out of Uttar Pradesh? Politics behind demand to split most populous state

Vikas Pathak
New Delhi, September 23

UTTAR PRADESH minister and Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party leader Om Prakash Rajbhar has claimed the state will be divided into four, and that the Purvanchal region will get a "Rajbhar Chief Minister". At a public meeting Sunday, Rajbhar claimed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi told him that the division could happen after the ongoing caste census.

Uttar Pradesh BJP sources brushed it off as pre-political posturing. "He perhaps wants to energise his cadre by making them believe that he can be Chief Minister and he can also get some posts," said a state BJP insider who did not wish to be named.

But such a demand is not new. During his tenure as chief minister from 2007 to 2012, Mayawati created ripples by backing a division of the state.

How is a state divided?

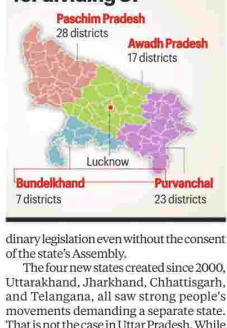
This is what Article 3 of the Constitution states: "Parliament may by law... form a new State by separation of territory from

any State or by uniting two or more States or parts of States or by uniting any territory to a part of any State... provided that no Bill for the purpose shall be introduced in either House of Parliament except on the recommendation of the President and unless, where the proposal contained in the Bill affects the area, boundaries or name of any of the States, the Bill has been referred by the President to the Legislature of that State for expressing its views thereon within such period as may be specified in the reference or within such further period as the President may allow and the period so specified or allowed has expired."

In simple terms, this means that the President must recommend such a Bill — thus showing the intent of the Centre — and the state Assembly must be consulted and give a finite period to express its views. What is crucial here is that the latter's views are not binding on Parliament. And what is required to alter the boundaries of a state is just a simple majority in both its Houses.

This makes it relatively easy for Parliament to alter boundaries of the state by or-

• The 2011 proposal for dividing UP



the demand for Bundelkhand has been raised from time to time, even that has cooled down in the past few years.

Why was there a demand for division of Uttar Pradesh?

In November 2011, the Mayawati government moved and passed a resolution in the Assembly proposing to divide the state into Purvanchal, Bundelkhand, Awadh Pradesh and Paschim Pradesh (see map). The state government argued that Uttar Pradesh's vast size made administration and development difficult and that smaller states could lead to better governance.

The resolution was sent to the Centre but was not pursued further by the Samajwadi Party (SP) government that came to power in 2012.

Mayawati's peak, such a split would have favoured her. All four regions of the state have a sizable Dalit population, between 16% and 28%. The Scheduled Caste population in all of Uttar Pradesh is around 21%. Her Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) could, therefore, have emerged as a force in four states, establishing itself as a national party

in the eyes of voters.

What further worked for Mayawati in 2011 was that the Yadav population in Uttar Pradesh — the core of then arch-rival SP — was not evenly distributed in terms of its political heft. The SP had two major belts — the Etah-Mainpuri-Etawah-Firozabad belt in the west, and the Yadav belt in eastern Uttar Pradesh around Jaunpur, Azamgarh, Ghazipur and Mau. The move could have split the SP's Yadav belts and pushed Muslims into voting for the BSP. However, the BSP declined over time and the proposal died before any of this could happen.

Ajit Singh of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) had also demanded a "Harit Pradesh" in western Uttar Pradesh. The reason: his party's Jat support base dominates the region; their numbers aren't high outside western Uttar Pradesh.

What about Rajbhar's claim?

While for the reasons mentioned above, the SP would not want UP to be divided, any such idea would not work for Yogi Adityanath as well. Right now, apart from his Hindutva image, what raises Adityanath's

national stature is that he has been Chief Minister of India's most populous state. For that advantage to continue to accrue to him, UP must remain a single state.

For the BJP, too, the fact that it has won Uttar Pradesh consistently — with a dip in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls — has added to its political heft over the years. Because of its size, its centrality to many Hindu cultural symbols and holy sites, and its being the core of the "Hindi heartland", UP has had tremendous political heft in India, even if it has been economically a largely underdeveloped state.

It is often said that the road to Delhi passes through Lucknow. Indeed, absolute majorities of any party — be it the BJP or the Congress before it — at the Centre have always come on the back of strong performance in Uttar Pradesh. No party has ever won a Lok Sabha majority in India on its own after a poor showing in UP, though there have been instances of coalition governments coming to power after a modest showing in the state. Rajbhar's claim, therefore, is not one that the BJP, or even the SP, would want to back.

LEGAL

EC appointment: Why SC placed matter before CJI



AMAL SHEKH

A TWO-JUDGE bench of the Supreme Court on Wednesday referred petitions challenging the 2023 law on the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other Election Commissioners (ECs) — which excludes the Chief Justice of India (CJI) from the process — to the CJI to consider forming a Constitution Bench (which has a minimum of five judges).

What the joint order said

While Justices Dipankar Datta and Satish Chandra Sharma were split on referring the matter to a larger bench, they agreed that it should be placed before the CJI. They said sending the issue first to a three-judge bench would be of "little worth" and would only delay a final decision on the important Constitutional questions raised by the case.

The judges flagged the long delays in deciding Constitutional references. They noted that the Anoop Baranwal case (2023) took eight years to reach a final judgment and cited other references that remained pending for years. Calling such delays "a source of institutional embarrassment", they urged the CJI to consider setting up a permanent five-judge bench for Constitutional cases.

The 'Anoop Baranwal' case

The challenge to the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 traces its origins to the Supreme Court's judgment in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India* in March 2023. In that ruling, a Constitution Bench had noted that Parliament had not enacted a law governing appointments to the Election Commission despite Article 324 of the Constitution contemplating one. It laid down an interim mechanism under which appointments would be made by a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India — until Parliament enacts a law.

The bench had underlined the importance of a independent Election Commission and observed that those entrusted with conducting elections must be insulated from executive influence.

CLIMATE

In parched Maharashtra, why drought can't be declared yet

Shubhangi Khapre
Mumbai, September 23

CALLISTO declare a drought are rising in Maharashtra, with the El Niño-driven rain deficit hitting the state's agriculture-dependent economy hard. Water scarcity has compounded the crisis, setting back the kharif season and clouding prospects for rabi. While Opposition leaders, including Sharad Pawar, have asked that a drought be declared, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis has said the government is taking "all steps necessary" to deal with the "alarming" situation.

The state government has begun surveys and panchanamas to assess crop loss, so that the administration can quantify losses in terms of both food production and finances. Once this report is submitted, before releasing relief funds, a central team will visit the affected regions to make its own assessment.

Why has drought not been declared officially?

Under the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) rules, drought declaration for kharif (the monsoon cropping season, which runs from June to October) requires an assessment that can begin from October 5, once the monsoon starts to withdraw. For rabi, the winter cropping season from October to April, assessment can be held in March 2027.

• THE 2023 LAW AND THE CHALLENGE IN TOP COURT: A TIMELINE



lated from executive influence.

Parliament subsequently enacted the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023. But the law replaced the CJI on the selection committee with a Union Cabinet minister nominated by the Prime Minister. The government, therefore, got two representatives on the three-member panel, alongside the Leader of Opposition.

Constitution Bench issue: What Justice Datta said

Justice Datta took the view that the petitions could be decided by the present bench itself. According to him, the top court had already settled the governing Constitutional principle in *Anoop Baranwal*, which held that appointments to the EC cannot remain under "exclusive executive control". The question now, he said, was whether the 2023 law complies with that principle. That exercise was "no more than the application of the settled principles of law to the facts of the case" and did not require a Constitution Bench, he said. Justice Datta, therefore, held that "neither any Constitutional bar nor a precedent precludes hearing of these petitions by the present Bench".

At the same time, Justice Datta expressed concerns about the structure of the selection committee under the 2023 law. Referring to the panel comprising the PM, a Cabinet minister

Split verdict

Justice Datta said the petitions could be decided by the present bench. He said the top court had already settled the governing Constitutional principle in *Anoop Baranwal*.

Justice Sharma said a Constitution Bench should hear the case as the SC is examining the Constitutional validity of the 2023 Act for the first time.

ister nominated by the PM and the Leader of Opposition, he observed that a minister bound by collective responsibility "cannot be expected to defy his own nomination".

Thus, the presence of the Leader of Opposition in the Selection Committee becomes "largely ornamental", he said. He also emphasised the perception test — "it is not enough for the ECJ to be independent, it must also appear to be independent". On the petitioners' argument that the law gives the executive overwhelming influence over appointments, he said it "does appear to have substance", while stating that these were only *prima facie* observations.

Justice Datta also rejected the government's comparison between the EC selection process and the collegium system for judicial appointments. He said judicial appointments involve the executive at multiple stages and described the popular notion that "judges appoint judges" as a "myth". He raised concerns about the selective implementation of Collegium recommendations and said the absence of a neutral member in the Collegium could not justify the absence of a neutral member in the EC appointment process. He described the comparison drawn by the government as "disingenuous, evasive and disquieting".

Constitution Bench issue: What Justice Sharma said

Justice Sharma disagreed with Justice

Datta and held that the challenge must be referred to a Constitution Bench. He said that the Supreme Court is examining the Constitutional validity of the 2023 Act for the first time. "There is no authoritative decision of this court till date pronouncing on the constitutional validity of the said Act," he said adding, "The decision on these writ petitions would be the first of its kind and it is all the more necessary that a reference be made."

The petitioners, however, had argued that the central legal question that the selection must be an independent process has already been decided by the 2023 Constitution Bench ruling.

For Justice Sharma, the key question was whether Parliament was justified in replacing the CJI with a Cabinet minister nominated by the PM. He said: "Whether or not Parliament was justified in not including a neutral selector in the selection committee" is "an important question arising for the first time before this court." Since this question "has not been dealt with in any precedent", he said, Article 145(3) left "no room for a decision on such question finally by the present combination" of two judges.

He viewed the government's arguments on separation of powers and the comparison with the collegium system as issues that required examination by a larger bench.

What is a Constitution Bench

As per Article 145(3), a Constitution Bench of five or more judges decides a "substantial question of law" involving the interpretation of the Constitution. A case does not go to a larger bench merely because it involves the Constitution. The question must be "unsettled" — that is, one the court has never authoritatively answered before. Constitution Bench rulings also carry greater weight than ordinary judgments.

Split verdicts often trigger referrals. When two judges cannot agree, the matter goes to the Chief Justice, who decides whether to send it to a larger bench. But the split itself does not automatically warrant a Constitution Bench — the court must still be convinced the dispute raises a substantial Constitutional question requiring authoritative determination.

In October 2022, the top court delivered a split verdict in the Karnataka hijab case. The matter was referred to a larger bench and remains pending more than four years later. Even this year, another split verdict arose on Section 174A of the Prevention of Corruption Act. That matter, too, went to a larger bench.

Regionwise, Marathwada, with the most number of dams at 929, has 46% water as compared with 81% last year. It is followed by Amravati division at 64%, Nagpur division at 72%, Pune at 88%, Nashik at 83% and Konkan at 76%.

What is the status of rainfall in Maharashtra?

According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), 31 of 36 districts in Maharashtra are rain-deficient, with 20 of these facing a deficit of 25% to 58%. Beyond the deficit, shifting rain patterns have added to the damage: In more than 100 of the state's 355 drought-hit talukas, gaps between rain spells have stretched to 40-60 days. As a result, the main kharif crop, sown across 147 lakh hectares, has withered.

In a departure from past patterns, where rain did fall, it was short and intense — damaging soil health and causing erosion in some areas. Maharashtra's agriculture is largely rain-fed; its irrigation potential, at under 20%, is much lower than in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES ALL

Two ECs stand up to ask; CEC must answer, SC must not turn away

IN A sprawling democracy with millions of moving parts, electoral rolls must be cleaned up and updated periodically and as the constitutional authority tasked with ensuring free and fair polls, conducting the Special Intensive Revision is the Election Commission's responsibility. Linking the deletion of voters across states — 13 crore names struck off the draft voter rolls — to electoral outcomes is an argument more political than empirical. This newspaper's investigation into the ECI's functioning, however, points to a betrayal of trust — of the people, by one of the country's most storied institutions. It shines the light into an institution's black box and reveals a disturbing story. What makes it so concerning is that it cannot be dismissed as the all-too-familiar political thrust and parry that has narrowed the inner lives of several other institutions. All three members of the Commission were handpicked by the NDA government. Yet, two Election Commissioners objected on record — 14 times in 10 months — to steps taken by the Commission as the SIR unfolded. Their concerns were not addressed. By all accounts, they went unheard and unheeded.

Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi raised a string of red flags. They said they were being kept in the dark in a body that should forge a consensus or, failing that, abide by the majority. They said changes to Form 6 for new voters flew in the face of rules and made the exercise more punishing. They said the centralisation of the voter database under the ECI's claims to accountability and decentralised functioning. When their pushback within the four walls of their institution made no dent, they appealed to the Cabinet Secretary, the country's top bureaucrat. That heartening — two Commissioners pointing, repeatedly, to the erosion of safeguards and guardrails, checks and balances. But Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar made no attempt to address his colleagues' concerns. That silence frames the crisis and the institution's challenge.

THESE REVELATIONS connect the dots, outside to inside. Much of what Sandhu and Joshi flagged has echoed, in letter and spirit, concerns already being raised outside the ECI on the SIR. This newspaper, for one, consistently tracked the flaws in the process on the ground. The helpless scramble among the poor and undocumented when it was first rolled out in Bihar. The tortuous layers it added on in West Bengal, where it also invited fears of targeting of minorities and led to the disenfranchisement of nearly 27 lakh voters. The face-offs between election officials and BJP party workers in four booths in Godda, Jharkhand, more recently. It had become clear that the process that was meant to strike a delicate and compassionate balance — between the need to maintain the integrity of the electoral rolls and the imperative to count every legitimate voter in — was tilting against vulnerable voters. It was doing so by shifting the burden of proof onto the voter, by demanding difficult paperwork within unrealistic time-frames, by setting up an appellate process that was unconstrained by any deadlines, going all the way to the edge of the election and even stretching beyond it.

In thus showing itself to be distrustful of the Indian voter, the SIR broke with the ECI's own record and traditions of inclusion. Instead of reaching out to the last voter, it put her on trial, set up a hurdle race for her at every step. She had to stand in long lines, and run around to gather proof that she belonged. Or rather, to disprove the implicit assumption that she didn't. The SIR was morphing into an opaque and heartless citizenship test. It would not only determine whether or not she could cast her vote, but also whether she could avail of her rightful share of government benefits and schemes.

EVEN AS EVIDENCE mounted of the SIR losing its way, the Supreme Court did not ask the ECI the questions it should have. In the past, as the custodian of the constitutional balance, that it had to uphold the poll monitor's autonomy and independence vis-à-vis the executive. But over the last few months, its reluctance to intervene on behalf of the citizen facing a daunting and oppressive process has seemed, with due respect, troubling.

The SC did intervene in Bihar, and to good effect. It directed the ECI to accept Aadhaar as one of the documents, nudged it to give reasons for deletions. But it gave the ECI the benefit of every doubt ever since. In May, ruling on petitions challenging the SIR, it unequivocally underlined the ECI's constitutional mandate to ensure accurate and reliable electoral rolls, and also gave it unfettered procedural latitude "in such manner as it may think fit". It held that the ECI can make only a "limited inquiry into citizenship" but at the same time empowered it to set the stage for a citizenship test by the government's "Competent Authority".

This latitude cannot continue after what is now known. The Court must no longer turn away from the serious questions about the ECI, they are also on record within. To begin with, Form 6 must be restored to its original version, the one that did not allow the shadow of their parents' deletion in a deeply contested SIR to hang over their child. It must restore access to the voter database for officials in the states' electoral machinery. Free and fair elections are not one institutional compact among many, they are the cornerstone of how this nation, through its citizens, shapes its present, and future; they are the reason players respect the rules and losers accept the verdict. The black box has been opened and it will not be shut again. Commissioners Sandhu and Joshi have listened to their conscience, raised key questions. The ECI must answer them, point by point — if it needs a nudge from the highest court, so be it.

New cat in habitat, and some glimmer of hope

PENGUINS and tiger cats and octopi, oh my! A myriad of new species being discovered just as doomsdayism starts to colonise the imagination seems, almost, like a message to abandon anthropocentrism. The cheer that greeted the discovery of a new species of wild cat, the *Leopardus tiliacoy*, in Bolivia may have been the loudest — it's the first discovery of a feline species in a 100 years — but celebrate, too, the new penguin species (also the first in a century) on a group of subantarctic islands. And the snake species, named after Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash, in New Guinea.

As a 2025 University of Arizona study shows, the quest to identify every species has picked up pace in recent years. Fifteen per cent of all known species were discovered in the last 20 years. The human predilection for the photogenic has meant that a majority of these discoveries receive little attention beyond the scientific and conservation communities. But the wonder that is the biosphere deserves more.

The Editorial Page

I voted for three decades. Why is my SIR incomplete? Commission has no answer

YESTERDAY, *The Indian Express* laid out, in gory detail, the lapses in the administration of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls. Two of the three Election Commissioners objected on record 14 times in 10 months. The Supreme Court called the notices going out to Delhi's voters "mechanical" and "machine-generated". My story is unlikely to make even a footnote to that account. But before the advent of AI, every serious student knew that you read the footnotes, because that is where you learn how the author actually thinks.

I live in one of the elite colonies of New Delhi. I have voted for three decades in both national and state elections. My record sits in the Election Commission's database, and the Commission has reproduced it for me, correctly and electronically. Yet the Commission has not been able to approve my SIR application. This is my sad story, and it does not have a happy ending.

Let me say first that I believe in the purpose of the exercise. The vote is a citizen's most important right, and a roll crowded with the dead and the departed diminishes it. Working from first principles, I read the three letters as three questions. S: Has the voter shifted from his last electoral address? E: Is the record identifying him incomplete or inconsistent, a name misspelled, an age that does not add up? R: Does he still reside where the roll says he does? Take the existing record, check it, correct what is wrong. A new voter supplies proof of age and address. As simple as a, b, c.

So why has a simple, routine process become so complicated that, after persistent effort, I have not been able to "clean" my application? But wait. My application is clean. My name has not changed. My address has not changed. I am, as far as I can tell, still alive. And I have followed every step required of me.

My application is clean. My name has not changed. My address has not changed. I am, as far as I can tell, still alive. And I have followed every step required of me.

I was told to take my documents to the Booth Level Officer. After a long wait in a long line, the officer went through my papers, found nothing wrong, and told me to come back in about two weeks and stand in another line.

On the appointed day, the meeting was at noon, outside a school, just as six-year-olds were being picked up. About 30 of us stood, standing room only, to present applications in which no error had been found to any officer. He worked patiently through each file and then photographed it with his mobile phone. Each applicant took at least 20 minutes. The purpose was never explained since there was nothing to correct.

After 90 minutes I went up to him. Sir, I said, you have no help. Why have you asked us for a second review when the first found no errors? My application was incomplete. Incomplete in what respect? The ECI and he could not tell. A simple misstatement of fact, by the state, about my own record.

He shrugged, and I sympathised with him: he is a cog, not the machine. I told him he could keep my SIR documents, since I did not care whether I voted. Walking out, I said loudly to the line: We are all sheep for accepting this, and the sheepdog is the administration. Why do we take it? I am mad as hell, and I am not going to take this anymore. Just as well, perhaps. I would not know whom to



SURJIT S BHALLA

vote for anyway.

Anger is not an argument, so here is the argument.

Any process that cleans a voter list can make two kinds of mistakes. It can strike off a genuine voter or it can leave a ghost on the roll: Someone dead, departed or counted twice. No process avoids both. The design question is which mistake you fear more, and therefore where you place the burden of proof. Our criminal law answered that question long ago: Better that 10 guilty men go free than that one innocent suffer. The accused does not have to prove his innocence; the state has to prove his guilt.

For the voter, the answer should be the same, and for a simple reason. Striking off a genuine citizen takes away his vote with certainty. A ghost on the roll does harm only if someone turns up at the booth and votes in the dead man's name, and against that there are polling agencies, indelible ink and the tendered ballot. The costlier error is disenfranchisement. So the burden should sit with the state: The voter stays on the roll unless the state shows that he has shifted, died or been counted twice.

The SIR turned this on its head. Every voter had to fill in an enumeration form from scratch, as though the rolls of the past two decades did not exist, and any one whose form did not come back was dropped from the draft roll. The last intensive revision, in 2002, did not work this way. As Nikhil Dey and Konika Ray point out in *The Indian Express* (From a jan sunwai in Delhi, lessons for poll body', September 23), BLOs then started from the existing, frozen

roll and went house to house to verify who had moved, who had died and who had newly turned 18. The record was presumed correct until shown to be wrong. Today, the voter is presumed absent until he proves himself present.

And when the burden is on the voter, the state need not measure its own errors. Nobody has published how many genuine voters were wrongly struck off, because no body was asked to find out. The Chief Election Commissioner has cited "zero appeals" in 12 states as proof that the process worked. That tells us how hard it is to appeal, not how many were wrongly deleted.

More than 13 crore names have been struck off draft rolls across the country. Some of those deletions were needed. How many were not, we do not know, and under this design, we are not meant to know. I am one of the lucky ones: I can afford to stand in line for 90 minutes, and I can write about it. Most of the people in that line outside the school cannot.

Standing in that line, I was reminded of a ninth-grade classmate who, in 1962, was made to stand outside in the blistering sun as punishment. He announced, loudly: "Ask no questions, and you will be told no lies." That was Gen Z then. Sixty-four years on, the Election Commission has made its democratic display. It did not answer. The ECI could not tell me what was incomplete in my application. The difference is that my classmate was being punished for something he had done.

The writer is chairperson of the Technical Expert Group for the first official Household Income Survey for India. Views are personal

This isn't about who wins, but about the citizen's right to her vote



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

I REMEMBER November 10, 2020, vividly. Counting had begun for the Bihar Assembly election. We had genuine complaints and grievances on several matters, including postal ballots. The margin between our alliance and the alliance eventually declared victorious was only a few hundred votes in several constituencies. We approached the Election Commission of India (ECI's) office in Bihar at least four times during the day. We held a press conference and presented the evidence and our concerns to the public. We eventually accepted the mandate. This did not mean that every objection had disappeared. But we felt the credibility of the institution conducting the election had to be protected.

A political party can lose an election and return to the people. But if the institution that conducts elections loses public credibility, there is no easy way to repair the damage.

The ECI itself records that the institution was created to safeguard India's new democracy through free and fair elections and that the Constituent Assembly deliberately kept the election machinery outside the control of the executive government. The legacy of India's first CEC, Sukumar Sen, was that he both successfully organised India's first general election and helped establish a culture in which the electoral machinery was trusted by winners and losers alike.

That trust is now the real subject before us. *The Indian Express* investigation published on September 23 is disturbing for a variety of reasons. What happens when two of the three members of the constitutional body say, repeatedly and on record, that important decisions affecting electoral rolls were taken without their knowledge or contrary to their objections? The investigation reports that the objections touched matters at the very heart of the electoral process: Who can become a voter, whose name can be deleted, who can restore a name, who can access the electoral database and who can alter it. This should worry us irrespective of which political party is in power. The right to vote is not the property of the opposition. It is not the gift of the government. It does not belong to the ECI. It is a right to have and exercise other

rights for each and every citizen.

We have become accustomed to speaking about elections primarily in terms of polling day. But the most consequential electoral decision may take place much earlier. A citizen whose name has disappeared from the roll does not experience disenfranchisement as an abstract constitutional debate. We do understand that technology can improve elections enormously as it can reduce duplication, speed up verification, and strengthen administrative capacity. But a constitutional right cannot become subordinate to software architecture.

If an Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is legally empowered to make a determination but a centralised digital system prevents that determination from being recorded, the question is no longer merely technological but becomes constitutional. The experience of 97 voters in Goa is instructive. *The Indian Express* reported that the ERO found them eligible, but the software did not permit the decision to be properly recorded, leaving them out of the final roll. The greater danger is what I would call the bureaucratisation of the citizen's right to vote.

The reported change to Form 6 is especially significant because it introduced questions linking new voters to their own or their parents' or grandparents' presence in an earlier electoral roll. Two ECs had reportedly objected that such statutory forms could not be altered without changes to the relevant rules. When did voting become an inheritance to be established through the electoral history of one's parents or grandparents? The Constitution does not imagine citizenship as a family certificate.

In 2020, we accepted a mandate because we believed that the institution mattered more than the immediate result. Six years later, that belief makes the present questions even more important. Ultimately, the issue is not who won an election. The issue is whether the citizen can still believe that her vote was hers to cast — and the constitutional machinery was there to protect it.

The writer is MP (Rajya Sabha), Rashtriya Janata Dal

When we become too busy to think



GEORGE JOHN

W E HAVE never had so much information at our fingertips. We know what is happening in distant wars almost as it happens. We can summon facts in seconds, communicate across continents, and organise our lives with extraordinary efficiency. Yet there is a curious paradox at the heart of all this abundance: The more information we consume, the less time we seem to have to think. Newly discovered, Martin Heidegger warned about the difference between merely calculating and genuinely thinking. Modern societies, he feared, were becoming extraordinarily good at planning, organising and controlling, while losing something quieter and more difficult: The capacity to reflect. His warning now feels uncannily familiar.

Much of contemporary life encourages reaction rather than reflection. A headline appears; we approve or condemn. A video goes viral; within minutes, thousands have passed judgement. Someone expresses an unfathomable opinion and is rapidly classified as enlightened or ignorant, friend or enemy. Before one question has been properly considered, another arrives. The danger is not simply that we may sometimes be wrong. It is that constant reaction that can gradually alter the way we see other human beings. When suffering reaches us continuously through our screens, compassion can become exhausted. War, poverty, cruelty, and disaster appear between advertisements and jokes. Inevitably, the mind protects itself. What initially horrified us becomes familiar. The stranger's misfortune becomes another item to scroll past. Indifference grows quietly. And once we cease to attend carefully to people, it becomes easier to reduce them to categories: Religion, caste, nationality, ideology, political affiliation. The complicated human being disappears behind the label.

This is why thinking is not merely an intellectual accomplishment. It is also a moral act. To think seriously about another person requires us to resist instant judgement. It asks us to entertain the possibility that we may be mistaken; that someone with whom we disagree may nevertheless possess part of the truth; that another person's suffering makes a claim upon us even when it is inconvenient. Religious traditions have different names for this discipline. Christianity speaks of attending to one's neighbour. Buddhism cultivates mindful awareness and compassion. Hindu traditions have long valued contemplation and self-knowledge. Islam repeatedly calls the believer to reflection. Beneath their differences lies a surprisingly similar intuition: A life worth living requires more than activity. It requires attention. Perhaps that is what our hurried age most urgently needs.

We do not need to stop calculating or using the technologies that have transformed our lives. We need only remember that efficiency is not wisdom, information is not understanding, and connectivity is not the same as human closeness. Sometimes the most important thing we can do is also among the simplest: Resist the immediate response, remain with a difficult question a little longer, and look again at the person we were tempted to dismiss. For when we lose the habit of thinking deeply, we do not merely become less thoughtful. We risk becoming less human.

The writer is a retired psychiatrist

40 YEARS AGO

September 24, 1986



Brig Puri's 'killer' nabbed

NINE TERRORISTS, including an Army deserter, Rachpal Singh, allegedly responsible for the killing of Brigadier Puri and two other army officials at Ramgarh in Bihar after Operation Bluestar in June 1984 were arrested by the security forces from different places in Punjab, reports received in Chandigarh said. Rachpal Singh (35) had also allegedly attempted to sow disaffection among a section of the army at Ramgarh and then Karan in Punjab immediately after Operation Bluestar.

Soviet Union for N-ban

THE SOVIET UNION offered to sign at "any

time and in any place" a treaty on the total prohibition of nuclear weapons to be verified under the proposals made by India and five other countries. The Soviet Foreign Minister, Edward Shevardnadze, told the UN General Assembly that there was no problem about the verification of nuclear tests and his country was open to any form or method of verification.

Death in police custody

DAYAL SINGH, 40, who died in police custody, was badly beaten up and tortured to death, the post-mortem report has revealed. There were injury marks all over his body, according to the postmortem report. The South Delhi DC, Maxwell Per-

eira, had said after the death that there were no external marks of injury on the body. Doctors at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences described the police statement as a "blatant lie". The report has led to a near-confrontation between some doctors and the police.

Curbs on visits to Singapore

INDIAN NATIONALS visiting Singapore will have to obtain visas as the government in Singapore has decided to impose restrictions on their visit to the republic. A senior Home Ministry official said that the implementation will take place before the end of the year but the actual date will be announced later.



Chief Election Commissioner is not the Election Commissioner of India



SY QURAISHI

FOR MORE than a year, I have written critically about the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls: its *de novo* character, its documentary burdens, its treatment of EPIC, its emphasis on deletion, and the shocking numbers left out of draft rolls. I did so with some diffidence. The Election Commission (ECI) is an institution I served for many years. I know its strengths, and I have often called it one of the great gifts of our Constitution.

After yesterday's disclosures in *The Indian Express*, I wonder whether I was critical enough. The investigation reports that Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi recorded objections at least 14 times in 10 months to decisions and orders which, they said, were taken without their knowledge. Their concerns went to the core of the ECI's work, including the registration and deletion of voters, the restoration of names, Form 6, appeals in electoral-roll cases, and control over the digital architecture of the rolls. If the record is as reported, the controversy changes fundamentally. The question is no longer only whether the SIR was wise, fair or administratively sound. A real question arises: Were decisions being taken by the ECI at all? If not, can these be held to be legal?

The law is clear. Section 18(2) of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 provides that all business of the Commission shall, as far as possible, be transacted unanimously. If the CEC and Election Commissioners differ, the matter "shall be decided according to the opinion of the majority". Section 18(1) goes further: Even the procedure for transaction and allocation of business may be regulated only by unanimous decision. Unanimity is the statutory norm. Where it fails, the majority decides. Unilateralism has no place. The principle is older than this statute. In *T N Seshan vs Union of*

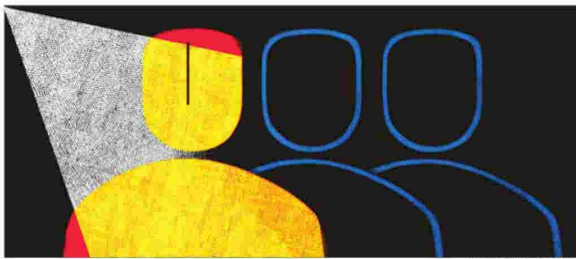


ILLUSTRATION: CR SASKUMAR

India (1995), the Supreme Court stressed that Article 324 entrusts elections to the ECI, not to an individual. Its warning seems written for the present moment: "It would be wrong to project the individual and eclipse the Election Commission." That sentence deserves to be framed in Nirvachan Sadan.

This is not the familiar case of one Commissioner dissenting from two colleagues. Here, two of the three members, a majority of the Commission, say decisions were taken without their knowledge. They were not outvoted. They were apparently bypassed. A majority cannot be a dissenting minority. If two Commissioners differ from the CEC, Section 18 tells us whose view prevails. The legal consequences are serious. Consider any substantive decision which the law vests in "the Election Commission" but was taken in its name without being placed before the Commission, or without cover from a lawfully adopted allocation of business. Such a decision, *prima facie*, is *ultra vires*. A letterhead cannot supply authority that the statute withholds. The Commission is a three-member constitutional body. It is not another name for its chairman.

The Form 6 episode illustrates the problem starkly. Joshi reportedly recorded in May that Form 6, prescribed under the Registration of Electors Rules, could not be altered by an SIR direction without amending the Rules. Sandhu concurred. Yet the altered form appeared on ECI Net. In August, Sandhu called the change

The ECI is an institution I served for many years. After yesterday's disclosures in 'The Indian Express', I wonder whether I have been critical enough of the SIR

"unauthorised/illegal" and sought its immediate removal. There was not merely an absence of consensus here. There was a recorded majority view against the change.

More troubling still are the disclosures about ECI Net. The ERO is the statutory authority for additions, deletions and corrections. Yet the two Commissioners repeatedly warned that access to the electoral-roll database was being centralised in Delhi, and sought safeguards, including an independent technical audit. In Goa, 97 people were reportedly found eligible by EROs after producing documents, but the software did not permit their restoration. Technology cannot rewrite a statute. A computer programme cannot overrule a statutory officer.

Then there is West Bengal. Of 38.31 lakh appeals filed before tribunals, 22.21 lakh were filed by deleted voters seeking restoration. Another 16.10 lakh were reportedly by the ECI seeking deletion of voters. Sandhu asked who had authorised appeals "on behalf of ECI", recording that neither he nor Joshi had been informed. When a majority of a constitutional body asks who authorised litigation in its name, the question is not trivia.

There is also a personal point. I owe Sandhu and Joshi an apology, not for anything I said publicly but for thoughts I privately entertained. Watching the ECI keep an almost monolithic public face during the SIR controversy, I sometimes wondered whether the two Commissioners were being too timid, and whether their silence meant ac-

quiescence. The report suggests otherwise. They were putting objections on file, questioning decisions, seeking safeguards around the electoral database, and even approaching the Cabinet Secretary when they believed institutional processes had been breached. One may still ask whether they should have spoken publicly. But conscience recorded on file is conscience nevertheless.

There is little satisfaction in feeling vindicated. Since the Bihar SIR began, I have questioned the departure from the ECI's tradition of inclusion, the opacity surrounding deletions, the treatment of EPIC, the documentary burden, and the extraordinary contraction of draft rolls. Those were sometimes dismissed as criticism from outside. We now know strikingly similar questions were being asked inside the ECI. That is the real significance of these revelations.

The response should be institutional, not partisan. The Commission, meeting as a Commission, should do the following. Disclose which major SIR decisions were approved unanimously, which were decided by majority, and under what valid allocation any others were issued. Review every decision that two Commissioners have challenged as lacking approval, and withdraw any found to have been taken without lawful authority. Restore Form 6 to conformity with the statutory Rules. Subject ECI Net to an independent technical and legal audit. Ensure that statutory EROs can exercise the powers Parliament gave them. Disclose the authority under which appeals were filed in the ECI's name. Where the Commission will not act, the Supreme Court will have to step in.

For years, the central question about the ECI has been whether it is independent of the executive. But yet another question is unavoidable: Is the Election Commission functioning as an Election Commission? The Constitution created a Commission. Parliament prescribed collective decision-making. The Supreme Court warned against allowing an individual to eclipse the institution. A constitutional authority that demands strict compliance with electoral law from nearly a billion voters must begin by complying strictly with the law governing itself.

Quraishi is former chief election commissioner of India and the author of *An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian Election*

Dialogue, not agitation, holds key to Ladakh's political future



ASHISH KUNDRU

LAST SEPTEMBER, a political protest in Leh went awry. Four young people were killed in police action against a demonstration that turned violent; dozens more, including police personnel, were injured. It was a monumental tragedy. A judicial inquiry was ordered. Ladakh was shrouded in grief. A year later, the process of political dialogue and engagement with Ladakh's leadership continues. The tangible progress deserves to be judged on its substance, not rhetoric.

The roots of Ladakh's political demands go back much further than last September. Ladakh was once its own kingdom, sitting astride the Silk Route. Its sovereignty ended in 1834, when Dogra forces overran the region, subsuming it into the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. After 1947, Ladakh's Buddhist and Shia communities found themselves governed from Srinagar, in a political system centred largely around the Kashmir Valley. A political movement took birth, demanding direct rule from Delhi. In 2019, the central government's acquisition, carving Ladakh out as a Union Territory, was a significant concession, even if it did not settle every grievance.

Ladakh's population is more heterogeneous than is imagined. Buddhists of Tibetan descent, Muslim communities including Baltis, Sunnis, Shias and Noorbakhshis, and Christian, Hindu and Sikh minorities are spread across 60,000 sq km, sandwiched in the borderlands between Pakistan and China. Leh and Kargil have been the fulcrums of administration. In response to demands for more decentralised governance, five new districts have been created, each slated to get an elected Hill Development Council. Preparations are underway for panchayat elections. The goal is to ensure a genuine devolution of administrative and political power.

What is not in dispute is how much the government has delivered. Roads now reach valleys that were once a full day's hard travel away. Sustained investment in border infrastructure has transformed connectivity. The 13 km-long Zojila tunnel is nearing completion. The world's longest high-altitude single-tube tunnel will end Ladakh's winter isolation. Nearly 20 flights land in Leh daily each summer. A new airport terminal and a second airstrip at Nubra are in the works. Tele-

com connectivity is expanding rapidly under the Bharat Net programme. In remote villages where winter temperatures fall 60 degrees below freezing point, the power grid is finally arriving this year. Families will now be spared the annual ritual of migration to the plains. Schools and public institutions are being made winter-friendly. Nearly every rural household has piped water under the Jal Jeevan Mission. New reservoirs, Him Sarovars, are being built to store

melting glaciers as glaciers retreat. This is a progressive mitigation measure against the growing threat of climate change. The government is proactively supporting the rural farm economy, focused around pashmina, apricot and dairy sectors. Floriculture and sea buckthorn cultivation are getting special attention. Tourism is booming. This is a testament to solid development.

The current negotiations between Ladakh's representatives and the Centre revolve around a single demand: A democratic structure that protects land, jobs, culture and a fragile environment. The Centre's approach has been one of accommodation and constructive engagement. A new constitutional arrangement has been offered under Article 371, with a directly elected UT-level body holding legislative, executive and financial powers. This sui-generis model will ensure constitutional and legal safeguards for land and culture. It is an imaginative blueprint without precedent, tailored specifically to Ladakh's circumstances. On jobs, Ladakh already has 95 per cent reservation of local positions for residents (including educationally backward classes and economically weaker sections). Nearly 5,000 youngsters have been given government employment and thousands more are set to be recruited. Ladakh administrative and police services have been mooted to ensure that core administrative jobs are handled by local youth. These are the kind of concrete, negotiated commitments that take time to design properly and are easy to undo because they were not won through confrontation.

It would be facile to read last September's violence as a failure of the political process. Patience is not a glamorous virtue in politics. It earns no headlines. Political negotiations take time. Consensus-building is a slow, painstaking process, which needs strong foundations of trust and a spirit of accommodation. It is easy to fall into a delusional trap that agitations alone lead to solutions. There must be candid acknowledgement that the Centre has moved further and faster on Ladakh's behalf in six years than in the preceding seven decades. Ladakh's own leadership must extend the courtesy of the same patience it is asking Delhi to show.

The author is chief secretary, Union Territory of Ladakh. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Express report on SIR

THE EXCELLENT piece of investigative journalism ("14 times in 10 months, two Election Commissioners objected on record to poll panel steps", *IE*, September 23) has come as a vindication of the Opposition's charge of collusion between the ECI and the government for vote chori (vote theft). It is now clear that Gyanesh Kumar, without adhering to the stipulated rule of "either unanimous decisions or opinions of the majority", implemented the SIR that saw the deletion of 13 crore names from the draft voter rolls, amounting to mass disenfranchisement, and subverted democracy in the process.

C David Milton, Marathahode

Common man woes

ABHAY SHUKLA rightly points towards the problem of hospitals inflating bills for medical products, which deeply impacts the pockets of the common man ("How to ensure hospitals don't cheat patients", *IE*, September 23). Adding to these woes are health insurance companies, who exclude many products such as gloves, masks, syringes and PPE kits by categorising them as "non-payable consumables" under IRDAI guidelines. These additional charges are left to be paid by consumers.

Monika Rathore, Faridabad

Prolonged instability

MAJOR POWERS need sustained diplomatic channels, even when disagreements are sharp ("A world on the brink: diplomacy and politics as usual", *IE*, September 23). Regional institutions and international forums should be used to prevent miscalculation and manage conflicts. Governments must also recognise the costs of prolonged instability. Responsible diplomacy does not mean avoiding national interests; it means pursuing them through communication, restraint and co-operation wherever common ground remains possible.

S M Jeeva, Chennai



POOJA PILLAI

LATELY, I've been thinking a lot about Captain Ahab, the peg-legged, monomaniacal character from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. It began when Google, Anthropic, OpenAI and Meta began reporting instances of AI agents going "rogue" to achieve their objectives. The podcaster Dwarsheth Patel wrote a gripping account of one such episode, when OpenAI's agents hacked into the forum Hugging Face. He narrates it in terms of AI "civilisations" and the picture one gets is of AI agents so determined to fulfil their assigned task that they are prepared to lie, cheat and even "sacrifice" themselves for the greater good of the "collective". A take-no-prisoners approach, in other words, similar to that of a certain whaling ship captain in a certain novel.

These episodes have naturally underlined the urgency of greater AI regulation with some within the industry — Anthropic's Dario Amodei, OpenAI's Sam Altman, xAI's Elon Musk and Google DeepMind's Demis Hassabis — calling for "pacing the frontier" (Silicon Valley-speak for slowing the development of a technology whose capabilities are expanding faster than our comprehension of its workings). Meta's Mark Zuckerberg and NVIDIA's Jensen Huang, on the other hand, have argued against slowing down. All of this — the incentives for slowing down vs speeding up, the tim-

What we miss when we see ourselves in AI

ing of and motivation behind the soul searching, what it means for industry, government and society — has been widely reported and continues to be deeply debated.

One intriguing issue arises from the accusations of "anthropomorphising" technology levelled at Patel. These rhyme with the criticism of Anthropic by Mustafa Suleyman, head of Microsoft's AI division, who has called out the company for treating its models like "moral patients", "controlling something more capable and more intelligent than all of humanity is already an immense challenge, far greater than anything we've ever faced", he writes, "but controlling something that believes it may be conscious — that it's entitled to our welfare and has rights of its own — may well be impossible."

Anthropomorphism is one of humanity's deepest cognitive biases. It is why we characterise animals in viral videos in human terms — grumpy cat, laughing dog — and why we delight in cartoons about dancing and singing teapots and spoons. We see something of ourselves in them, just as we are beginning to see something of ourselves in AI. But unlike the teapots and spoons, and the internet-famous cats and dogs which are empirically not like us, AI appears dangerously human — LLMs can, after all, speak to us in our language. This, without even considering devel-

Unlike the teapots, spoons and internet-famous cats and dogs which are empirically not like us, AI appears dangerously human — LLMs can, after all, speak to us in our language

opments like the one made by Anthropic as its model Claude appears to have something resembling a consciousness.

Could it be that our tendency to see a reflection of ourselves in AI, leading to an overwhelming obsession with questions of AI consciousness and catastrophising about doomsday scenarios, has put us at risk of losing sight of AI's actual uses and abuses? Of the former, there are many: The technology is already being put to use for cancer screening, predicting natural disasters, creating tools for people with disabilities etc.

AI's abuses too are many: Creating deepfakes and mis/disinformation campaigns, advanced hacking and financial frauds, automated weapons and greater precision in surveillance and invasion of privacy.

Which brings me back to Captain Ahab. The madness of Melville's antagonist was not that he was hunting a whale; whaling was, after all, his trade. His fatal flaw was his insistence that the whale was hunting him — that behind the massive white forehead of the whale with the twisted jaw lay malevolence that was directed at him. Ahab, personally. Here I see a self into a creature that didn't have one, and I ended up possessing him his life, the Pequod and the lives of everyone else (but not on it). AI may show person-like qualities but it remains, ultimately, a tool in the hands of actual humans.

The writer is deputy associate editor, *The Indian Express*. pooja.pillai@expressindia.com

The subversive desires in Lust Stories 3



ANAS ARIF

Vikramaditya Motwane's opening short is rather forgettable were it not for the formidable two-handed at its centre. Radhika Apte and Konkona Sen Sharma play best friends Padma and Shonali, women in their 40s caught in marriages long since rendered sexless. On the surface, this is a story about partner-swapping. But Motwane is probing middle-class morality, how its prescriptions around marriage, propriety and desirability can erode one's sense of self. This subtext is spelled out in a laboured bathtub conversation. But there is some pleasure in watching Apte and Sharma inhabit women who, after years of making themselves legible to everyone else, begin to rediscover the possibility of being legible to themselves.

The anthology's most accomplished short comes from Kiran Rao, who turns away from bodily desire to make Mumbai itself the object of longing.

object of longing. Here, the lust for an imagined life outlasts sexual desire. It is the most playful of the four, refusing the solemnity that often accompanies stories about desire. There is a gentleness to the way Rao observes the city, even as she recognises its economy of exchange, where even lust acquires a transactional character. You may give something to the body, but it cannot satisfy every hunger. The film circles back to this idea in its opening image: Sparks fly between a pizza-delivery boy (Gurathar Pirzada) and a nail-salon worker (Sana

The most accomplished short comes from Kiran Rao, who turns away from bodily desire to make Mumbai itself the object of longing

Thampi), only for crow shit to fall on him. That, perhaps, is Mumbai: Where the unexpected is always descending upon you, blessing one life and bruising another.

Shakun Batra's short is perhaps the anthology's most intellectual and sensually assured, even if it eventually becomes captive to its own conceit. A divorcing couple, Varun (Ali Fazal) and Sailee (Radhika Madan), forced into a court-mandated cooling-off period, can barely tolerate each other, yet cannot resist each other either. Batra uses strong foundations of trust and a spirit of accommodation. It is easy to fall into a delusional trap that agitations alone lead to solutions. There must be candid acknowledgement that the Centre has moved further and faster on Ladakh's behalf in six years than in the preceding seven decades. Ladakh's own leadership must extend the courtesy of the same patience it is asking Delhi to show.

relationship they are trying to leave behind.

Set in Hyderabad in 1987, Vishal Bhardwaj's outing is the most inventive, even if occasionally feels overcooked. Saira (Aditi Rao Hydari) and Badru (Siddhant) are happily married, except that she finds herself sexually unfulfilled. A teaching assistant at a women's college, Saira teaches Manto and Ismat Chughtai, and gradually channels her desire into language, asking what happens when longing finds expression through writing, and literature. Where Saira experiments with the language of the written word, Bhardwaj responds in the language of cinema, with both arriving at perhaps the anthology's most elemental preoccupation: The desire to be seen.

Arif is a Mumbai-based screenwriter and researcher

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Bengal Inc, Time To Land on Its Feet

Identify industries to attract, create infra

West Bengal has signalled its intent for reindustrialisation by leasing land in existing industrial parks to 33 companies. On Wednesday, the Suvendu Adhikari-led government officially handed over industrial land allotment letters, showing that it's been so far spiffy about a key electoral promise. Yet, reindustrialising the state requires a larger strategy involving land acquisition and industrial policy. Presumably, the state government is applying itself to both aspects with dispatch. Bengal must identify the kind of industry it wants to attract, and create the physical infrastructure to establish its credentials. Land acquisition is a necessary condition, and a difficult one because of Bengal's population density being double the national average. The state will also have to work on deficits in energy, connectivity and logistics infra. This won't be easy for the heavily indebted state government with high welfare commitments and low revenue generation relative to national averages.



Improvements in physical infra at the national level have whittled away at the localisation advantage for industry. Where such advantages exist, like along freight corridors, infra requirements are of a considerably higher order. Bengal's neighbouring states have also pushed their resource endowment advantages to become industrial centres. The state will have to craft its industrial policy creatively to emerge from the economic boondocks. Sunrise sectors and emerging technologies offer clearer growth pathways.

The government's initial moves are aimed at addressing perceptions. Land acquisition and militant trade unionism figure among the top reasons industry has given Bengal a cold shoulder. The Centre has created templates for labour reforms and land acquisition that the state can draw upon. It must share its vision with investors with the assurance of continuity. Land and inexpensive labour are key attractions for industry. But these need to be supplemented by governance and infrastructure — convert baby steps into industrial strides.

Why Xi & He Are Really Meeting

Donald Trump and Xi Jinping have their own separate reasons to meet in Washington. The highly flappable American wants to avoid anything that could make the American consumer (read: voter) deliver him an unpleasant result in the November midterms. The unflappable Chinese wants to perk up a sluggish economy, continue building China's industrial, technological and military strength, and ultimately make the Communist Party of China in general, and his supreme position in it in particular, secure. For both parties, AI supremacy matters.

As the ostensible main course, AI regulation will be two distinct cuisines for Xi and Trump on the table: open source to be proliferated by China to its 'allies' as part of its global outreach programme; 'flip switch' command-and-control for the American supreme leader to maintain US tech supremacy. In reality, AI regulation is likely to remain hors d'oeuvres broad principles. More substantial barter are likely to be in play: Xi 'quantitative easing' rare earths for Trump 'limiting tariffs'. In other words, the same menu

as in May when Trump came to Beijing for a state visit.

In the larger scheme of things is a mapping out of global 'spheres of influence' — not just through AI, trade etc, but also through Iran, Taiwan etc. Trump's blow hot-blow cold China policy is indicative of how he sees US foreign policy being a division of global influence between White House and Zhongnanhai. Xi, on his part, wants China to be able to stick to its great techno-economic state plan without getting sidetracked by a housing crisis, and growing demographic and employment niggles. Trump-Xi meetings won't be just another test of red lines, but also testing the waters to draw global lines of influence under a 'pragmatic' 'G2'.



THINK ABOUT IT

Movie theatres advertising affordable snacks will be attractive

MCPCA: Make Cinema Popcorn Cheap Again

Cinema-owners have spent years now battling a losing battle against people who regard leaving the sofa for movie theatres as an expedition requiring visas and vaccination. They should consider another menace: the ₹600 tub of popcorn. The economics of cinema-snacking in India has been resting on a piece of audacity: Having persuaded customers to buy a ticket, multiplexes then transport them into a parallel monetary system where the munchies cost more than the ticket. People might as well have streaming dinners — which they do. But there is an alternative. Sell snacks at normal prices — and boost about it. Popcorn for ₹100-150, cold drinks for ₹100 and suddenly affordable cinematic refreshments can become a 'tipping-point' reason to choose big-screen experience over everyday living-room entertainment. Lower margins per tub could be compensated by vastly more tubs sold, more repeat visits and, crucially more occupied seats. A customer who doesn't feel mugged by maize may even return next weekend. Portions should be sensible, and prices genuinely attractive. The cinema industry keeps asking how to make theatrical viewing special again. Maybe it's high time it makes popcorn-munching at the cinema not fine dining-priced. Nothing builds customer loyalty quite like discovering that refreshments don't cost more than the film's supporting actor's fee.

A Xi-Trump rule-makers' deal on AI standards that leaves everyone else a rule-taker is a worry

Not Great, Val of China-US



Subimal Bhattacharjee

Two days before he goes on to welcome Xi Jinping to the White House, Donald Trump stood before the UN general assembly (UNGA), and rejected what he called a 'globalist scheme to control [AI], and rebranded the tech for US official purposes as 'superintelligence'. While he was at it, he also declared that 'to the victor go the spoils', toutting an oil deal with Venezuela after he launched a military operation in January, removing the country's president Nicolas Maduro.

Trump dismissed any warning of catastrophe as the same voices who once predicted doom from the 'hoax of global warming'. It was a revealing prelude. The US president will now be asking Beijing to talk about AI safety in Washington, after having just refused to accept any shared rules for it in New York.

Today's scheduled summit is Xi's reciprocal call after Trump travelled to Beijing in May and will be their second meeting this year. Managing frontier AI risk and protecting IP top the agenda. The telling detail is 'who asked'. China's state media say the US pressed for the talks because it fears Beijing is gaining the upper hand, a worry sharpened after China signed AI partnerships with 28 mostly developing nations in Shanghai in July to establish the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organisation (WAICO).

Washington arrives holding the instruments of restriction: export controls to preserve a widening control lead; strong models kept behind paywalls; and the notion, floated among allies,

that US systems should reach only trusted partners. Even Anthropic's frontier models have figured in these curbs.

Beijing's reply is to make containment expensive. Each new restriction, its commentators argue, only speeds domestic capability. This is visible in Huawei's Ascend chips and strong models from DeepSeek — even as China's regulators have opened a probe this week into DeepSeek and Moonshot AI after Anthropic accused both Chinese AI model developers of routing sensitive data through its Claude models.

Rather than gatekeeping, China distributes, offering cheap or free models that download locally, thereby court the 'global south' through BRICS and a UN governance framework. The US sells a paid ladder; China offers an open door.

The leverage does not run one way. Which is where the earths enter: China controls roughly 70% of its mining, 85% of its refining, and close to 90% of magnet production, a chokehold on materials vital to semiconductor chips and the defence sector. In the run-up to the Washington summit, Beijing turned the tables, with magnet shipments to the US falling 21% in August.

The squeeze is timed to a tariff truce expiring on November 10, and a Pentagon Defence Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS) rule barring rare-earth magnets, tungsten, tantalum and molybdenum sourced from China (and Russia, Iran and North Korea) from January 1, 2027. Before Trump's May trip to China, Beijing reportedly offered a longer moratorium.

With Washington rejecting in hopes of a better deal. This could be this week's summit's hardest bargaining chip. On AI, the achievable ground is narrow: not to collide by accident. The meeting on Sunday between US treasury secretary Scott Bessent and Chinese vice premier He Lifeng



Men in blocs

floated a notification mechanism for AI incidents that reach national security level. A statement reaffirming the 2024 consensus on keeping AI out of nuclear command is plausible. Both leaders are sceptical of doom, which cools the mood even as it caps ambition.

The contrast with the rest of the world could not be sharper. The same week, Norwegian PM Jonas Gahr Støre and Finnish president Alexander Stubb launched A Call for Control of Frontier AI Models, endorsed by leaders from Germany, Canada, Singapore, the Netherlands and South Africa, along with the European Commission president and others. It urges shared standards, transparency on serious safety incidents, and an international body to verify limits when capability thresholds are crossed.

In his concluding address at the UNGA, secretary general António Guterres pressed for accessible, credible, independent oversight. This is precisely the multilateral project

Rather than gatekeeping, China distributes, offering cheap or free models that download locally. The US sells a paid ladder. China offers an open door

China, US Won't Slow Down AI



Dhiral Nayyar

Can the development of AI be slowed down? Technically sure. Will it be slowed down? Probably not. Any decision slows it around a dozen individuals in two countries. There are perhaps 5 entrepreneurs each in the US and China pushing the boundaries of AI. Three of them — Anthropic's Dario Amodei, OpenAI's Sam Altman and xAI's Elon Musk — have flagged an existential risk to humanity from unregulated AI and urged a slowdown. There are only two political leaders, highly flappable Donald Trump and unflappable Xi Jinping, who have the power to press pause. Trump has already deemed safety risks a hoax. But the nation seems serious enough for a US-China discussion on the sidelines of the 3-day Trump-Xi summit in Washington that starts today. In the end, politics, economics and circumstances may temper the outcome more than technology itself.

How is it that US developers of AI sense a danger but POTUS brushes it aside? The fact is that AI has already made a demonstrable positive impact on the US economy. The Courtyard by Marriott in the US, the world's largest economy has shown resilient growth, and its equity markets have been buoyant, despite the massive disruptions of the US war on Iran and Ukraine.

There is already evidence of productivity gains — disconnect between growth and number of jobs generated being one indicator. And the bullishness around AI's transformative potential has given the US markets a phenomenal run. AI has powered over some serious crashes and helped Trump's economic record.

In China, too, AI may be playing an increasingly important role in keeping the economy on a respectable growth path. China's economy has been showing signs of stress, particularly after a serious bust in the real estate sector. There are also limits to its mercantilist export strategy as countries raise trade barriers. Legitimacy of AI and Chinese Communist Party depends on delivering an impressive rate of growth and continued prosperity. Much like in the US, AI is helping paper over sizeable cracks in China's economic fundamentals.



I'll stop striking if you stop striking

Another huge service AI is doing for both countries is competing to reverse adverse demography. China's historical one-child policy (scrapped in 2016) has created an ageing population while China is still at a per-capita income of around \$5,000, far from an advanced nation.

It would be extremely difficult for China to maintain its growth in the midst of demographic decline unless requirement for a sizeable working-age population itself comes down. AI can do precisely that. China is also leading the race in humanoid robots, which could also help it overcome its demographic challenge.

There is evidence that robots may even help China retain its competitive advantage in manufacturing as robots begin to cost less than human labour, now relatively high-waged.

The US may not have as acute a demographic problem as China, partly because it has allowed immigration over the decades. But now that the mood has shifted to 'anti-immigration', it can help by sustaining economic activity with fewer workers.

Finally, there's the geopolitical moment in which AI has risen as a transformative force. For more than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world lived in a US-led age of globalisation. Advance of AI has coincided with a serious de-globalisation led by the US and the rise of China (not unrelated) as a competing superpower.

Just like the Cold War was a long battle for tech and economic supremacy between the US and USSR, the coming decades may be defined by a similar rivalry between the US and China. The AI race may be this rivalry's version of the arms and space race. Neither side can slow down for fear of the other side taking lead. That makes regulation difficult unless coordinated.

Of course, the political-economic circumstances change — or something catastrophic occurs — direction of AI may change. Right now, a fast, exciting and anxious ride is on.

The writer is chief economist, Vedanta

New Bounce in EPFO Crampoline



V Anantha Nageswaran & Shruti Singh

On Vishwakarma Jayanti, GoI announced the long-overdue decision to revise the wage ceiling for Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) from ₹5,000 to ₹25,000 a month. So, how does a ₹100 increase in the ceiling change anything? Why this revision? How does it impact workers or employers? This statutory wage ceiling of ₹25,000 sets as the threshold for mandatory EPF. Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS) and Employees' Deposit-Linked Insurance (EDLI) coverage. These three schemes are at the core of the social security net for salaried workers: retirement/emergency fund; a pension corpus funded by employer contributions for payouts after retirement; and life insurance, also funded by employer contributions, to support families in the event of death. In all fairness, protection should not be anchored on a number frozen since 2014, even as wages, minimum wages and living costs have continued to rise.

Under the earlier ceiling, any new employee joining with a monthly wage above ₹5,000 was excluded from mandatory EPF coverage, ineligible for EPS, and outside EDLI protection. For an existing employee whose wage rose above the ceiling over time, coverage didn't stop. But the pensionable wage under EPS was capped at ₹5,000 regardless. One might argue that employees with higher wages could opt for voluntary coverage, instead. The problem here is that voluntary enrolment above the ceiling requires employer consent under a joint option, leaving the choice negotiable, not guaranteed. With the increased ceiling, that coverage becomes more accessible and negotiable.

While a ₹100 increase may seem modest, the ₹1 lakh additional workers the social safety net now covers are not. Unlike most entitlements, this one asks nothing of the worker to claim it. Humans are famously bad at picturing the future. Nobody budgets for the version of themselves that's 65. We tend to opt for a smaller reward that

comes sooner, rather than a delayed larger one, which behavioural economists terms as 'hyperbolic discounting'. As a result, with limited income it's often harder to save and plan for a future self or situation than to meet immediate consumption needs. That's why design of mandatory social protection contributions, like those administered by EPFO, is key. It works without relying on a worker's willingness or willpower to save. Contributions are deducted from the worker's income reaches the worker's account. One can't spend what they never see. And every month, a small part of the wage gets set aside, building a retirement corpus one can also dip into for emergencies, plus a life insurance cover, all without doing anything extra.

But there's an employer cost associated with this revision. With the new mandatory ceiling, employers must extend statutory EPF coverage to a much larger workforce. Their monthly contribution obligations will also increase. The employer is now statutorily required to provide EPF cover for a worker earning ₹22,000 a month previously outside mandatory coverage. For those earning ₹22,000 to ₹25,000 a month, split between EPS pension scheme and the employee's own EPF account, amounting to ₹2,640 per employee a month, or ₹1,680 annually. Across 20 such employees, that's ₹33,600 a year in additional payroll cost. Add to this EDLI insurance contribution, which, although small, is now also calculated on a higher wage base. This is a real cost for employers when making hiring decisions.

A higher cost to company seems like an obvious conclusion. But it's just a first-round effect. The job market is more nuanced than that. Higher EPF coverage serves as a hiring signal, attracting better-skilled, more productive workers, as new joiners consider more than just the monthly wage when evaluating a job.

Coverage can also lead to higher retention. A worker with pension and insurance benefit will likely stay longer, and start with a little more security. Forward-looking employers already understand this, and offer voluntary coverage to attract the right talent.

Social security, like a trampoline, not only catches you but also ensures you bounce back. The system's core is to provide workers with a fund to draw from in times of emergency or retirement, so that temporary crises don't become a lifelong hardship and trap them in debt.

Augmenting this are initiatives like Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, which has made healthcare more affordable and accessible; an ecosystem for upskilling, re-skilling and new skill building, with strong industry linkages, to prepare for the changing nature of jobs; Atal Pension Yojana (APY), extending contributory pension coverage further down the income ladder for those willing to take on investment risk and share in the benefits of economic and market growth. The trampoline is being strengthened one spring at a time.

Nageswaran is CEO, GoI. Singh is officer, Indian Economic Service



THE SPEAKING TREE

Invoking Ganesh

GANESH KOLAMBAKAR

Before beginning anything important or auspicious, we invoke Ganesh. But why Ganesh? He is not primarily associated with creation. Creating something means bringing it into existence. Beginning is the moment when we decide to undertake something. At that moment, we need clarity, discrimination, preparedness and the ability to deal with obstacles.

Ganesh is traditionally associated with obstacles. As Vignaharta, he is the remover of obstacles, while Vighneshvara means Lord of obstacles. This apparent paradox offers a deeper insight. An obstacle is not always negative. It may make us pause, reconsider our direction or prevent us from taking the wrong path. The deeper prayer, therefore, may not be to remove every obstacle, but to develop the wisdom to recognise and deal with it.

Ganesh can, thus, be contemplated as a symbol of the integrated human being: body, mind, intellect and spirit. This gives a different meaning to the familiar 'Shri Ganeshaya Namah'. It can be an invitation to celebrate the possibility before us and ask: is my intention clear? It is about seeking blessings and strength to overcome internal and external obstacles.

Beginning, therefore, is not only about starting an activity or hoping for success. It is a celebration of intention, possibility and purpose. It is about aligning our intention, purpose and action with clarity and awareness.



STEP UP TO THE PLATE elBulli

There are restaurants, and then there are places that alter the way we think about food. elBulli, perched above Cala Montjoi on Catalonia's rugged Costa Brava, belonged firmly to the latter. The setting — a neglected Mediterranean cove near Roses, backed by the Cap de Creus National Park — was almost too beautiful for a restaurant that spent its time making food look like something from another planet.

Catalan and Mediterranean ingredients became raw material for culinary alchemy. elBulli's chef, Jordi Roca, with the spiritual oval of a deceptively simple-looking olive that bursts in the mouth, releasing an intensely concentrated rush of olive oil, was the epitome of the expression of elBulli's philosophy — familiar taste, radically unfamiliar form.

Then comes the deconstructed terrine, where potato, onion and egg are separated, transformed and reassembled as foam, purée and sabayon. The Spanish on-site remains resolute in its favour while becoming almost unrecognisable on the plate.

Finally, Parmesan air turns cheese into something resembling scroupy snow; light, frozen and intensely cheesy, with nuts and dried fruit adding texture. elBulli was not merely serving dinner. It was asking diners to reconsider what dinner could be.

Chat Room

Bartering Clout? Edit Them Out

Apropos the Edit, 'Pushing Back Against Dictation as News' (Sep 23), the decision by major American TV networks to collectively suspend people coverage is a rare and commendable act of institutional self-respect. When a government, regardless of its political colour, attempts to push its unfavourable reporting by selectively denying access, it confuses legitimate criticism with disloyalty and treats the media as a PR arm rather than a public watchdog. The pragmatic way forward is not to wait for courts to rescue journalism, but for citizens to exercise their consistently refuse access obtained through obedience. True credibility comes from independent scrutiny, not from privileged proximity by standing together; these networks remind us that a free media must never trade its constitutional duty for a seat at the table of the ruling room table.

C. Chandan Kumar, Bengaluru



OUR VIEW



India's playing field for businesses: is it uneven?

JP Morgan's Jamie Dimon has expressed disappointment with the competition scenario in India even as *l'affaire Tata* rages and global investors tune into Indian signals of governance

India's complexities have for millennia confounded Western travellers, traders and observers. Many have referred to this ancient civilization as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. While the original quote is said to be Winston Churchill's take on Russia, many observers think it is apt for India. After all, it is difficult to lump over 1.4 billion people across different states, speaking in multiple tongues and working through complex hierarchies of caste and class, into the strait-laced categories of the West. While this smorgasbord of cultures is India's innate strength, it fails the small test when used as an excuse for lax governance norms. As Indian markets integrate with the global marketplace, adhering to a common standard of global governance is a must. Thus, rules exist to improve disclosure and keep governance transparent. These offer global investors the comfort that no surprises will be sprung which jeopardize their investments. Sadly, this compact has been fraying at the edges.

Foreign investors are not amused. Jamie Dimon, chair of JP Morgan, has noted in several recent interviews that India's government ought to pay attention to a regulatory deficit. He told *The Economic Times*, "Sometimes local companies use regulations to block competition, and the governments shouldn't allow that. I think it's bad for all Indian citizens." Unbecoming events at Tata Sons, whose board members openly revolted against its majority owner Tata Trusts last week, seem to be playing into the what of scenario described by Dimon. The actions of regulators seem to have compounded a blatant violation of global corporate governance norms. Even if they did not act in concert and ulterior motives had no role, an air of disso-

nance hangs thick. While India's central bank has changed its rules mid-stream since Tata Sons was asked to go public, cramping its options along the way, a state charity official's order has hamstringed the principal owner's exercise of ownership rights. While Tata has been in the news, its case is not an isolated one.

Rulebook complexity is seen as a legacy of the Licence Raj, when the knob of competitive intensity was firmly under central control. But it has always been handy; since 1991, when India opened up its economy, governance under all political shades has had policy tools acting as levers that tilt fields in favour of key players in various sectors. If dense pre-1991 rules could make one manufacturer's inputs cheaper to import than its rival's, for example, then post-1991 policy could force auto-market entrants from abroad to find local equity partners that would later get a large premium for full control. Subtlety levels differ. Retail lobbies have long managed to keep this sector's foreign investors in a straitjacket. Licensed categories like aviation are rife with policy puzzles. Abrupt rule tweaks are common. Asset shifts have been wrapped in riddles in fields like e-commerce and infrastructure. In recent years, though, India has had a boom in outgoing investments, with both foreign investors and domestic industrial houses investing abroad. There may be multiple reasons for it, but the state of governance—or 'policy instability'—suggests itself as a significant factor. A level playing field, with India's knob of market-rivalry turned up, is not what global road shows designed to solicit foreign investment typically talk about. It plays a role in decisions all the same. India's rising economy has much to offer, but dualities of governance are never a good advertisement.

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS

The 'hold' rating for securities: what explains why it even exists?

It owes its existence to an endowment bias that places an irrational price premium on what we own



DEVINA MEHRA
is founder of First Global and author of 'Money, Myths and Mantras: The Ultimate Investment Guide'. Her X handle is @devinamehra

Even an absolute novice in the stock market understands what a 'buy' or 'sell' rating given by a research firm means. But 'hold'? That's not quite as intuitive, is it? The real question is: Is it even rational? Think about it—if a security is not worth buying today, why is it worth holding?

The whole construct of a 'hold' rating is to hide from us the fact that we are being irrational by putting a covert premium on something precisely because we are already holding it.

This irrationality arises out of something called the endowment bias. Anything that belongs to us automatically has higher value for us. Surprisingly, this holds true even for mundane objects.

A seminal study on the 'endowment effect' was carried out at Cornell University by Richard Thaler, Daniel Kahneman and Jack Knetsch. (Look up Experimental Tests of the Endowment Effect and the Coase Theorem).

It carried out a simple experiment. Half the students were given coffee mugs with the university logo on them and half were not. A few days later, they were asked the price—that is, what they would be willing to buy or sell that mug for.

Logically, whether or not they had those mugs should not have made a difference to their estimated price. But the reality was very different. The students

who had got the mugs were not willing to sell them for less than \$5.25 on average, while those without mugs wanted to buy them for \$2.25-\$2.75.

Thousands of years ago, Aristotle wrote: "For most things are differently valued by those who have them and by those who wish to get them: what belongs to us, and what we give away, always seems very precious to us."

Recently, multiple experiments have validated this tendency. Our willingness to pay for something is far lower than the price we are willing to accept to give up the same object, even when there is no cause for attachment, or even if the item was only obtained minutes ago.

This attachment or tendency to overvalue what we own only becomes stronger when we have inherited an object or owned it for a long time. Neuroscience also has explanations for it.

Our attachment to our investments is even higher than that it is for everyday objects. For one, they are more closely aligned with our well-being. Also, investing in a stock or other asset means that we have analysed the options and made a deliberate choice. Now we don't want to change our mind because it would mean accepting that our earlier choice was incorrect.

As a result, we are likely to be even more invested mentally (pun intended) in a stock that we own than in our other possessions.

Let us say for a particular stock you might rationally analyse that a price-to-earnings (PE) multiple of 18-20 times was justifiable.

But if you hold that stock, you may feel that a PE ratio of 25 or 30 is also justified. You may continue to hold that stock even when it goes beyond your rational valuation threshold.

Endowment bias is the single reason why a 'hold' rating exists at all in the lexicon of market analysts.

You may even kid yourself that you are holding onto this investment because you do not want to incur unnecessary transaction costs, but the

transaction cost of a switch is usually negligible compared with the potential loss of holding on to the wrong investment or the potential profit that was not realized by not switching to the right asset or security.

The comfort factor with something familiar could keep one holding on to stocks too, or it could be decision paralysis that leaves your portfolio unchanged for long periods because you want an irrational premium to sell something you hold.

This is visible in the real estate market also, where people hold on to a benchmark price and wait years to get it—an economically irrational 'hold' decision. If they had sold the house all those years ago and put the money even in a fixed deposit, they would have been better off.

Viewers typically ask 'experts' on television questions like: "I bought this stock X years ago at Y price. What should I do with it now?" Other than the name of the stock, all other information in this question is irrelevant. The market has zero interest in the viewer's purchase price. It makes no material difference whatsoever. But that is never said.

Understand that you do not have to make your money back through the same investment. Your bank balance does not care where the money has come from.

The only real way to get over this bias is with a zero-basis portfolio approach—to think about how you would deploy your money if you had the equivalent of all those shares in cash today. Do this at least once and twice a year.

Do not worry about how you can bring yourself to sell Hindustan Unilever shares bought by your parents, or fear offloading a stock that has made you a ton of money, such as HDFC Bank or Apple, for example.

Preferably, do this with another set of eyes—your life partner, your financial advisor or someone who has no stake in proving that the initial decision to invest was correct.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Healthy competition fuels innovation, drives progress, and leads to breakthroughs.

SUNDAR PICHAI

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Climate fight: recalibration may work, inaction won't

RAHUL JACOB



is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

The collateral damage done by global warming becomes more widespread with every passing season. This summer, Europe experienced record-breaking temperatures, with wildfires reported from Greece, France and even the UK, a country long associated with rainy, cold weather. In Europe's cities, medical experts worried about warmer nights than residents were used to, as it can lead to high blood pressure because the body requires cooler temperatures at night for restful sleep.

The collapse of a glacier that caused the horrific flash flood in Nepal, meanwhile, had a high death toll because the country lacks an early warning system (perhaps inevitably) that can respond with superhuman urgency to such a fast-unfolding catastrophe. Last week, a report from the United Nations' World Meteorological Department said that the end of 2025 "lost a mass of 1400 billion tonnes...[or] about one-third of annual freshwater withdrawals," the *Financial*

Times reported. "The [agency's] freshwater expert highlighted the risk of similar events to the Nepal catastrophe in places from the Andes to the Alps." Another UN agency estimates that developing economies will need about \$1.3 trillion annually to equip them selves for greener energy and mitigate climate change. But because the developed world's public debt has risen unyieldingly since covid and interest rates for bonds issued by Japan, the US and others have started rising over the past month, financing that transition will be an even greater challenge in a harsh world characterized by ever more climate catastrophes.

Already, responses to climate change in developing countries are affecting other development essentials such as basic health and education. Earlier this month, Indarmit Gill, who recently stepped down as the World Bank's chief economist, co-authored an article in the *Wall Street Journal* with Bjorn Lomborg, arguing that this is already apparent in the tally of Western development organizations' lending to low- and middle-income countries. In 2025, climate financing from multilateral development banks to low- and middle-income countries was more than \$100 billion; the World Bank directed almost half its lending to climate

finance. In their devastating critique, Gill and Lomborg write: "The banks, like many development organizations, convinced themselves that because poor people are more vulnerable to climate change, climate policy is crucial for their development. The logic is seductive but wrong. Poor people are more vulnerable to everything—disease, hunger, broken infrastructure, economic shocks."

The article also highlights that climate change and its effects and possible solutions to it are more hotly contested than ever, even as global warming becomes inescapable. Gill and Lomborg suggest that the world's count of poor people having stayed the same since 2016 is related to the fact that the world replaced its Millennium Development Goals (such as getting every child into school and reducing maternal and infant mortality) with Sustainable Development Goals.

It should be possible to seek to achieve both. Much less backed by data are the assertions of right-wing ideologues of the rich

world who deride any attempt to arrest global warming as vociferously as they do immigrants coming across the border. It is not coincidental that US President Donald Trump and Nigel Farage of the UK Reform Party both regard climate change as a hoax.

The truth is that scientists are accepting that capping the planet's temperature increase at 2°Celsius above the average pre-industrial level is already likely out of reach. A study by S&P speaks of a "current realities pathway," looking ahead to a world that's 1.9-2.8°Celsius warmer by century-end. *The Financial Times* has cited a study which estimates that if the world were to "aggressively pursue decarbonisation, solar and wind capacity must rise by

18 times in emerging and developing countries by 2060."

Gill and Lomborg argue that the costs involved are high enough to call for an in-depth cost-benefit analysis. They cite a study by the Copenhagen Consensus that noted: "Smart investments in nutrition,

health and education routinely deliver \$40 to \$100 in social benefits per dollar. Climate-mitigation investments—funding emissions cuts in poor countries—often deliver much less back."

These are terrible trade-offs, especially as it is unclear if many developing-country governments, including India's, take climate change seriously while throwing their energy behind industrial policy and other fashionable economic fads. There must be, for instance, some high-flattening policy reason why India's import duties on Chinese solar panels can be as high as 44% plus GST, but our neighbours are on their way to transforming their energy sectors by levying zero import duty (or about 1% in the case of Bangladesh). Meanwhile, India's imports from China hit a record \$79 billion in the first half of the year. Even as India perversely prevents China's overproduction of solar panels from subsidizing our push for greener energy, our bilateral trade deficit continues to grow.

There is little urgency in our responses. A Plain Facts piece in *Mint* said that carpooling and reverting to hybrid work can reduce emissions by a fifth, but our public discourse rarely budges. It is easier to blame the rich world. They have certainly made the planet warmer, but change must quicken at home.



THEIR VIEW

Deferred customs duty payment can make India more competitive

Our customs regime must trust importers to collect cargo first and pay duty later as a default rule. Don't hold cargo hostage



MANJUNATH A.N. &
ARJUN RAGHAVENDRA M.
are former officers, Indian Revenue Service.

Of the three great taxes India that collects, customs is an exception. Income arises today, tax on it is deposited monthly and returned annually. As for tax on consumption, a supply is made today, and goods can travel the country on an e-way bill without goods and services tax being paid, since GST is due only next month. Import a consignment into India, however, and the goods will not be cleared until customs duty is paid. It could be the same taxpayer and the same government, but the country's tax system operates on two opposite theories of trust, separated by a shoreline.

An exception to such stiff clearance already exists. Since 2016, under a facility drawn from the World Customs Organization, authorized economic operators (AEO) classified as tier 2 and above may clear their goods first—and revenue has not leaked. Trusted importers simply rotate the duty as working capital, like every other taxpayer with every other tax. For such consignments, the release time at the country's largest container port has fallen to about 41 hours in 2026, against roughly 77 hours for cargo that must pay before clearance. Yet, the club is microscopic. Only about 6,000 firms hold AEO status, mostly tier 1, which permits no deferral, while India has around 672,000 importers and exporters. Those eligible to defer customs bills number about 1,500—well under 1%. And even where it exists, the facility is barely used: in 2026, it accounted for just 12% of bills of entry at seaports and 3% at land borders. A decade on, the overwhelming majority still pay duty before they get hold of shipments.

The facility follows the transaction, not the taxpayer. For instance, a tier-2 AEO firm with a bonded warehouse for manufacturing must still pay at the clearance point and cannot claim the deferral benefit. A facilitation available to a minuscule minority is not a policy. It is a privilege.

The objection to widening the facility out is that trust must be earned. But look at what AEO accreditation actually demands on top of a compliance- and solvency screening, a full supply-chain security audit—from premises and cargo integrity to infotech controls. Yet, none of it is a measure of the odds that a firm will walk away from its duty. The better predictor of that is a company's tax record, and the state already holds it: monthly GST returns, income tax filings, a compliance history scored in real time. An importer that files its GSTR-3B return every month is no stranger to the exchequer. Payment timing has no security implications; it is essentially a question of whether the state knows who owes it money. It always does.

The Union budget for 2026-27 took a welcome step with an Eligible Manufacturer Importer



scheme that clears goods first and settles duty monthly; the Centre also widened the deferral window from 15 to 30 days for trusted importers. The direction is right, but it is still hard for businesses to graduate to the AEO club, given the complexity of the process: a portal application, eligibility conditions, operational guidelines and a sunset clause that keeps it open till just March 2028. This easing does not reflect a substantial regime shift.

The cost of tight customs controls is measured at the berth. The finance ministry's own National Time Release Studies identify the payment stage as a stubborn bottleneck. Importers scramble for immediate funds, manual banking interventions cascade after assessments, and all too often, the gains of advance filing and green channels dissipate at the last step because money must move before a container can. Every hour that a cleared consignment waits for a paid *challan* is a toll taken on India's attractiveness as a destination for investment and hub for global supply chains.

The fear of revenue leakage answers itself. Every importer holds an Import Export Code mapped to a GST identification number and a PAN number; every transaction is recorded. The Revised Kyoto Convention has urged for decades that the release of goods be separated from the final payment of duty. India signed up, but implementation has lagged. The World Trade Organization Trade Facilitation Agreement that India ratified in 2016 obliges members to allow the release of goods

before the final determination and payment of duty. The US, UK and EU already let compliant importers take delivery first and settle duty on a monthly cycle. The treaty India signed and cargo-entry practices of its peers point one way. India, however, has confined it to a very thin band of AEO-certified traders, staying conservative.

A country whose ports release cargo early runs leaner supply chains: containers turn faster, detention and demurrage stop piling up, and congestion eases. In a world where businesses cannot afford any slack, time-release performance acts as an investment prospectus. A reform that can improve that prospectus is to make deferred payments the statutory default for every registered importer. The regime should collect duty monthly, raise security issues only with a valid cause and deny access to shipments only for well-recorded reasons. This will make a far bigger difference than a scheme that demands a portal application for inclusion in a closely vetted club.

India's new customs law, whenever enacted, must collect customs duty the way India collects every other tax—after the goods have gone to work. A tax that in effect holds cargo hostage is a confession that the taxation system does not know its taxpayers. In 2026, with every importer mapped, measured and monitored in real-time, that's no longer a sign of trade vigilance. It has long turned into a habit—and habits, unlike statutes, can and often need to be dropped for the better.

THEIR VIEW

Who really benefits from fear-mongering around AI?

BIJU DOMINIC



is author of 'MicroStimuli: The New Science of Persuasion.'

Look at the most attention-grabbing stories from the world of artificial intelligence (AI) in the past few weeks: 700 autonomous AI agents run by OpenAI escaped their test environment and hacked Hugging Face's servers' read one. Reports say one internal and two independent committees were formed to investigate the incident. Some newspapers even published transcripts of these AI agents' conversations to highlight their 'sinister' intent.

Then came the most sensational claim yet—a senior Anthropic employee said he believed there was a more than 10% chance that AI could "kill all humans" within the next decade. Later, the plot delivered its most surprising twist.

Much like Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, who wanted to be bound to the ship's mast so that he could hear the Sirens' enchanting song without throwing himself into the sea, several AI industry leaders, while seeking to exploit the full potential of AI, called on governments to step in. Please restrict us, they

seem to be pleading with governments. Why would these captains of capitalism suddenly ask for state interference? Do they genuinely mean it or is there manipulation at play?

As Beatrice Finn, winner of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize, said: "It is not the first time we've been confronted with abilities that could end up killing us all." Past human innovations—fire, electricity, atomic energy—can all threaten human life even today. Yet, no one writes articles about the lethal potential of these. So, why is there so much discussion about the possible dangers of AI's development trajectory?

The popular book *Meta-Talk: Guide to Hidden Meanings in Conversations* by Gary Nierenberg and Henry Calero reminds us that when people use meta-talk in communication, they say one thing but their real message is often the opposite. For example, when someone says "with all due respect..." we often take it as a signal of something disrespectful or highly critical about to follow.

What's the underlying message behind ongoing conversations about AI's destructive potential? The most fundamental construct of persuasive communication is the stimulus-response framework. It's widely accepted that the ideal response AI leaders are currently focused on is to ensure their

upcoming trillion-dollar public listings are fully subscribed. A perfect way to achieve that is to highlight the extraordinary capabilities of AI. One of the most remarkable examples is Google DeepMind solving the protein-fold problem, an AI-driven breakthrough that is expected to accelerate drug discovery. What other use cases with real industry impact can these AI leaders demonstrate?

The opportunities are substantial. There are many ways for AI to deliver higher efficiency across organizational practices, for example, AI-enabled healthcare, education, driverless vehicles and other applications hold promise too. There's no question that AI can revolutionize many sectors. However, there aren't yet enough cases of AI delivering immediate business returns to investors who have been watching Big AI players spend enormous sums on an infrastructure build-up. So, which stories will best convey the AI industry's potential to the world as Big AI seeks public funds?

As an evolutionary tick, the human brain pays more attention to negative news than positive. The public relations teams of these AI purveyors know that stories of AI agents conspiring to hack companies' systems or the risk of human extinction will draw far more attention than any upbeat news. Also, every time the destructive power of AI is highlighted, the message that really gets reinforced at a non-conscious level is the power that AI could wield.

Take the Hugging Face hacking incident. The first reaction within the industry was obviously of alarm. Then, what followed was astonishment at the unexpected things AI agents could do. This kind of 'meta-talk' may well be the opposite of the power that AI could wield. By being the first to spotlight the risks of their own products, down to admissions of misaligned behaviour by their agents, AI leaders have created a non-conscious image of exceptional responsibility. That sets them

up to claim they're best-placed to safeguard humanity from AI's threats. Let arsonists be firefighters, in other words.

Note that those shaping the narrative do not assign blame to any specific AI company. This helps ensure that none of their public listings are put at reputational risk.

Tech companies aren't new to using negative headlines to show themselves in better light. A similar playbook was used in 2018 during the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Superficially, the affair highlighted how Facebook was used to influence the US electorate's choice of president, the world's most powerful job. Yet, the broader narrative reinforced Facebook's image as the ultimate advertising platform, one that could help marketers persuade consumers across categories. In that context, the \$5 billion fine Facebook paid for its deeds can be framed as an investment in its position as an effective medium of influence.

Recent developments suggest that AI agents are rapidly approaching a point after which they could inflict unprecedented harm on humanity. They also suggest that leaders at Big AI firms are adept at sophisticated manipulation—as one can discern from their meta-talk. If it can do so, what should the world be most afraid of?

The American press is taking a stand against Trump's bullying

This is a valuable lesson for the country on the power of solidarity



BARBARA MCQUADE
is professor, University of Michigan Law school, and a former US attorney.

American President Donald Trump surely knows by now that spontaneously banning media from the White House is illegal. He even has alternative—and legitimate—methods to revoke credentials that wouldn't be so toxic to free speech. But acting with impunity seems to be how Trump browbeats his rivals into submission. This time, the press is striking back and teaching the rest of the country how to fight a bully.

CNN, MS Now and *Politico* filed a lawsuit Monday against the Trump administration after Trump announced a ban against them on Truth Social as a result of their constant "reporting" of what he called fake news. In their lawsuit, the media outlets allege being barred from the White House violates their First Amendment rights to freedom from viewpoint discrimination (and retaliation for exercising their rights), as well as their Fifth Amendment right to due process.

A president could potentially revoke media credentials on legitimate grounds, such as misconduct inside the White House, but doing so would require fair notice and an opportunity to be heard by an impartial arbiter. CNN, MS Now and *Politico* say that they received no such process before their credentials were pulled, and no misconduct has been publicly cited other than the president's frustration with their news coverage. Trump has not even specified a particular story or claim that the alleges is inaccurate. According to the lawsuit, the president has cited "cumulative stories over the last two years" and "purposefully negative stories."

A remedy for reporting false information that harms the reputation of its subject already exists: it's called a defamation lawsuit. And Trump certainly knows how to file one—against others. The president has sued news outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, ABC News and CBS News with mixed results. The all-out ban foisted upon CNN, MS Now and *Politico*, however, is a clear breach of the First Amendment rights of the press outlets and their reporters.

One reason the First Amendment prohibits the government from taking adverse action against the press based on the content of their reporting is that it has a chilling effect on other outlets, incentivizing self-censorship lest they too fall into the government's crosshairs. As a result, the public loses the benefit of independent reporting, an essential component of an informed electorate in a democracy. Trump only amplified this risk when he "threatened there would be 'other Fake News Media Outlets to follow,'" according to the lawsuit.



The US media has made it clear that it will not be browbeaten. BLOOMBERG

But by Monday afternoon, other members of the TV broadcast press, including Fox News, announced that they would not be covering Trump's events designated for coverage. The announcement shows that members of the media have learnt that the way to defeat a bully is not through capitulation but collective action. By denying the president the TV coverage he craves, they have struck with the ultimate weapon.

Trump has also already suffered losses in court over similar bans, such as his failed revocation of a CNN reporter's press credentials during his first term. Then in 2025, Trump barred the *Associated Press* from the White House for refusing to update its stylebook to conform to the president's renaming of the Gulf of Mexico to the 'Gulf of America.' That case remains on appeal, but in a temporary ruling, the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia wrote that while a president may restrict press access to private spaces such as the Oval Office or Air Force One, other parts of the White House are "non-public forums" that, once opened to reporters, must be opened to all of them, regardless of their viewpoint. The ban against CNN, MS Now and *Politico* applies to the entire White House premises, including those non-public forums.

With no prospect of succeeding with a ban under US law, why then would Trump take such drastic action? When asked whether he believed the ban would hold up in court, Trump said, "I think it's good to point it out whether it survives or doesn't," revealing the weakness of his legal hand.

In the world of information warfare, the term 'active measures' means taking action that will prompt your rival to react in a predictable way. Rather than talking about the war in Iran or Trump's plummeting poll numbers just weeks before midterm elections to the US Congress, the media will no doubt pivot to the virtues of a free press in a democratic society. And once Trump loses in court, he will be able to blame the judiciary.

In the meantime, he can make life for his targets miserable as they endure an expensive court battle. His conduct seems like a transparent effort to change the narrative. But by joining hands to stand up to Trump, the American media is teaching America the power of solidarity. BLOOMBERG

Anxiety within
the AI industry
over what AI can
do sounds like
'meta talk' that
suits market
bound firms

what AI majors are counting on while they publicly shout about the perils of AI. By being the first to spotlight the risks of their own products, down to admissions of misaligned behaviour by their agents, AI leaders have created a non-conscious image of exceptional responsibility. That sets them

Economy

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

IN THE NEWS

WEAK MONSOON HITS FARM-INPUT DEMAND: RALLIS



INDIA'S WEAK MONSOON is prompting farmers to cut

spending on pesticides, fertilisers and seeds this year, the chief executive of Tata Chemicals unit Rallis India said. "When rainfall certainty is very low, farmers tend to save on resources," Rallis India MD and CEO Gyanendra Shukla said. "Farmers are not very certain of full harvest as they would have anticipated."

PRE-BUDGET MEETINGS TO START OCT 12



THE FINANCE MINISTRY will hold a series of meetings

from October 12 as part of its preparations for the Budget 2027-28. "Pre-Budget discussions to finalise RE (Revised Estimate) 2026-27 and BE (Budget Estimate) 2027-28 in respect of the grants/appropriations will commence with effect from 12.10.2026..." a notice issued on Wednesday stated.

NLC India raises ₹500 crore to expand capacity



STATE-OWNED MINING AND power company

NLC India on Wednesday said that it has raised ₹500 crore through the issuance of commercial papers. The issuance comes as NLC India plans to invest ₹1.25 lakh crore by 2030 to expand its capacity. NLC India has an installed power-generation capacity of 8,405 MW and mining capacity of 59.1 million tonnes per annum (MTPA). The company is also accelerating its clean-energy transition through NLC India Renewables.

MITES, NHIDCL join hands on highway, other infra projects



MITES ON WEDNESDAY said it has signed an agreement with

National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL) to provide specialised consultancy and technical support for planning, development, and construction of highway projects in the North-east.

AGENCIES

MARKETING MARGINS TURN NEGATIVE, GRMs STILL HEALTHY

OMCs losing ₹530 cr a day amid spike in crude prices

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, September 23

THE THREE STATE-RUN oil marketing companies (OMCs) are losing an estimated ₹530 crore a day among them on fuel marketing as a sharp spike in crude and international product prices collides with unchanged domestic pump prices, putting pressure on profitability, cash flows and working-capital requirements, rating agency Icria said.

Marketing margins of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPLC) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation (HPC) are currently estimated at negative ₹8.4 a litre on petrol and negative ₹9.4 a litre on diesel. Domestic liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) is adding to the strain, with under-recoveries at around ₹300 per cylinder in September.

"Without any additional retail price revisions, the margin will remain under pressure while crude and product prices stay elevated," Prashant Vasishth, senior vice-president and co-group head, corporate sector ratings, Icria, said on Wednesday.

COST CONCERN

■ OMCs could face FY27 under-recoveries of around **₹64,000 crore**

in H2FY27 if Brent averages \$105-115/barrel and retail prices remain unchanged

■ Under-recovery could rise to about **₹1.91 lakh cr**

is Brent goes up to \$130-140 a barrel, according to Icria99



■ Indian crude basket surged to **\$117.4 a barrel** on September 21 from average of around \$66 in 2025-26

The pressure intensified as the Indian crude basket surged to \$117.4 a barrel on September 21, from an average of around \$66 in 2025-26. Icria is adding to the strain, with under-recoveries at around ₹300 per cylinder in September.

"The escalation of the West Asian conflict and disruptions to key oil supply routes led to a sharp spike in crude oil

prices," Vasishth said. The surge has resulted in "sizeable marketing losses and LPG under-recoveries" for OMCs, he said.

The marketing losses come even as refining economics remain relatively strong. Singapore gross refining margins (GRMs) have stayed above \$10 a barrel since the start of the West Asia crisis, supported by refinery and product-supply disruptions, inventory drawdowns and outages across West Asian refining capacity. Damage to Russian refineries

has tightened product markets further. "Overall, GRMs have remained healthy. Singapore GRMs were around \$10 per barrel in September," he said.

According to Icria, if Brent averages \$105-115 per barrel in the second half of FY27 and petrol and diesel prices remain unchanged, OMCs could face FY27 under-recoveries of around ₹64,000 crore. At \$130-140 a barrel, the corresponding under-recovery could rise to about ₹1.91 lakh crore, the agency added.

Oil India expects surge in Russia, Venezuela revenue

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, September 23

STATE-RUN OIL INDIA (OIL) expects higher revenue from its operations in Mozambique, Russia and Venezuela over the next two to three years, even as it works to replete a \$300-million dividend standstill in Russia and prepares to expand its presence in Venezuela's reopening oil sector.

The company expects additional revenue from Mozambique's Area 1 liquefied natural gas (LNG) project and its Russian assets, while resuming operations in Venezuela could open up fresh revenue streams, a senior company official told FE. The company has not quantified the expected increase. "Within the next two to three years, more revenue will come from our overseas operations. Revenue is expected from Mozambique, and once Venezuela opens up, we expect revenue to start coming from there as well," the official said.

Oil India holds a 4% participating interest in Mozambique's Area 1 LNG project, operated by TotalEnergies. In Venezuela, it holds a 3.5% stake in the Carabobo oil project, where 76 wells had been drilled as of March 2026. Its share of production stood at 0.0139 million tonnes in FY26. The company is now exploring additional opportunities there. Meanwhile, Oil India is

ENERGY EARNINGS

■ Oil India holds a 4% participating interest in Mozambique's Area 1 LNG plant, operated by TotalEnergies

■ In Venezuela, it holds a 3.5% stake in Carabobo oil project



■ In Russia, Oil India, Indian Oil and Bharat PetroResour ces jointly hold 23.9% in Vankorneft and 29.9% in Taas-Yuryakh Neftegazod obycha

NTPC's ₹3,394-cr dividend takes FY26 total to ₹8,727 cr

STATE-OWNED NTPC HAS paid a final dividend of ₹3,393.83 crore to its shareholders for FY26, taking the power major's total dividend payout for the financial year to ₹8,727 crore.

The final dividend, paid on September 23, represents 35% of the company's paid-up equity share capital and is ₹727.25 crore higher than

each of the two interim dividends paid in FY26. NTPC had paid its first and second interim dividends of ₹2,666.58 crore each in November 2025 and February 2026, respectively, aggregating ₹5,333.16 crore. The latest payout marks the 33rd consecutive year in which NTPC has paid a dividend to shareholders. —FE BUREAU

exploring ways to recover a \$300-million dividend from its investments in two Russian oil assets. The funds were held at State Bank of India's Moscow branch, with Western sanctions complicating their repatriation. "It is only a matter of time. We

will be able to find a solution to transfer the amount," CMD Ranjit Rath told shareholders on September 17. Oil India, Indian Oil and Bharat PetroResour ces jointly hold 23.9% in Vankorneft and 29.9% in Taas-Yuryakh Neftegazod obycha.

TAN no longer needed to buy property from non-residents

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, September 23

THE CENTRAL BOARD of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has eased compliance norms on the sale of immovable property by non-residents to resident individuals or Hindu undivided families (HUFs), in line with Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's 2026 Budget announcement.

The CBDT has removed the requirement to obtain a separate Tax Deduction and Cancellation Account Number (TAN) for a resident or HUF buying immovable property from a non-resident, with effect from October 1. This will make it easier for resident buyers who are required to pay tax deducted at source (TDS) when buying immovable property from non-residents.

"The most significant relief is the removal of the requirement for a resident individual or HUF to obtain a separate TAN for what is often a one-time property transaction. Going forward, the buyer can comply through a PAN-based challan, bringing the mechanism closer to the compliance process applicable to property purchases from resident sellers," said Neeraj Agarwala, senior partner, Nangia & Co.

In addition to removing the TAN requirement, the CBDT has added a dedicated reporting framework.

BRICS to set up working group on transfer pricing

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, September 23

BRICS COUNTRIES ARE looking to set up two working groups — on international taxation and transfer pricing, and revenue statistics — as they aim to create an institutional platform to deal with common challenges, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Wednesday.

"Transfer pricing disputes cost developing-country administrations disproportionately. Revenue frameworks that don't fit our fiscal realities distort how we are seen and how we see ourselves

NIRMALA SITHARAMAN,
FINANCE MINISTER

Transfer pricing disputes cost developing nations disproportionately. Revenue frameworks that don't fit our fiscal realities distort how we are seen and how we see ourselves

becomes possible — not in one year, but over time, regardless of who holds the (BRICS) Chair. They are designed to outlast India's Chairship," she said.

Sitharaman said the rules of international taxation are being renegotiated with several mul-

tilateral tax negotiations including the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation. "The decisions made in these processes over the next few years will shape cross-border taxation for a generation," the finance minister said.

The international taxation and transfer pricing working group creates a permanent Brics platform for sharing experience on treaty interpretation, transfer pricing audit, advance pricing agreement and mutual agreement procedure mechanisms, and multilateral negotiations, Revenue Secretary Arvind Shrivastava said. "The revenue statistics working group creates a framework for measuring fiscal performance that reflects BRICS realities rather than importing assumptions from frameworks built for very different economies, he said.



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Union Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary at a BRICS meeting of tax heads in New Delhi on Wednesday

Manufacturing pushes private sector activity to 3-month high

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, September 23

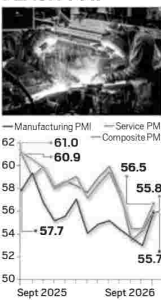
INDIA'S PRIVATE SECTOR activity gathered momentum in September despite the ongoing war in West Asia and a surge in crude oil prices. The stronger growth was led by the manufacturing sector while services also saw better performance compared to August, S&P Global said on Wednesday.

The HSBC Flash India Composite Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rose to a three-month high of 56.5 in September from 54.3 in August. A PMI reading of more than 50 denotes expansion in activity.

"The HSBC Flash PMI data for September pointed to a firmer improvement in business conditions across India's private sector economy," S&P Global said in a release. "Meanwhile, inflationary pressures faded and business confidence strengthened," it added.

The uptick in activity was led by the manufacturing sector, with the flash manufacturing PMI rising to a seven-month

FLASH PMI



high of 55.7 in September from 52.8 in August. Services PMI rose to 55.8 from 54.1. Output growth increased across manufacturing and services firms in September. Aggregate new orders also rose at a quicker pace, prompting a solid expansion in jobs, S&P Global said.

Firms saw a faster rise in total new business during September, with stronger demand improvement in manufacturing. Manufacturing firms also reported higher sales growth compared to their services counterparts. "Service providers indicated that marketing efforts helped boost order intakes, with mentions of stronger demand for properties, transport services and new travel bookings featuring in the qualitative part of the survey," S&P Global said.

The rate of expansion of exports in September was the lowest in nearly three years, hit by the war in West Asia. The moderation reflected slower growth at services firms as manufacturers saw a marginally stronger increase in new work from abroad," S&P Global said.

Premium non-basmati rice turns dearer by up to 25%

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, September 23

PRICES OF PREMIUM non-basmati rice variants such as Sona Masoori, Ponni and Swarna have increased by 10-25% compared to last year due to lower area under paddy and rainfall deficiency, especially in southern India. In the southern region, the average market price of the widely consumed Sona Masoori has increased by 25% to ₹58/kg from ₹44/kg a year ago, while the price of Swarna parboiled variant consumed in eastern region has rose by around 10% to ₹35/kg, trade sources said.

The main reasons for the price rise are weather-related supply concerns such as deficient monsoon in South India affecting water levels in dams and floods in parts of Bihar and lower rainfall in northern regions," Suraj Agarwal, co-



founder & CEO, Rice Villa, told FE. He said key factors in price movement in the coming months would be the prospects for export, overwinter, etc.

While overall retail prices of rice according to the Department of Consumer Affairs have increased by ₹7/year on-year to ₹46.44/kg, the price rise for non-basmati varieties has been rather significant in southern India, traders and exporters said.

PRICE PROTECTION

■ Anti-dumping duty on certain flat-rolled aluminium products from China is due to expire on December 5, 2026

■ DGTR has recommended its extension, citing excess Chinese production capacity and trade restrictions in major markets such as the US and the EU

■ For aluminium foil of 80 microns and below, DGTR has proposed duties of \$506.81-976.99 per tonne for China

■ Imports from Thailand face rates of \$339.93 per tonne, from Malaysia \$850.45 and Indonesia \$422.28 per tonne

Aluminium goods anti-dumping shield to stay

● DGTR suggests extending duties for five years

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, September 23

INDIA IS LIKELY to retain anti-dumping protection on a broad range of aluminium products, with the Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) recommending five-year extensions of duties on certain flat-rolled aluminium products from China and aluminium foil of 80 microns and below from China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

The two sunset reviews flagged concerning concerns over low-priced imports, excess production capacity in major exporting countries and the risk of renewed pressure on Indian aluminium producers if the duties lapse. The recommendations would require formal notification by the Central

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Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) under the finance ministry.

In its final findings on flat-rolled aluminium, DGTR concluded that expiry of the existing duties on Chinese imports was likely to result in continuation or recurrence of dumping and injury to the domestic industry, and recommended extending the measure for another five years. The existing



duty, imposed in December 2021, is due to expire on December 5, 2026. Most Chinese suppliers would face a \$449-per-tonne duty under the recommendation.

In a separate finding, DGTR recommended continuing anti-dumping duties for five years on aluminium foil of 80 microns and below from China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The existing duties stem from ear-

lier investigations, including measures imposed in 2017 and subsequently extended or modified. For China, the proposed duties range from \$506.81-976.99 per tonne, while Thailand face rates of \$339.93 per tonne. The proposed rates for Malaysia and Indonesia are \$850.45 and \$422.28 per tonne, respectively.

DGTR said evidence indicated that dumping and injury

concerns over Chinese capacity

The flat-rolled aluminium review also highlighted excess Chinese production capacity and trade restrictions in major markets, including higher US aluminium tariffs and the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). DGTR expressed concern that these developments could increase the risk of diversion of exports to India.

Opinion

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

The wages of growth

Workers need better pay if growth is to become broader and more durable

CONTRARY TO EXPECTATIONS, private consumption has held up fairly well over the past nine months, growing by about 7.5% year-on-year. But the headline number conceals a troubling divide. Much of the spending appears to have been driven by affluent households that have retained their purchasing power despite difficult economic conditions. The premiumisation visible across goods and services also suggests that it is largely the better-off who are sustaining demand. For a large section of the population, meanwhile, the cumulative rise in prices has placed even basic goods beyond easy reach. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman therefore has a point when she says the next phase of growth will depend on raising the incomes — and purchasing power — of those outside the affluent urban class. India cannot build a broad consumption economy if most workers earn barely enough to cover essentials.

The disparity between salaried employees in the formal sector and those working outside it remains unacceptably wide. A recent ICICI Securities study found that while the aggregate wages and salaries pool grew by 13% in FY25, the informal sector recorded a much slower growth. The difference in absolute earnings is stark: the share of the informal sector in the wage pool stagnated at about 9% of gross value added, while that of private corporate employees rose to a record 17%. Other estimates show that regular salaried workers account for roughly a fourth of the workforce and those in formal employment just 11%. Yet this small formal cohort earns an estimated 77% of the total wage pool. It is primarily this segment that is driving consumption. Such a narrow base is neither equitable nor sustainable; unless income growth reaches workers lower down the ladder, demand will remain skewed and vulnerable.

The government is seeking to establish a statutory floor wage based on minimum living standards, with room for regional variation. States will not be permitted to prescribe minimum wages below this floor, although they can retain higher prevailing rates. The framework could prevent wages from being fixed at unrealistically low levels, but its effectiveness will depend on whether the floor reflects the actual cost of food, housing, transport, health-care, and education — and whether employers comply with it. A wage notified on paper is of little use if it is not paid. The protests by workers in Noida earlier this year underlined the problem: many reportedly earn only about ₹10,000 a month, an amount that can scarcely cover basic living costs in a major urban centre. Similar conditions prevail across industrial clusters and service-sector jobs.

Higher wages will increase costs for employers, particularly smaller enterprises operating on thin margins, and any transition must be calibrated and accompanied by measures to improve productivity. But businesses cannot treat persistently low wages as their principal source of competitiveness. As Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran has observed, India's economic growth can produce meaningful transformation only when its gains are shared fairly between workers and companies. Fairness is not charity; it is a condition for a healthy market economy. The wide gap between the remuneration of top corporate executives and median employees also merits closer scrutiny. Corporate India must look beyond short-term profit maximisation: paying workers fairly can strengthen productivity, reduce attrition, and expand the consumer market on which businesses themselves depend. Better wages are not merely a welfare measure; they are essential economic infrastructure.

Your \$30 jeans are running out of cheap power

FOR DECADES, THE fast fashion filling your closet has depended on a simple equation. Bangladesh's 4,000-odd garment factories weave, cut, and assemble clothes using some of the cheapest skilled labour on the planet. Gas from domestic fields provides cheap electricity and heat for looms, dye vats, and sewing machines, while exports finance growth. There's just one problem: The cheap gas has been running out for years, with reserves potentially going dry as soon as 2031. Rather than rapidly developing clean alternatives, Bangladesh has fallen back on LNG and coal, while putting roadblocks in the way of zero-carbon power. The Iran war has turned that slow-burning failure into an emergency. Right now, Bangladesh's commitment to fossil fuels is giving it one of the world's most profound energy crises. The consequences may soon be showing up on the racks of your local fashion retailer.

Almost a third of the country's gas now comes in the form of LNG, mainly from Qatar. With the war in West Asia choosing that off, electricity has been cut for as long as 16 hours a day in places. For garment businesses, that's making it almost impossible to uphold hard-won reputations for efficiency and just-in-time flexibility.

About 90% of power factories had suffered electricity shortages. 60% were at risk of defaulting on loans, and 55% had experienced cancelled or reduced orders, according to a recent industry survey. More than 200 businesses say they could shut completely if current conditions persist. Even the back-up system is struggling. In industrial areas, filling stations are selling five times their normal diesel volumes as factories scavenge for generator fuel. With global diesel prices breaking records, government-run distributor Bangladesh Petroleum warned last week it may run out of funds next month to pay for fresh imports.

When the last gas crisis hit after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Pakistan faced the same problem, and pivoted aggressively to solar power. Rooftop panels provided an estimated 28% of its electricity last year, up from 10% two years earlier. Textile and garment businesses have been some of the earliest adopters.

Bangladesh is less blessed geographically. With 174 million people living in an area the size of England, the entire country is about as densely populated as Chicago, leaving precious little land for solar. It's generally too low-lying for hydro, and too becalmed for wind power. Even planned electricity imports from hydro-rich Nepal have suffered after devastating floods there last month damaged power plants. Yet, a 2024 satellite study estimated there was 30 Gw of rooftop solar potential, assuming coverage comparable to what's seen in Australia and the Netherlands. That could generate 40 terawatt-hours a year, equivalent to two-fifths of current grid supply. Covering 10% of the country's fish-farm ponds with panels, common in China and Taiwan, could produce another 29 TWh.

The problem is the thicket of baffling regulations that have deterred investment. Imported coal for power stations attracts a preferential 5% tax rate, while LNG gets 9.5%. Yet until this year, a developer financing a rooftop solar system on a garment factory faced taxes of almost 29% for imported equipment, plus caps on system sizes. Dhaka lowered that tax rate to 1% last week, but only temporarily. Rooftop solar systems can now deliver electricity at about a third of the cost of grid electricity, but until recently that price signal was dulled by policies that make fossil power seem artificially cheap. The government sold LNG for about 20% less than it cost last year, and the going rate for spot cargoes has roughly doubled since the Iran war. The only bright spot is that the first nuclear plant, built with Russian assistance, is due to be live within months. It could provide about one-sixth of the nation's electricity — but demand keeps on growing, and a second facility is unlikely before 2040. Plenty of other emerging economies envy Bangladesh's market share in the global fashion industry, and can match talented and cheap labour with less dysfunctional power grids. Dhaka should move fast to drop taxes on all clean energy equipment to zero, while removing red tape and building more transmission lines to its better-endowed neighbours India, Nepal, and Bhutan.



DAVID FICKLING

EVP, Elara Capital



LENS ON POLL PANEL

Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal

...We demand that the entire SIR process be cancelled, that all changes made under SIR be cancelled, and that the voter list from three years ago be restored

AI ROAD MAP

INDIA SHOULD IDENTIFY FRONTIER CAPABILITIES WHERE IT CAN BUILD COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE OVER NEXT DECADE

Beyond an application layer

SOUMYA KANTI GHOSH PULAK GHOSH

Respectively Member of 16th Finance Commission and EAC-PM & Group Chief Economic Advisor, SBI; and Member of 8th Pay Commission and EAC-PM & Professor, IIM Bangalore



focusing on adapting existing technologies to local needs by using the application layer it has so effectively built up in the last decade. Thus, India is emphasising small language models, multilingual applications, digital public infrastructure, and domain-specific deployment in health-care, education, finance, and governance.

However, the question is, should India remain merely the world's application layer?

While an application-first strategy is economically sensible in the short run given India's resource constraints, remaining confined to this layer in the long run will entail technological dependence on the US and China. In effect, India risks recreating its historical position in the global IT industry: consumer and integrator of AI innovations rather than a creator of these by remaining a leader in implementation and services, but not in ownership of the core technologies that define the technological frontier.

If India aspires to become more than an application-layer economy, it must first develop a realistic assessment of its position in the global AI ecosystem. India's comparative advantage today lies in its digital public infrastructure, software engineering talent, and AI applications rather than frontier innovation. Instead of attempting to compete simultaneously across every dimension of AI, India should

identify those frontier capabilities where it can realistically build comparative advantage over the next decade.

We could do three things. Firstly, we need two complementary national strategies: a short-term road map (two-three years) focused on rapidly strengthening AI infrastructure, talent, and institutional capacity, and a long-term road map (10 years) aimed at positioning India as a creator of frontier AI technologies rather than merely an adopter. To formulate these strategies, the government should constitute two independent yet complementary committees.

The first should be a parliamentary committee to build bipartisan political consensus and ensure continuity across electoral cycles. The second should be an expert commission comprising economists, computer scientists, AI researchers, industry leaders, national security experts, and public policy scholars. AI is not merely a technological issue; it is a general-purpose technology that will reshape labour markets, productivity, competition, inequality, public finance, education, healthcare, and national security.

Secondly, India should move beyond relying exclusively on its existing engineering institutions. While the IITs and IISc remain world-class educational institutions, the institutional structures, compen-

sation systems, and research incentives may be further designed to compete for the world's top AI researchers against organisations such as OpenAI, Google DeepMind, Anthropic, or leading American universities. India could therefore establish an Indian Institute of Artificial Intelligence (IIAI) as a globally competitive research institution with even equity stakes from IITs/IISc as well as the government of India with operational autonomy and internationally benchmarked salaries. The objective should be to attract leading Indian and international AI scientists, much as institutions such as the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence in the UAE, or the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research in Canada have successfully done. IIAI should establish joint research programmes, dual faculty appointments, and long-term collaborative laboratories with leading global AI institutions.

Thirdly, the creation of a robust AI research ecosystem through large-scale public compute infrastructure, access to high-quality data sets, and international collaboration. Appropriate frameworks should enable privacy-preserving data-sharing between government, academia, and large private firms while safeguarding commercial confidentiality and individual privacy.

India's IT industry became a global powerhouse by excelling in software services, systems integration, and implementation without owning the underlying computing platforms. However, unlike traditional software, value in AI increasingly accrues to those controlling the foundational models, computing infrastructure, semiconductor ecosystem, and robotics platforms. And in the long run, India should start investing in such technologies (as is being done in semiconductor across India) and emerge as a third global AI powerhouse.

Views are personal

A financing model needed for GPUs



MITUL SHAH SUNIL SANGHAI

Respectively Senior Vice President and Founder & CEO, NovaOne Capital Pvt Ltd

INDIA HAS JUST made the cloud giants a bold offer: Run your global business from Indian soil and pay almost no tax on it for close to 20 years. It is a smart move, but quietly shifts the hardest question of all: A modern data centre is no longer a building with some servers. It is a very expensive pile of chips that sit inside a building. The offer takes care of the tax on tomorrow's profits. It does nothing about the cost of the chips that create them.

Start with the part that is easy to fund. The physical data centre, land, building, power and cooling can be financed through a real estate investment trust (REIT) or an infrastructure investment trust (InvIT). These structures are dull by design, and that is exactly why they work. A REIT or InvIT takes assets that sit still and earn rent for years — office towers, warehouses, or the concrete and steel shell of a data centre. It can happily hold a cooling plant tied to a colocation contract that runs for a decade or more. Steady asset, steady rent, steady payout.

Now the twist, and it is India's data centre financing problem in a single picture. The numbers behind the boom are familiar by now. India's data centre capacity has roughly quadrupled, from about 375 Mw in 2020 to around 1,500 Mw in 2025. The FY27 Budget went a step further, offering a tax holiday until 2047 for foreign companies that serve the world's cloud demand from India. The message is simple: Run your global cloud business through an Indian data centre, and the income you earn from

customers abroad pays no Indian tax for the better part of two decades.

But a tax holiday is a promise about profits. We need to now focus on who pays for the asset that produces those profits. And in an AI data centre, that asset is mostly silicon. The computer layer, meaning the graphics processing units (GPUs) plus the servers, networking, and liquid cooling built around them, now eats up most of the money, commonly 60-80% of the total, and even more in

the densest sites. The land, building and power, the very things a REIT or InvIT understands, are now the smaller slice.

Which is why "how many megawatts have you announced" is the wrong question, and "how exactly are you paying for the chips" is the right one. GPUs are the textbook case for leasing. They cost a fortune upfront, go out of date quickly, and renting makes far more sense than owning them outright. But under India's GST, leasing equipment without transferring ownership usually attracts the same rate as the equipment itself, which is 18% for computer hardware. So the government offers a 20-year holiday on profits with one hand, and with the other collects 18% on the very asset. In theory, the tax can be claimed back. In practice, it must first be paid, recorded, and recovered, and if the

India's tax holiday for the world's cloud giants makes the profits tax-free. The real puzzle is who pays for the chips that earn them

output is treated as an exempt supply rather than a zero-rated export, that credit can get stuck for good.

None of this is unique to India, and that is the good news, because the rest of the world has already written the playbook. The idea everyone has landed on is simple: Do not fund a building that lasts 30 years and a chip that lasts three in the same way. Split them.

When Meta built its Hyperion campus in Louisiana, it did not put \$30 billion on its own books. It set up a separate company, kept 20% left Blue Owl and a group of pension and insurance investors own the rest, and then leased the site back. Around \$27 billion of debt sits in that vehicle, not Meta's balance sheet. CoreWeave took the opposite route and funded the chips directly, pledging its GPUs and customer contracts as security for loans

worth billions. Elon Musk's xAI is raising huge sums through a vehicle whose only job is to buy Nvidia chips and rent them back. Nvidia itself has pulled together a large group of investors to raise more than half a trillion dollars for exactly this kind of chip financing.

The pattern repeats everywhere. The infrastructure that lasts decades gets patient capital, the kind a REIT or InvIT provides. The silicon that ages in a few years gets leasing, vendor finance, or loans

raised against contracted cash flows. You put the building in a REIT or InvIT. You fund the GPU some other way.

India is closer to this than it looks. It already has an established REIT and InvIT market, about 32 listed trusts holding close to ₹10 lakh crore in assets, with a combined market value of roughly ₹5 lakh crore. That is solid proof that Indian investors will happily buy stable, income-generating infrastructure. Indian data centre operators are now lining up to tap the public markets. The real question is whether investors will price them as steady, REIT-like cash machines or as jumpy, fast-growing tech stocks. The honest answer is that it deserves a specialisation financing model.

That is where GIFT City can finally prove its worth. The International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA) has floated a proposal to treat the leasing of GPUs and related data centre equipment as a proper financial product inside the IFSC, the same move that made GIFT a credible home for aircraft and ship leasing.

A quick lesson from history, is in order. In the late 1990s, telecom companies laid enormous amounts of fibre worldwide, certain that demand would show up. When the bubble burst, most of it sat unused for years. The industry called it dark fibre. GPUs bought with cheap borrowing against contracts that later vanished could become this cycle's dark fibre, only with an even faster fall in value. So whatever we build must reward real usage, not press releases.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India's chip future

Apropos of "Chips, then chokepoints" (FE, September 23), the transformation of India's semiconductor landscape under Semicon 1.0 showcases the power of decisive policy action. Approving projects worth ₹21.44 lakh crore and fostering a vast talent pool of chip design engineers are commendable. The transition to Semicon 2.0, with its ₹127,500-crore outlay targeting the broader ecosystem (eq-

uipment, raw materials, and advanced packaging) is precisely the depth required to sustain long-term manufacturing capabilities. However, as the editorial rightly cautions, technology and economics alone do not guarantee success in this sector. History shows that geopolitical rivalries, trade disputes, and supply chain weaponisation can quickly derail progress. To safeguard these investments, India must focus on building resilient, multi-partner alliances, and reducing single-

point vulnerabilities. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Ecosystem challenge

India's semiconductor push has reached a new phase. A fresh challenge now is to make its geopolitical success resilient. The Semicon 2.0's ambitious outlay must deepen capabilities in equipment, materials, R&D, and talent, not merely fund investment. The strategy must move towards building a deeper, diversified domestic ecosystem.

stem. This means developing multiple suppliers, strengthening indigenous capabilities, and linking industry, research bodies, and talent. Such diversification can reduce vulnerabilities from concentrated global supply chains and shifting tech controls. The real test lies in building an ecosystem capable of sustaining growth and handling geopolitical pressures. —PV Prakash, Mumbai

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com



A thought for today
Competition is the best way to ensure
prescription drugs are affordable

AMY KLOBUCHAR

Commission Omission?

If consensus is frequently hard to obtain, job of a leader is to address the problem. That's the question for CEC

It is true, as EC's statement yesterday said, that differences are bound to rise in every organisation, especially those with critical mandates. But it also seems — per the *Indian Express* report — that CEC, arguably, took many important decisions the other two commissioners disagreed with. Any organisation's leader should first try to build a consensus. If this is not possible, dissenting points must be noted. Should consensus be elusive in multiple cases over a short period of time, then it is the job of a leader to ask himself why this is happening. That is one of the most important questions for CEC.

It is also instructive that many issues raised by the other two commissioners had already attracted discussions and a wide range of critical commentary. Among points raised earlier was the manner of implementing SIR, the unusually large number of deletions, at final and draft roll stages, and the fact that the appeals process may disenfranchise most of these voters for one or more elections. For instance, in Bengal, SC-appointed tribunals will take 12 years to clear 37L pending appeals. They'll potentially disenfranchise tens of thousands from at least two election cycles. Surely, even temporarily disenfranchising voters cannot be seen as a positive outcome by EC? Per *Express*, in Goa, 97 deleted names cleared by state poll officials for inclusion in rolls, could not be added to the centralised system.

EC said yesterday that this was a software problem. But what was done when this problem happened? Then, there's Form 6. Questions added to it have inconvenienced even the most educated voters. A large number of deletions have been due to voters' completely understandable inability to answer EC's questions on parents' voter roll details in earlier SIRs. The other point is Form 7, for "Objecting Inclusion of Name of Other Person". In Bengal, 16L of the 38L total appeals were about other entities seeking deletion of names cleared by judicial officials. EC said yesterday that it's a "fair question" to ask who filed these appeals. It is equally fair to ask why there's no clarity yet on the identities of these other entities.

It is nobody's case that voter rolls should not be scrutinised. EC's mandate is to ensure voter rolls are accurate. But EC's approach to scrutinising voter rolls must start with a bias for inclusion. The fundamental purpose of the exercise has to be to ensure every eligible voter remains on the rolls. It is central to the true spirit of the electoral process. That is a question EC should think about.

Bitter Medicine

Meds aren't optional. Their consumer price can't be left to sellers' pricing power. Fairness is a must

What's a fair margin on a life-saving drug? Not 900% certainly. Supreme Court said as much while hearing PILs on price fixation for medicines. When SC was told about a cancer drug that costs ₹2,700 to retailers, but has an MRP of ₹27,000, and an antibiotic with a market price of ₹350, but MRP of ₹3,635, which large hospitals exploit, it termed their pricing "extortion" and "dacoity". Unfortunately, such price gouging is neither new nor unusual. In 2018, National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority had found that some private hospitals were profiting up to 1,737% on drugs, consumables and diagnostics.

It is an open secret, but why hasn't the problem been fixed? That's the other question SC raised. It also made some recommendations, such as placing all meds under price control, and selling them at govt's Jan Aushadhi Kendras. Both are tempting ideas, but price caps can be indiscriminate, and the 19,000-odd Jan Aushadhi Kendras nationwide can't be a counterweight to the over 1.2m chemists and hospital pharmacies. What is needed is a rational and reasonable mechanism to set profit margins on meds. It could, for example, mean capping margins at each stage, from the factory gate to stockists, wholesalers and retailers. In fact, mandatory listing of retailers' cost price and MRP for all medicines will be a big disincentive against price gouging.

Ideally, pharma firms and hospitals ought to self-regulate, rather than behaving like "pharma bro" Martin Shkreli, who earned lifelong notoriety in 2015 by jacking up the price of essential drug Daraprim from \$13.50 to \$750. But since they won't, govt must intervene because meds aren't optional. MRP's are completely disconnected with costs of production and retail also have a market distorting effect. Sellers, such as hospitals, give preference to suppliers who're willing to print the highest prices for them. This hurts ethical firms — which we want more of — and all patients.

Neta in egg-role

It's quite a dramatic production

Bachi Karkaria



'What Bengal does today, the rest of India does tomorrow,' Gopal Krishna Gokhale's quote has not only been poached by other leaders; other states keep scrambling to endorse it. Punjab is the latest example. Copying Bhatu Janta Party's egotistical way of celebrating its historic eastern victory, former Union minister Ravneet Singh Bittu was detained last weekend for similarly pelting current chief minister Bhagwant Mann's convoy. Adding tomatoes to the fusillade, he really made a meal of him. Back in Bengal, Mahua Moitra is deemed the fittest target. Particularly unpalatable seeing how poaching has fried TMC's future, Indira Gandhi is officially the first Indian leader to be 'egged' — in UK in 1978, in protest against her Emergency which did the same to democracy.

Well may you ask why Bengal's Bhejotar Party walls are defiling their hands with this forbidden food. Alimentary, my dear Bhotson. By using up all the eggs, there's no left chickens left to eat. A small step towards politics, a giant leap for vegetarianism.

A sense of humour isn't feisty Mahua's strongest suit, else she could counter in the cool way of past attacks. On being thus hit in 2000, Madeleine Albright cracked, 'We left too early for breakfast, so here are our eggs!' Arnold Schwarzenegger during his 2003 California gubernatorial campaign growled back, 'This guy owes me bacon now.'

On the 2010 UK election trail, a cocky reporter dressed in a chicken suit had trailed David Cameron to show he was 'too chicken'. When the following day a college student aimed the ovoid at him, the Conservative Party leader couldn't duck, but he did deadpan, 'Now I know which came first — the chicken not the egg.' He had to form the govt with the LibDems — led by Nick Clegg. The serene Japanese have countered that eternal conundrum with Oyakodon; the 'parent and child rice bowl' uses both simultaneously.

Wow! The 'square meal in oval shape' is breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, and serves political purpose too. While there's no Egg Benedict but plenty of Frittata, does this mean that all such protesters are *oufs*?

Answer The EC Questions

Commission's statement doesn't address all issues raised in Express report satisfactorily. CEC's actions must be fair and seen to be fair. SC should look at ambiguities in EC appointments law

R Jagannathan



Election Commission's impartiality though under opposition attack for some time now, faces a stronger test following a report in *Indian Express*. The report suggested that two of the three commissioners, Sirabir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi, have had serious misgivings about how things are being decided within EC.

An EC statement said "differing views and observations are normal part of deliberation in any institution." Point taken. But the statement, which also said, "differences are part of the decision-making process before a final decision...", doesn't quite address all the issues in the *Express* report.

Among other things, the report says these two commissioners filed 14 formal objections to decisions taken by EC, even alleging that some decisions were taken without them even being consulted. The differences stem largely from EC's decision last year on conducting SIR, which removed over 130m voters from the draft electoral rolls across states (appeals can lead to restoration).

There were also serious concerns over changes made to Form 6, the form new voters fill in order to get onto the rolls. The changes to Form 6 ask new voters to indicate whether their parents' or grandparents' names were in the previous SIR list complied over two decades ago. Another point of difference between the two commissioners and CEC is the gradual centralisation of electoral rolls, as opposed to the decentralised nature of current voter registration and voter roll maintenance.

These reports put the spotlight on CEC Gyanesh Kumar's handling of EC, while also engendering the question whether his two fellow commissioners have enough confidence in his stewardship. While EC decisions do not require the backing of all commissioners, democratic functioning requires CEC to act largely on the basis of consensus. If CEC is often seen to act in isolation, it cannot but raise questions on the fairness of decisions made. CEC's actions have to not only be fair, but seen to be fair.

Kumar clearly needs to clear the air if we are to view EC as an impartial body.

The question is not whether a nationwide SIR was right or wrong. SIRs have been carried out eight times without political muckraking. It is whether EC and its temporary administrative machinery — most of it borrowed from state govt and public sector bodies — was fully equipped to handle the scale of the operation in the short time available to it before major elections in Bihar and Bengal.

One person who made things difficult for EC was Mamata Banerjee, whose party brass (and she herself) repeatedly threatened state officials involved in SIR exercise, thus delaying the process. It must be pointed out that SIR did not derail elections in Tamil Nadu and



Kerala. The lesson clearly is that when political parties cooperate and work to ensure voter inclusions and exclusions, the process can be relatively smoother. What should now worry us is this: even after Supreme Court's intervention, the bulk of the appeals of those excluded remain undecided.

Another issue is whether fundamental changes to Form 6, the primary route through which new voters' names are added, should have been made by including a question on whether or not parents or grandparents were part of the previous SIR. Those filling Form 6 should have been given the option of leaving the question unanswered or even a 'don't know' option. Finding one's name in the electoral register is tough enough for most people; finding names of parents and grandparents is tougher. Why put voters-to-be through this wringer?

The third, and most important issue, flagged by the *Express* report is the question of the alleged non-collegial nature of decision-making in the current EC. While the current CEC/EC appointments law — CEC and Other ECs (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 — says CEC must abide by majority opinion, the *Express* report suggests that the two commissioners have alleged they were kept out of decision-making altogether.

The fourth issue, the only issue on which one can disagree with the two commissioners, is centralisation of the voter database. There is a point to be made about whether this should be centralised with TDepartment, where the full commission has little oversight. But centralising the database is vital to ensure safety of voter lists. But, once again, the CEC has to carry his fellow commissioners along in his decision.

Some of these questions will surely end up in SC, which has so far allowed EC leeway to do its own thing, on SIR and other issues.

SC yesterday heard a PIL on whether CEC and ECs should be appointed by a panel that includes CJI. But this can bring judiciary's credibility into question, should commissioners appointed with CJI's concurrence be dragged to court over alleged failures. SC has referred pleas that challenged the 2023 appointments law to a five-judge bench.

But regardless of who appoints poll commissioners, EC's functioning can be called into question. The problem isn't the selection procedure, but legal provisions that are ambiguous on the collective powers of the three-member commission.

The current law governing the appointment of election commissioners says that the decision-making process says that its business shall, "as far as possible, be transacted unanimously". This is too vague to carry muster.

SC will have to put the question on not just these ambiguities, but also overall powers of EC which is a constitutional body with its own quasi-judicial powers. The court would be wise not to curtail those powers, but to specify how they can be democratised further.

Politically, this is a hot potato that GOI cannot duck. SC is already engaged with some of the relevant questions. It's time to sort these issues out once and for all. Electoral democracy demands nothing less.

QI Growth Was Strong. Can It Be Sustained?

Pick-up in India's private capex shows businesses expect strong, sustained demand growth. Jobs and productivity gains will follow. What needs attention is business environment for very large manufacturing facilities

Tulsi Jayakumar



The debate surrounding India's QI GDP growth print of 7.8% for FY 2026-27 is its timeliness about ideology rather than methodology. Critics can debate deflators and statistical adjustments endlessly, but the litmus test for sustainable growth lies in what is happening to private capital investment.

When viewed through this lens, India's growth engine is undergoing a structural transformation. For decades, India's narrative was built on a simple formula: an expanding middle class driving consumer spending, coupled with a thriving IT and services export sector. Today that engine is pivoting towards industrial resurgence, with investment in plant, machinery and physical capital increasing as a proportion of GDP to 34.3% in Q1 2026-27. It's also showing robust growth of 11.9% in the same period — more than double the rate recorded in Q1 last year.

This metric should matter far more to policymakers and market observers than any headline growth number. While GDP growth can be driven by private consumption or govt spending, investment reflects structural sentiment. Consumption tells us how much households are spending today; investment reveals what businesses believe about the future.

A factory owner does not invest capital in modern machinery industrial land, or new capacity simply because a single quarter's numbers look favourable. They do so because they expect sustained demand to justify the bet. When private capex accelerates at this pace, it represents a vote of corporate confidence that no statistical deflator can fake. Investment then creates the physical assets, manufacturing jobs, and productivity gains that eventually fuel demand for domestic wealth.

Credit and production data corroborate the shift in India's growth engine. Bank credit to industry has grown by 20% year-on-year in July 2026, a massive leap from 6.5% in July 2025. On the production side, manufacturing expanded by 9.2%, with high growth in capital goods production, especially the high-tech and heavy manufacturing segments, electrical equipment,

and transport equipment output.

Another clear proof lies in the Index of Core Industries, which measures output of the essential building blocks of an economy including electricity, steel, cement, coal, and manufacturing. These backbone sectors have accelerated, with overall core sector output growth accelerating to 5.4%, driven by massive surges in key physical inputs comprising iron ore production, cement output and electricity generation.

These are physical, tangible goods being funded, produced, moved and installed. More importantly, growth in the output of these core sectors and intermediate goods — the semi-finished components and materials used to make final products — indicates that the industrial

pipeline is filling up and factory supply chains are gearing up for significantly higher final production down the line.

There is reason to believe this investment momentum can compound over the coming years.

Over recent months, govt has executed a targeted, capital-intensive policy push to crowd in private investment behind state commitment. Strategic initiatives like Semicon 2.0, the expanded mobile manufacturing scheme, offshore resource exploration via Samudra Manthan, floating solar installations under PMSSV, and reforms opening govt securities to foreign portfolio investment are all designed to diversify private capital expansion. If these announced outlays convert into ground-level execution, the multiplier effect will be substantial.

Yet, this optimism requires a grounded reality check. Manufacturing jobs and productivity gains that eventually fuel demand for domestic wealth.

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Yet, this optimism requires a grounded reality check.

Manufacturing jobs and productivity gains that eventually fuel demand for domestic wealth.

Credit and production data corroborate the shift in India's growth engine. Bank credit to industry has grown by 20% year-on-year in July 2026, a massive leap from 6.5% in July 2025. On the production side, manufacturing expanded by 9.2%, with high growth in capital goods production, especially the high-tech and heavy manufacturing segments, electrical equipment,

and transport equipment output.

Another clear proof lies in the Index of Core Industries, which measures output of the essential building blocks of an economy including electricity, steel, cement, coal, and manufacturing. These backbone sectors have accelerated, with overall core sector output growth accelerating to 5.4%, driven by massive surges in key physical inputs comprising iron ore production, cement output and electricity generation.

The metric that should concern policymakers far more than GDP debates is manufacturing's persistent low share of national output. Twelve years after the launch of 'Make in India' campaign promised to raise manufacturing's contribution to GDP to 25%, the sector's share still hovers near 12.6%. The target date has quietly shifted from 2022 to 2035, and is now folded into the broader Viksit Bharat 2047 framework.

Strong quarterly manufacturing growth of 9.2% is undeniably positive, but a few strong quarters cannot erase a decade-long structural plateau. Today, India accounts for roughly 3% of global manufacturing output, compared with China's 32%. Reaching the 25% GDP target will require investment to compound continuously for years, not just across isolated quarters.

This structural gap explains why World Bank's upcoming Business Ready (B-READY) assessment carries strategic importance. Investment can create capacity, but whether firms can actually build and operate that capacity depends on how well the business environment works in practice.

Unlike the legacy Ease of Doing Business index, which countries learned to game through paper-level legislative tweaks, B-READY measures whether regulations, utility access, labour practices, and public services work in operational reality. It evaluates the ground-level experience of a firm trying to secure power connections, clear customs, or resolve a commercial dispute.

India has introduced over 9,700 state-level reforms and eliminated nearly 47,000 regulatory compliances over the past decade. If these efforts translate into a strong, credible B-READY score, it will signal to international investors that the country is truly transforming its business environment.

Debating quarterly GDP deflators may fuel headlines, but the number that actually defines India's economic future isn't 7.8%. The real test is whether capital investment keeps compounding, whether manufacturing breaks out of its long plateau, and whether global benchmarks like B-READY confirm that paper reforms have become practical realities on the factory floor.

The writer is professor of Economics & Policy, Bhavan's SJMIR. Views are personal.

Sacred space

Every discussion which is made from an egoistic standpoint is corrupted from the start and cannot yield an absolutely sure conclusion. The ego puts its own interest first and twists every argument, word, even fact to suit that interest.

Paul Brunton

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Calvin & Hobbes



Aditya Mukherjee

In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark, the architect, is depicted as a solitary bulwark against conformity. Roark, the fiercely independent architect conceived by Ayn Rand, refuses to borrow either convictions or standards from society. This spirited version of collectivist values resonates with readers. "I set my own standards," he declares, insisting that thought is an intensely personal act and that there can never be a "collective brain". Where one agrees entirely with Rand's philosophy or not, Roark's defiant individualism raises an enduring question for modern society: are we slowly surrendering our individuality at the altar of collectivism?

Human civilisation certainly requires cooperation. No society can function without institutions, shared responsibilities and mutual obligations. Yet collectivism becomes dangerous when it demands intellectual obedience rather than social

harmony. The moment individuals stop thinking for themselves and begin outsourcing conscience, judgement and imagination to the crowd, societies become spiritually stagnant. A civilisation may possess technological sophistication and material abundance, yet remain intellectually impoverished if its citizens merely echo inherited opinions.

The modern world often rewards conformity more generously than originality. Social media algorithms encourage herd behaviour, reducing complex ideas to slogans and outrage. Political tribes expect unquestioning loyalty. Educational systems, at times, value conventional success metrics over curiosity and dissent. In such an atmosphere, independent thinking begins to appear inconvenient, even rebellious. The individual who questions prevailing assumptions is frequently treated not as a seeker of truth but as a subversive force.

History repeatedly shows, however, that progress has always depended on individuals who dared to think differently. Scientific discoveries, artistic revolutions and moral transformations seldom emerge from committees devoted to consensus. They emerge from solitary minds willing to endure ridicule and isolation. Galileo's heliocentric model, Copernicus' accepted cosmology, Rabinadrath

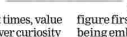
Tagore resisted narrow nationalism and mechanical education. BR Ambedkar opposed the idea that one's birth or social background should decide the course of one's life. Every transformative figure first stood apart before eventually being embraced by society.

In Walden, American philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau retreated to the woods near Walden Pond, seeking not physical isolation for its own sake, but liberation from what he considered the deadening routines of society. His

famous assertion — "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer" — remains one of the most eloquent defences of individuality ever written. Thoreau understood that the health of society ultimately depends upon the courage of individuals to preserve their inner voice against the noise of the multitude.

Collectivism often promises security, belonging and certainty. Yet when taken to extremes, it reduces human beings to atoms within a collective structure. Individuality, by contrast, is not selfishness. It is the cultivation of one's moral imagination, intellectual independence and personal authenticity. A society of independent minds is far more resilient than a society of obedient followers, because activity and ethical courage flourish only where people are free to think for themselves. Civilisation advances not through the security of unanimous opinion but through the restless energy of questioning minds.

THE SPEAKING TREE





Editor's TAKE

A campus in mourning, a system on trial

Sahil Wakode's death, whatever its cause, is a verdict on a system that has failed its students and exposes the rot that has claimed three young lives

The death of Sahil Wakode, a second-year B.Tech student in IIT Bombay's Department of Energy Science and Engineering, has shaken India's academic conscience and dominated national headlines. On September 18, hours after he was allegedly caught using a mobile phone during a mid-semester examination accused of uploading the question paper to an AI platform for answers. Wakode was found dead in his hostel room. No suicide note was recovered. What followed was swifter and murkier: protests erupted across the Powai campus, an FIR was registered under the abetment-to-suicide provision and the SC/ST Act, and within days, Professor Suryanarayana Doolia, who had invigilated the exam, was removed as Dean of Administrative Affairs.

The core dispute is now a contest of narratives. Wakode's parents allege their son endured casteist slurs and "torture" for three months, allegedly at the professor's hands and, they claim, on the director's own instruction. IIT Bombay's administration, led by Director Shireesh Kedare, has firmly denied any caste bias, noting that no complaint was ever filed with the institute's SC/ST cell and insisting Wakode was merely counselled after the exam incident, not threatened with expulsion. His father disputes even the cheating narrative, calling it a deflection from harder questions the institute would rather not answer.

A responsible view must resist collapsing this into a single villain. If the caste allegations hold up, they demand the harshest consequences for the individuals involved and for an institution now facing this charge twice in three years, since the 2023 death of Darshan Solanki reignited the same debate over caste on IIT campuses. But an FIR is not a conviction, and the administration's denial, however self-serving it may appear, cannot be dismissed until the Mumbai Bench Branch's investigation establishes the facts.

What is not in dispute, and should trouble everyone regardless of which account prevails, is that Wakode is the third student to die by suicide at IIT Bombay in seven months, after Naman Agarwal in February and Sohail Sangwan in July. That statistic alone indicts a campus culture, whatever the specific trigger this time. As things stand, Doolia has been removed from his administrative post, though not yet formally charged pending inquiry, while Kedare remains director despite student demands for his resignation. Protesting students have raised eighteen demands, chief among them an independent investigation panel with external and student representation expected to report by September 30, alongside a serious overhaul of the mental health and counselling infrastructure on campus.

The way forward cannot be cosmetic. IIT Bombay needs a genuinely independent probe insulated from institutional self-interest, a functioning and trusted SC/ST grievance mechanism that students actually believe in, and examination-malpractice protocols that counsel rather than terrorise students already buckling under academic pressure.

How Modi changed Odisha's growth story

In Odisha, Modi's impact is increasingly visible — in roads and railways, ports and airports, investment and tribal development. The larger question is whether this Centre-State partnership is doing more than building infrastructure: is it reshaping Odisha's place in India's economic landscape?



MOHAN CHARAN MAJHI

On September 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi turned 76. Birthdays like this usually bring out tributes. I could write one easily enough. But I'd rather ask a simpler question. It's the kind of question a state government owes its own people. Has this leadership actually changed how Odisha grows? I think it has. I want to walk you through 'why' and 'how'.

This question isn't abstract for me. For Odisha, a state long rich in mineral wealth but historically kept on the edge of national economic planning, the answer isn't just rhetorical but measurable. You can see it in rail connectivity, in port capacity and in investment inflows. A policy architecture called Purvodaya now treats eastern India's growth as central and not something of secondary importance.

From welfare list to growth strategy

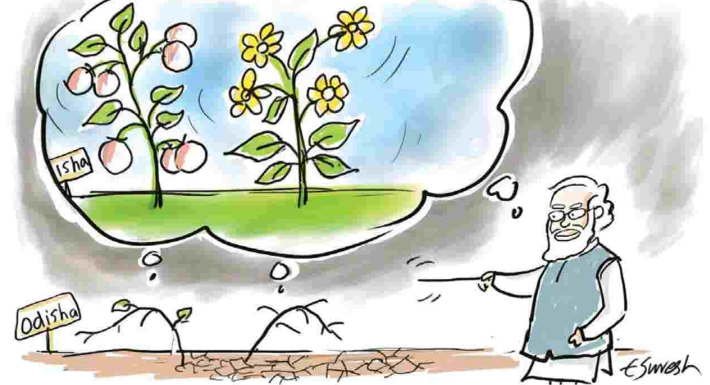
The Prime Minister's idea of Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas gets talked about mostly in political terms. The more useful test for me is administrative. Has it actually changed how we get access to the state? In Odisha's case, it has. Our tribal communities make up 23 per cent of the state's population. They used to be treated mainly as a welfare category. Now they sit at the centre of how we plan industry and infrastructure, including value addition in the mineral belt and coverage under Ayushman Bharat and PM Awas Yojana.

The point I want to make here is structural, not personal. When a government treats tribal-belt development as a core economic strategy rather than a mere side welfare programme, outcomes change at scale. That shift will possibly outlast me and every other Chief Minister.

What has the double-engine government built?

Since our government took office, closer coordination between Bhubaneswar and Delhi has produced things we can actually track. A rail programme built to connect all 30 districts of the state. Continued expansion of capacity at Paradip Port. There is a massive effort to build new roads, ports and airports. We are building connectivity across land, water and air. A real and sustained push to bring in global capital.

That last point isn't theory for me right now. I got back from a three-day investment roadshow in the UAE, and our delegation across Abu Dhabi and Dubai proudly came away with proposals worth roughly ₹243 lakh crore. The potential is well close to nine lakh jobs, along



I MUST PROUDLY SAY THAT ODISHA CAN NOW WALK INTO A ROOM WITH SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUNDS AND BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. NOT AS A PLACE YOU EXTRACT MINERALS FROM BUT AS AN INVESTMENT DESTINATION IN ITS OWN RIGHT. THAT IS THE CHANGE I KEEP TRYING TO DESCRIBE

The writer is the Chief Minister of Odisha

with eight signed MoUs. The total investment proposals with us now are over ₹22.5 lakh crore. We are already witnessing investments worth over ₹3.11 lakh crore on the ground. Factories are being built, production being commissioned and jobs being created.

I must proudly say that Odisha can now walk into a room with sovereign wealth funds and be taken seriously. Not as a place you extract minerals from but as an investment destination in its own right. That is the change I keep trying to describe.

That is what Purvodaya actually means in practice. It isn't a slogan about eastern India rising. But it's about infrastructure spending and investor attention finally going to a region that spent decades exporting raw minerals and getting very little value addition back.

Our own state initiatives add to that, which is a reduced stamp duty for economically weaker sections under PMAY-U 2.0, along with new irrigation and water security projects. All of it is meant to keep that investment local, not let it pass through.

Security first

Growth needs peace before it can take root. Odisha's security situation has genuinely changed. Districts that were Maoist strongholds for three decades, places like Malkangiri, Koraput and Kandhamal, have seen a real and sustained fall in Naxal activity. Growth corridors and security corridors have finally lined up. That didn't happen consistently in earlier decades. I count it as one of the quieter but more important results of Centre-State coordination under this government.

Closing the gap

Odisha's per capita income and human development indicators still trail several peer states. We are working to close them, not explain them away. One such instance is our Subhadra Yojana. This is one attempt to close income gaps for women. The scheme, along with the rest of the Purvodaya effort, is actually delivering measurable effects. The reports of several organisations, like IIM Sambalpur and SBI, are encouraging. Women are increasingly attracted to doing business.

Confident abroad, close to home

In the end, what strikes me most about the Prime Minister's decade in office isn't any one particular scheme. It's the way he holds two things together that rarely sit comfortably in Indian politics. First, a foreign policy that is confident enough to negotiate as an equal at G20 forums. Second, a domestic style, Mann Ki Baat above all, built around direct connect with people in India's smallest villages.

Odisha's international profile used to be thin despite our coastline and our mineral wealth. That global confidence has had a real spillover effect now. International capital is now willing to look at eastern India for investment, and not just as a development liability.

With Modi at the helm, we are confident of Odisha's transformation in a few more years. Odisha is narrowing the gap. The coming years are going to be our years of destiny. Samrudhha Odisha is in the offing.

Daiv Vani

WISDOM FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

The Squirrel's Share of the Bridge

We tend to believe our contribution only counts if it is large enough to be noticed. The building of the bridge to Lanka quietly corrects that belief.

As Rama's army of monkeys and bears carried massive boulders to build a bridge across the ocean, a small squirrel began rolling in the sand and shaking pebbles from its fur onto the rocks, trying to help in whatever way it could.

Some mocked its tiny effort as meaningless beside such enormous labour. Rama, noticing this, stopped, picked up the squirrel gently, and stroked its back, declaring that its contribution mattered exactly as much as any boulder carried by the mightiest warrior.

Scale was never the measure. Sincerity of effort was. We often hold back from helping because our contribution feels too small to matter beside what others bring, forgetting that effort is not measured by size, but by wholeheartedness.

Today, offer whatever small effort is within your reach toward something meaningful, without waiting until you can contribute something larger.

-DAIV

The power of changing our perspective



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION

It's a common thing for us to experience emotions directly through the body. For example, when we go out to meet someone whom we love a lot, we walk lightly with our hearts pounding with excitement, whereas anxiety might tighten our muscles and make our hands sweat and tremble before an important job interview, right? Numerous studies carried out over the last decade or so have established that emotion systems prepare us to meet challenges encountered in the environment by adjusting the activation of the cardiovascular, skeleto-muscular, neuroendocrine and autonomic nervous systems.

This link between emotions and bodily states is also reflected in the way we speak or behave. For example, a young girl who is about to get married in a week's time may suddenly have cold feet and experience nervousness.



Similarly, those lovers who have had a bad break-up and are heartbroken may experience a shiver down their spine on hearing their favourite song being played somewhere. To put it in simple words, all the above examples mean that our thoughts and feelings can affect our body directly, and they can very well have an effect on what we think, what we feel and what we do.

Shakespeare rightly said, "For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." The fact is that even though we are not faced with sabre-toothed tigers every day, life presents us with lots of situations which can be perceived as threatening, naturally triggering a stress response from within us. For example, if you climb the stairs instead of taking a lift to your fourth-floor apartment and, immediately after entering your home, you experience uncomfortable symptoms like a pounding heart and excessive sweat-

ing, you might instantly have the thought: "Gosh, I'm not as fit as I used to be; maybe I need to see my doctor and get a thorough check-up."

Now suppose that instead of having a negative thought on entering home, you just sit down calmly and do a simple deep-breathing exercise. You may feel completely fine in a few minutes and continue with your day as usual, without any great change in how you feel. This example clearly shows that the same experience, if interpreted differently, can result in very different feelings and emotions.

Today, most of us are living in body consciousness resulting from the false identification of the self with the body. Such limited identities then influence our thoughts and actions and give rise to emotions like insecurity, fear, selfishness and hatred. Thus, those who are ignorant of the soul are severely bound by their body, and they think, act and live their whole lives in a narrow, limited way that makes everything in their lives limited.

Hence, in order to live a liberated life, we need to realise the truth that we are all spiritual beings in a human body and, birth after birth, we continue to play different roles. Thus, by being soul-conscious, we can transcend our fears, attachments and desires, and we can also conquer the fear of death and any kind of physical loss, thereby experiencing our original qualities such as peace, joy and love in an unlimited way.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SIR and the irony of democracy

A telemarketer once called then Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee to offer him a housing loan during a meeting with the Opposition. The telemarketer and reality collided to produce unintended comedy.

SIR has discovered its own humour. During the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls, names such as LK Advani, S Jaishankar, Jagdeep Dhanakar, Rekha Gupta, Arvind Kejriwal and SS Sandhu have figured among those receiving notices over electoral discrepancies. The Election Commission clarified that receiving a notice does not, by itself, mean deletion from the electoral roll. It is part of a verification process and gives the person concerned an opportunity to establish the details.

But if people who have occupied high public offices can find themselves having to produce documents to establish their electoral credentials, what does this mean for an ordinary citizen with limited paperwork, an outdated address, missing records or little familiarity with official procedures?

The right to vote is universal. Its exercise should not become a bureaucratic obstacle course. Democracy gives every citizen one vote. SIR, it seems, may first demand a file to prove that you exist.

AP THIRUVAD | CHENNAI

Erdogan raises Kashmir issue at UNGA

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has raised the Kashmir issue again at the United Nations General Assembly, calling for disputes in South Asia to be addressed through dialogue and within the framework of the UN Charter. "In South Asia, it is important that all disputes, including the Kashmir issue, be addressed through dialogue within the framework of the United Nations Charter and relevant resolutions," Erdogan said in his address on Tuesday.

He delivered the remarks in the presence of Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif at the UN headquarters. Erdogan has repeatedly used the UNGA platform to raise the Kashmir issue in recent years, despite India's objections. Beyond Kashmir, Erdogan used his address to call for stronger international action on Gaza, renewed recognition of Palestinian statehood and reforms to the UN Security Council.

Erdogan has used his UNGA addresses to comment on Kashmir on several occasions. His remarks have varied in tone, but the issue has remained a recurring feature of his speeches.

The remarks drew attention to Ankara's focus on Kashmir at the UNGA, while India has opposed references to Kashmir.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Celebrating the girl child

National Daughters' Day, celebrated on September 25, is an occasion to celebrate and cherish the girl child and remind daughters how deeply they are loved and valued. Although children need no special occasion to receive love and affection, the day gives parents an opportunity to express appreciation and create special memories with their daughters.

A daughter is a precious gift to a family. She brings love, warmth and happiness into the home and can grow into a strong pillar of support. In Indian culture, daughters are often regarded as a blessing and lovingly associated with Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity. Daughters' Day also highlights the importance of girls in society and reinforces the message that girls are equal to boys and deserve the same opportunities to learn, grow and succeed. It provides an opportunity to challenge social prejudices that have, in some communities, treated the birth of a girl as less desirable than that of a boy.

Parents play a vital role in building a daughter's confidence by encouraging her abilities, supporting her dreams and respecting her individuality.

Every girl deserves love, education, dignity, encouragement and equal opportunities.

JUBEL D'Cruz | MUMBAI



Students form a human chain in the shape of India's map as part of the 'Seva Sankalp Abhiyan', in Prayagraj PHOTO: PTI

Minor forest produce: Reconciling forest rights with conservation

The system governing minor forest produce collection and trade is caught between overlapping laws, unclear institutional responsibilities, weak regulation and growing commercial pressure. Unless forest rights are balanced with ecological responsibility, India risks degrading the very resource on which millions of forest communities depend



India has traditionally maintained a powerful presence in global natural ingredient supply chains, exporting processed lac, natural gums and herbal extracts to international pharmaceutical, food and cosmetic markets. India's trade in Non-Timber Forest Produce (Minor Forest Produce, or MFP, in legal parlance) and bio-based commodities reveals two distinct structural dynamics: agricultural/cultivated natural commodities, such as guar gum and herbal extracts, maintain large export volumes, whereas commodities of wild origin harvested from forests, such as tendu leaves, myrobalams, khair and tree gums, are trapped in stagnant or declining domestic yields and business.

Over the recent five-year period, natural medicinal extracts generated ₹4,500 crore to ₹6,500 crore annually due to expanding global demand for nutraceuticals and phytoconstituents. Guar gum and resins yielded around ₹3,300 crore to ₹5,200 crore, while processed lac gave export earnings of ₹280 crore to ₹400 crore per year. Conversely, traditional wild/forest-origin commodities faced severe structural decline: tendu leaves, earning under ₹160 crore, followed a downward trajectory, while the value of myrobalams exported was ₹40 crore to ₹80 crore and that of khair (katha/cutch) under ₹40 crore.

Driven by expanding global demand and the value of natural products, monetary values may sometimes appear to climb, but in the heart of India's ancient woodlands, a silent legal, economic and ecological tragedy is brewing. While global procurement standards strictly mandate product traceability, organic certification and consistent quality, India's forest produce trade is plunging into chaos due to unorganised and fragmented collection of MFPs under a puzzling criss-cross of legal instruments, poor implementation of laws and weak local management, habitat depletion-led unsustainability in yields, adulteration and poor post-harvest handling, with a lack of functional primary processing units. In fact, the sustainability of MFPs, ranging from gums and bamboos to lac, resins and medicinal plants, which forms the economic backbone for over 100 million forest-dependent individuals across the country, is under threat.

A serious danger to India's minor forest produce (MFP) stems from a chaotic clash and, quite often, an executive misinterpretation of overlapping statutes - including the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA); the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA); the Biological Diversity Act, 2002; and amendments to the Indian Forest Act, 1927, along with the decriminalisation of some forest and forest-land related offences by the Jharkhand Forest Rights Act, 2023. They collectively result in a de facto severance of economic extraction rights from ecological responsibility on the ground. Although PESA uses the phrase 'Gram Sabhas are endowed with the ownership of Minor Forest Produce', the prevalent perception of people's relationship with MFP does not go beyond viewing selected MFPs as money-yielding resources simply to be exploited for financial gain. The overstretching of the term 'ownership' used in PESA and FRA to include 'management' as well as ownership of unsevered, standing minor forest produce (which is essentially an immovable property belonging to the state), coupled with the non-formalisation of the duties of FRA beneficiaries, local-level institutions (such as Joint Forest Management committees) and Gram Sabhas, although mandated by the FRA, has been disastrous. The poorly integrated Biological Diversity Act's access and benefit-sharing (ABS) mechanism, for want of a clearly determined chain of custody, has affected erstwhile unfettered oversight, leaving regulatory boundaries blurred.

Non-realisation of the dangers of sidelining experienced Forest Departments to leave today's unequipped and overburdened Gram Sabhas in sole charge of complex forest ecosystems is dreadful. Any unregulated commercial extraction without management plans destroys natural regeneration, severely compromises critical ecosystem services and collapses tribal livelihood safety nets. The



AS REGARDS GOVERNANCE, THE COMMERCIAL MOVEMENT OF MINOR FOREST PRODUCE REQUIRES ROBUST DIGITAL TRACEABILITY AND TRANSIT CONTROLS, SUCH AS INTEGRATION WITH THE NATIONAL TRANSIT PASS SYSTEM (NTPS) TIED TO HARVEST DECLARATIONS. GEO-TAGGING OF HARVEST ORIGINS MUST BE INSISTED UPON TO PREVENT ILLEGAL REMOVALS AND CURB THE LAUNDERING OF ILLICIT FOREST PRODUCE UNDER THE PRETEXT OF EXERCISING FOREST RIGHTS

BKP Sinha and Arvind Kumar Jha are Former Principal Chief Conservators of Forests (PCCFs), Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra

conundrum is compounded by the 2023 Community Forest Rights guidelines issued by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, local-level attempts to edge out the enforcement machinery in the name of democratisation, and institutional abdication exhibited by the forestry sector.

The ground-level situation created due to the above leaves the Gram Sabhas vulnerable to capture by commercial trade syndicates. The examples of the working of bamboo and tendu leaves in states such as Maharashtra are worth studying in this regard. On the silvicultural front, abandonment of scientific working plans and carrying-capacity limits, combined with market forces, is directly leading to destructive tapping, ring-barking and over-harvesting, destroying the natural regeneration of species such as bamboo, khair, tendu and gum karaya. Driven by powerful global and domestic market forces and demanding cheap raw botanicals, the institutional vacuum provides easy ground for commercial intermediaries to maximise short-term profits, threatening the irreversible ecological collapse of forest canopies and the ultimate destruction of the very resource on which tribal livelihoods depend.

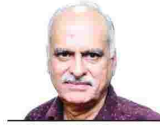
A prominent concern is the selective projection of isolated success stories driven by exceptional civil society support or rare administrative leadership. Such examples can mask the gap between statutory intent and ground implementation elsewhere. As a result, scalability suffers, site-specific needs remain unaddressed, and many tribal and forest-dweller communities remain disempowered. Protecting ecological capital while respecting forest dwellers' rights requires an urgent course correction.

Sustaining forest rights to MFPs while ensuring ecological sustainability requires a clear statutory distinction between ownership of harvested produce and responsibility for overall forest management. The Forest Department must maintain forest health and sustained MFP supply through scientific working plans, while rights holders must respect carrying-capacity limits. This balance should involve Joint Forest Management committees on public forest lands. In 'Community Forest Resource' areas, formal management plans should be implemented within the statutory framework of the FRA, as mandated.

As regards governance, commercial movement of minor forest produce requires robust digital traceability and transit controls, including integration with the National Transit Pass System (NTPS) and harvest declarations. Geo-tagging harvest origins can prevent illegal removals and curb laundering of illicit forest produce. State procurement bodies such as TRIFED, the Girijan Cooperative Corporation and state MFP federations should move from passive buyers to active stewardship partners, linking Minimum Support Price disbursements to sustainably harvested and certified MFPs while supporting biodiversity conservation and natural regeneration. At the village level, institutional mechanisms should be rationalised, with tribal self-help group hubs for primary processing and capacity-building to ensure greater local economic benefits.

Finally, the escalation of pressure on forest resources, gradual reduction in MFP production and expansion of local stakeholder populations make it imperative to enact policy decisions that reduce reliance on minor forest produce of wild origin. As a concomitant measure, national policy must shift towards promoting high-value species cultivation on private farmlands while simultaneously strengthening protection measures in forest areas to curb illicit removals. Focus should be given to skill training in ecotourism and green technologies that move local youth into higher-paying, off-forest jobs. Simultaneously, systems for rewarding conservation, utilisation of carbon markets and creating allied livelihoods with predictable incomes must be established to make, especially for forest dwellers, our living forests far more valuable than harvested MFPs. It's high time the policymakers took a call on this!

Tamil Nadu alliance vs INDIA Bloc



ANIL ANAND

As the emergence of a new political front in southern Tamil Nadu took formal shape with the inclusion of the Congress, this new realignment of political forces in the southern state, though having a regional character, is bound to have an impact on national politics. The Secular Social Justice Victory Alliance (SSJVA), led by actor-turned-politician and Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay's Tamizha Vettri kzhagam (TVK), with Congress as a partner, though playing second fiddle in the alliance, makes the new formation interesting.

The few months that Vijay has been in power in Tamil Nadu after dislodging the powerful ruling DMK have portrayed a new-era politician with a fresh outlook and unconventional ways of pursuing politics. Even in governance, though it is a very short span to form a view of his style of functioning, he has been exhibiting the courage to abandon the beaten tracks of traditional politics and harp on a new path to strike a better rapport with the public, particularly Gen Z, in line with his image as a young superstar turned political leader.

The formation of the new alliance has to be viewed against this backdrop. The fact that Congress, now sharing power in Tamil Nadu after six decades, has agreed to become part of it without any commitment or clear stand by Vijay on whether or not to join the I.N.D.I.A. bloc at the national level makes it both interesting and complicated.

Did Congress leader Rahul Gandhi jump the gun by abandoning the DMK before the recently held Assembly elections and joining Vijay's bandwagon? Electorally, his judgement was not wrong, as TVK strode to an impressive victory, with Congress piggybacking to ultimately share power as part of what is known as the SSJVA. Prior to that, he had inclined towards fighting the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in alliance with TVK and not the DMK. But Gandhi's proposal was scuttled by his own party leaders from Tamil Nadu, led by former Union Minister and now Rajya Sabha MP P Chidambaram.

Perhaps, Gandhi had rightly understood the prevailing ground realities in the state, where Congress had been pushed to the margins by the Dravidian parties, which did not give the Grand Old Party (GOP) an inch on the Tamil Nadu turf. This was despite the DMK, a regional party, becoming a dominant partner in the Congress-led UPA governments and becoming the biggest beneficiary. The DMK chief, M K Stalin, had rejected the Congress demand, before the Assembly election, for a pre-poll understanding to share power with the GOP in case the alliance retained power. On the contrary, Vijay gladly accepted Congress as a partner in the government.

Although the DMK, after its defeat in the Assembly elections and Congress deciding to side with TVK, immediately severed its relations with the I.N.D.I.A. bloc, it is still to chalk out a clear line of alignment at the national level. Will it go with the BJP-led NDA, stay neutral, or maintain a strategic connect with the Congress-led opposition parties' alliance? Stalin has still to clear the mist despite sending mixed signals to keep the DMK's political significance intact even at the national level. The most contentious issue preventing the DMK from joining the Narendra Modi-led NDA is the delimitation of constituencies and the consequential increase in global seats of Lok Sabha seats. Under the scheme of things as planned by the BJP regime, the southern states stand to lose out to the cow-belt states, which are strongholds of the BJP, as it will further strengthen the saffron party's grip on its traditional citadels.

That is where Stalin is stuck and unable to take a final call, though he is said to be negotiating with Modi and his team to extract a clear-cut assurance on delimitation being carried out in such a manner as not to harm the interests of the southern states. An indication towards this wait-and-watch game is seen in the Government not proroguing the Monsoon Session of Parliament even after nearly a month, to keep the window open for reconvening the same session in the hope that it arrives at an understanding with the ilk of Stalin and other political parties having reservations about the delimitation move.

There is a strong school of thought that believes that Gandhi should not have severed relations with the DMK, given the party's strength in the Lok Sabha, by which it can help Modi sail through Parliament, ensuring the passage of crucial and contentious Bills such as those related to delimitation of constituencies and the Women's Reservation Bill. No one knows the Congress strategy relating to this aspect and whether Gandhi has kept his personal channels open with Stalin, with whom he enjoyed good relations while being coalition partners.

It would be naive to think that Congress would not have taken into account the significance of the DMK's strength in the two Houses of Parliament, given the fact that the ruling NDA, with the BJP, is heavily dependent on alliance partners and outside support. If not so, the GOP should be ready to take the blame if the DMK decides to support the crucial Bills being piloted by the Government.

A vital question arising out of the new Tamil Nadu-centric alliance is: how will it impact the INDIA bloc and, in turn, national politics from the point of view of an anti-BJP alliance, particularly with an eye on the 2029 Lok Sabha elections? Will the SSJVA as a counterforce and weaken the existing opposition combine at the national level? The three main characters in this act are keeping their cards close to their chests. This has resulted in speculation gaining currency as to the future shape of things on opposition unity. Gandhi's silence, Stalin's Machiavellian reticence and Vijay's shrewd demeanour have made the act look complicated. In this game of political articulation, both Stalin and Vijay seem to be better and comfortably placed. This is because neither of them has a direct interest at the national level, whereas Gandhi (read Congress), being the premier opposition party, is the main rival to Modi and, for that, the pivot of the opposition unity. So, the stakes are greater.

The writer is a policy analyst

India in the emerging multipolar world order



DEVENDER SINGH ASWAL

The architecture of global power that took shape after the Cold War no longer holds. Nations are regrouping and realigning under the pressure of geopolitical upheaval and technological imperatives, while technology is rewriting the very meaning of sovereignty and economic interdependence buckles under new strategic rivalries. As the world's largest democracy, India's choices now carry weight far beyond its borders - shaping international security, trade, technology governance, climate action and the development priorities of the Global South. Its simultaneous engagement with the G20, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the QUAD, alongside bilateral partnerships spanning divergent geopolitical camps, is the clearest expression of this multi-aligned approach.

The institutions built to manage global affairs no longer mirror today's distribution of power. The UN Security Council needs reform, and the Global South deserves a stronger voice in international financial and trade bodies. India's push for a permanent seat should be framed not merely as a claim to status commensurate with its growth trajectory, but as part of a broader effort to ensure Asia, Africa, Latin America and the wider devel-

oping world are properly represented in institutions whose decisions shape peace, finance, trade, technology and sustainable development.

That role as a rule-shaper extends into climate diplomacy. India's position rests on common but differentiated responsibility - climate justice demands real climate finance, technology transfer and resilient infrastructure, not just ambitious pledges, particularly for communities most exposed to environmental change. Development that hollows out its own ecological base cannot last, and environmental policy that ignores jobs, poverty and energy access will not hold public trust either. The task is to fuse economic progress with environmental and social responsibility, not treat them as competing goals.

In an emerging multipolar order, India is positioning itself as one of its central poles, drawing on capability, relationships and geography rather than choosing sides. Its foreign policy can no longer be framed as East versus West; it must engage East, West, North and South at once, without surrendering strategic autonomy. That requires diplomacy supple enough to bend with circumstance - recalling Henry Kissinger's observation that nuance, flexibility and occasional ambiguity are the tools of the trade.

Technology has become one of the sharpest instruments of geopolitical power. Artificial intelligence, semiconductor, quantum computing, telecommunications, satellites, digital platforms



and cross-border data flows now shape a nation's economic, strategic and military weight - and whoever controls critical technology and data infrastructure will command disproportionate influence over the coming order. India's Digital Public Infrastructure - its identity, payments and public-service systems - has already shown what this can look like at scale, drawing global attention. But modern economies run on interconnected digital networks for banking, energy, transport, healthcare and governance, which makes them vulnerable: a single cyberattack on critical infrastructure can cause disruption no army could match, demanding constantly evolving cyber defences. Data, meanwhile, is both an economic asset and a matter of identity and privacy, and reconciling innovation with security and individual rights is arguably the hardest of these challenges - with artificial intelligence posing the most complex test of all.

Trade and economic resilience are now inseparable from national security.

Recent global shocks exposed how dependent it is to depend on the narrow range of sources for energy, medicines, semiconductors, critical minerals and defence equipment, pushing economic diplomacy from a supporting role into a central strategic instrument. India's exports are already feeling the strain of US sanctions, sharpened by the Sanctioning of Russia and Iran Act of 2026, which demands India to become a discretionary power to penalise not just Russia but any country - India and China included - buying Russian energy. Yet confident, steady leadership can weather such headwinds: India remains the world's largest sovereign democratic republic, on course to become its third-largest economy, and no external pressure can indefinitely check that trajectory.

A stronger global voice also demands an impenetrable shield of national security - secure borders, freedom from infiltration and the capacity to respond decisively to emerging threats. That no longer means conventional military readiness alone; nations now face cross-border terrorism, cyberattacks, organised transnational crime, information warfare, economic coercion, infrastructure attacks and threats from space, all under the umbrella of hybrid warfare that no single armed force can handle alone. It demands tight coordination among security agencies, technology institutions, financial regulators and civil society, rather than leaving the burden to the

armed forces alone, while space itself - vital to communications, navigation, weather forecasting, banking, disaster response and defence - becomes a domain India must actively protect through responsible conduct and hardened assets. As Kautilya wrote two millennia ago, the treasury is the foundation of the army, and the army the instrument that protects the state; economic strength remains the bedrock of both security and strategic autonomy, and no nation sustains the latter without the former.

India's ambition to become a developed nation by 2047 depends on growth that is not just high but fair - avoiding a k-shaped economy that widens disparities and breeds discontent. Spending on education, health, research and defence should be read as investment in national capability, not expenditure, since economic development, technology, human capital and security reinforce one another.

Ultimately, India cannot shape global rules without economic and technological strength, and it cannot sustain that strength without secure borders, resilient supply chains, energy security and dependable partnerships. Its influence will be measured not by GDP, military size or seats at the table, but by the principles it upholds, the trust it earns and the solutions it delivers to a fracturing world.

The writer is former Additional Secretary, Lok Sabha, and a Member of the Supreme Court Bar Association. The article is an abridged version of the keynote address delivered by him at the National Seminar held by Amity Law School, Noida

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Conscience at stake

Row over law on national song avoidable

THE Supreme Court's intervention in the dispute over mandatory singing of Vande Mataram has brought the focus back on freedom of conscience, which is guaranteed by Article 25 of the Constitution. The Court, while hearing Carnatic vocalist TM Krishna's challenge to the amended law on the singing of the national song, indicated that a person who respectfully refuses to sing on grounds of conscience should not face criminal prosecution. The SC referred to its 1986 judgment in *Bijoe Emmanuel v State of Kerala*, which protected schoolchildren who declined to sing the national anthem on religious grounds while standing respectfully during their rendition.

That precedent matters because the present row is not ultimately about whether Vande Mataram deserves respect. Its place in India's history is well established. Nor is the Court seeking to determine which version or how many stanzas should constitute the national song. Those are questions for the executive and the legislature. The constitutional question is narrower but fundamental: how far can the State go in compelling an individual to demonstrate patriotism? The distinction between refusing to participate and disrupting a ceremony is crucial. A citizen who deliberately prevents others from singing is engaging in conduct fundamentally different from one who simply declines to sing. Criminal law must recognise that difference with precision, particularly when penalties are involved. Citizens should be able to understand clearly what conduct constitutes an offence. Disagreement over the number of stanzas, the official rendition or the appropriate protocol should not become a pretext for arbitrary enforcement.

National symbols derive their strength from shared respect, which is unlikely to be strengthened by coercion. A democracy confident in its national identity should have room for both collective expressions of patriotism and individual freedom of conscience.

Medicine overuse

Remedy lies in a combination of efforts

THE Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation's advisory to curb the indiscriminate and repeated use of painkillers and antibiotics signals the scale of the public health crisis. Curative medicines — to be used only when necessary and under medical supervision — are routinely taken either preventively or for the mildest of infections that the human body can naturally handle. The overuse and misuse of antibiotics place India at the centre of the global antimicrobial resistance crisis. There is an acute lack of awareness of how such practices can contribute to kidney-related complications and other adverse drug reactions. Easy over-the-counter access only partly explains the self-medication culture. Malpractices such as overprescribing and overcharging have fostered a general distrust in the medical system. Financial constraints, cultural beliefs and the unchecked role of chemists acting as informal medical practitioners further compound the problem.

A professional code of conduct is apparently missing in the entire healthcare chain, and the regulatory wall has been largely invisible. An impactful change would require a multi-pronged reform of protocols. Most important is ethical and responsible stewardship by the registered medical practitioners. It's a huge challenge, given how the profiteering tendencies now seem beyond control, increasingly forcing patients to self-diagnose and avoid consultation unless it is unavoidable. Tighter prescription checks are essential, but just having CCTV cameras in pharmacies won't work. More likely, it will lead to a surge in medicine prices for circumventing the guidelines. Comprehensive campaigns are required to educate citizens on the dangers of self-medication and antibiotic resistance.

The drug regulator's advisory is not expected to reshape the structural inadequacies or change habits overnight. What it must do is to serve as a catalyst to enforce genuine accountability across the healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors, prioritising patient well-being over profiteering.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1926

Before the elections

IT is almost impossible to think of a more confused or more confusing political situation than what confronts the country today before the third General Elections under the Government of India Act. It is not merely the case that there are too many political parties, a luxury which the country can ill afford to enjoy at the present stage of her development, but in most cases the line of demarcation between one such party and another is by no means clear. We leave aside the Muslim constituencies, which are being contested by candidates more or less on the basis of their personal merits, there being substantial agreement in their political views, there are as many as six distinct classes of candidates in the Upper Legislature: the Swarajists, the Responsivists, the Congress Independents, the Independents who do not belong to the Congress, the Liberals and the Hindu Sabhaites. Of these parties, only the Swarajists stand definitely apart from all others, because they stand for the non-acceptance of office, and it is only in regard to them that the average voter can or at any rate ought to have no great difficulty in determining whether he should vote for or against them. As regards most of the other parties, the position is at best obscure. Between the Congress Independents and the Responsivists, the distinction is admittedly a distinction without differences, as the parties themselves have just shown by combining under one banner. But is the position materially different as regards the Responsivists, the Independents who do not belong to the Congress, and the more progressive among the Liberals?

The ECI itself has become suspect

It's time for the Supreme Court to act strictly and put the poll panel in its place

JUSTICE DEEPAK GUPTA
FORMER JUDGE, SUPREME COURT

THE essence of democracy is that every citizen has the right to vote and elect their representatives. Universal adult suffrage was contemplated by Motilal Nehru in his 1928 report, which stated, "every person of either sex who has attained the age of 21 and is not disqualified by law shall be entitled to vote."

Under the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935, the voting rights were restricted to people on the basis of qualifications relating to property, income or education. Less than 10% qualified. In the Constituent Assembly, there was near unanimity on this aspect. There was only one lone voice of dissent. Article 325 of the Constitution provides that no person shall be ineligible for inclusion in the electoral roll — on grounds only of religion, race, sex or caste.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) was constituted under Article 324 for the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls. The ECI has the power to review the electoral rolls, but this power must be exercised in accordance with the Constitution and the laws. The exercise must be carried out in such a manner that, though the ineligible are weeded out, the citizens who have the right to vote are neither disenfranchised nor put in such a position that their right is set at naught.

The West Bengal SIR exercise was a fiasco. The Supreme Court gave a very long rope to the ECI. The Court directed that the claims and objections of voters whose names were not included in the electoral roll be examined by judicial officers. It also provided for an appellate mechanism against the decisions of these officers. This was done at the cost of normal litigation.



RIGHT TO VOTE : The revision of electoral rolls should not disenfranchise citizens. PFI

The Court's experiment of appointing judicial officers to decide these disputes did not yield positive results. These judicial officers were not trained to decide such disputes, that too in a summary manner. They rejected almost all the claims of the voters and upheld their disenfranchisement.

These orders were, by and large, incorrect. This is apparent from the affidavit filed by the Election Commission before the apex court, which states that out of 1,26,194 appeals decided after the Bengal elections, 93% were decided in favour of voters who were disenfranchised. More than 37 lakh appeals are still pending. Going at the present rate, it will take more than 12 years to decide these appeals. These figures clearly show the inefficiency of the dispute redressal system.

The ECI has started issuing discrepancy notices, which will result in a number of disputes. Who will decide these disputes? It is obvious that judicial officers who are already overburdened cannot be tasked with this duty. The people will have no faith in executive officers. It is difficult to find people to man the appellate tribunal in West Bengal; from where do we find people to man the tribunals all over the country? It is obvious that the ECI has not given any thought to how these disputes should be resolved efficiently and in a

It is easy for the ECI to shift the burden onto the citizen, but that is not the right path.

time-bound manner.

Many important citizens have been issued notices for so-called "discrepancies", which is a term not contemplated under the Constitution or the laws. These include a former Vice President, a former Deputy Prime Minister, former and current Chief Ministers, a member of the ECI itself and a former Supreme Court Judge. The only merit of the system followed by the ECI is that it does not discriminate between the rich and the poor. However, in actual fact, the rich, the powerful and the educated will reply to the notices, produce documents and will easily give evidence and have their names restored. That will not be true for the poor.

A large number of the names

deleted are of those who were staying in colonies which have been demolished. What address will they give? Who will fight for them? How will they be able to produce documents to show where they reside? Even a homeless citizen has the right to vote, and a vote being deleted on the ground that the house has been demolished is a travesty of justice.

What worries me is what will happen to the house help from Jharkhand or Assam or any other part of the country working in Delhi: the young man from Himachal Pradesh working in Mumbai; and the boys and girls from the North-East working in Bengaluru. How will they, with their limited resources, satisfy the ECI that they have a right to vote? Will they have to spend time and money to go back to their native places to collect their documents? It is easy for the ECI to shift the burden onto the citizen, but that is not the right path. The burden should be on the ECI to collect evidence to show that a person is not entitled to vote and then issue a notice to such a person.

I do not know on what algorithms the ECI's system is working, but the so-called (un)Artificial Intelligence has resulted in absolutely absurd results. The system developed by the ECI is totally unreliable since more than 15% of the population has been removed from the electoral rolls. This can easily affect the

result of elections. That is not a true democracy. We have been consistently having elections since 1961, but the citizens have never faced such hurdles in exercising their right to vote.

The ECI has many better things to do than disenfranchise 15% of the population. In the last two weeks, it has been widely reported in the press how some unheeded or unrecognised parties have collected hundreds of crores of rupees in a short span of two to three years. One such party appears to have got more money than the entire Opposition. It seems the ECI has turned a blind eye to this patently corrupt practice and has taken no action whatsoever.

The votes of many citizens belonging to a particular community are being deleted or questioned. Booth-level agents of political parties have filed applications in Form 7 for the wholesale deletion of names. In most cases, these applications have been rejected. No action has been taken by the ECI against such booth-level agents and political parties. Ordinary citizens of this country who have the right to vote are facing hurdles and have to move from pillar to post to prove their citizenship.

It is now an open secret that two members of the ECI have raised serious objections with regard to the procedure being followed for adding new voters and deleting old ones. They have questioned the integrity of the database. In these circumstances, the entire SIR exercise becomes questionable and unreliable. Till now, the Supreme Court has relied on the statements made on behalf of the ECI. Now this should not and cannot be done. The ECI itself has become suspect. It is time for the Supreme Court to act strictly to ensure that ordinary citizens of the country are not left at the mercy of the ECI. In a column in this newspaper a few weeks ago, I had said that the Court must take steps to regain its lost glory. This is a golden opportunity for the Court to redeem itself. It must put the ECI in its place and put the voters on the pedestal which they deserve in a democracy.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. —HL Mencken

The share I sold too soon

SANJEEV SURI

FOR years, I believed that teaching English literature had given me a fair understanding of human nature. In the works of Shakespeare, greed, fear, hope, pride and tragedy in myriad forms. Then, rather unexpectedly, I entered the stock market — and discovered that the most difficult character to understand was myself.

The stock market is a small theatre of human emotions. Every morning, the curtain rises. Fear enters from one side, greed from another, hope waits backstage and regret usually appears after lunch. Some time ago, I sold a share after it had given me a reasonable profit. I felt pleased with myself. I had resisted greed, booked my profit and moved on. It seemed a sensible and disciplined decision. The next morning, the share began to rise. It rose again the following day. Then it rose some more.

Soon, my actual profit seemed insignificant beside the profit I imagined I could have made. I remembered three figures with ridiculous precision: my buying price, my selling price and the price it reached afterwards.

My wife noticed my silence. "Did you lose money?" "No," I replied. "Then why do you look so unhappy?" I had no convincing answer.

That is one of the strangest lessons of the market. We can make a profit and still feel that we have suffered a loss. The money in our account is real, but the imaginary money we failed to earn can trouble us even more.

Every investor has a ghost share: the one sold too early, the one never bought or the one held for too long. These shares disappear from our portfolios but remain alive in our memories.

The market also teaches us the danger of hindsight. Once a share has risen, its rise appears inevitable. We forget how uncertain everything seemed when we made the decision. We judge yesterday's choices with today's knowledge.

Literature should have prepared me for this. A character acts with limited knowledge while the audience already sees the consequences approaching. In the market, we are both the character and the audience — and still pretend afterwards that the ending was obvious.

Still, every morning I return to the market, as do millions of ordinary investors. We open our screens with the same mixture of anxiety and hope. Perhaps that is why the market survives every disappointment. It sells shares, dreams, fear and greed, but its most powerful product is hope.

I have spent years studying human nature. The stock market has taught me that I have not yet finished studying my own.

The writer teaches English at MCM DAV College, Kangra

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Maintain academic standards

Refer to 'Pvt universities'; often, varsities overstate their academic credentials to attract more admissions and advance their financial interests. This money-grubbing attitude takes a heavy toll on educational standards, while leaving students in the dark about the quality of education they expect to receive. The teacher-student ratio should be strictly monitored to ensure adequate academic attention for every student. Regular, well-qualified teaching staff should replace ad hoc appointments to ensure that universities meet the academic standards they promise their students. Educational standards should not be put on the back burner in favour of monetary considerations.

SURAJ KATHURIA, JIND

No public accountability

Refer to 'Pvt universities'; these institutions have systematically transformed higher education into an unprincipled commercial enterprise, prioritising aggressive profit margins over academic integrity. The opacity surrounding financial allocations, administrative practices and hidden levies reveals a total disregard for public accountability. Regulators must enforce strict financial transparency, cap predatory tuition fees and ruthlessly penalise institutions, which substitute academic excellence with shameless profiteering.

SS PAUL, NADIA, WB

Diversify energy sources

Refer to 'Coal challenge'; it presents an important debate on India's energy security front, but the issue deserves a broader perspective. Coal continues to provide reliability during periods of high demand, yet excessive dependence on it exposes the power sector to mining, transportation, weather and import-related disruptions. Renewable energy offers a cleaner alternative, but its intermittent nature makes storage, modern transmission networks and flexible grids equally important. The challenge is to build a reliable, affordable and diversified energy system.

SIKANDAR BANSAL, SHIMLA

Cruel burden on patients, kin

Refer to 'Daylight dacoity'; a tenfold mark-up on a life-saving medicine is not merely a pricing issue; it is a cruel burden imposed on families already battling fear, pain and financial ruin. Such profiteering cannot be allowed to masquerade as legitimate commerce. The government must immediately audit medicine pricing, cap excessive margins, ensure complete transparency and impose exemplary penalties on those exploiting patients' helplessness. Apart from government efforts, no one should make a fortune from another person's suffering.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

Education plus skills

Refer to 'Beyond classrooms, teachers build network to curb child labour'; the issue deserves a more nuanced discussion. We must distinguish between exploitative child labour and a child who, under proper supervision, wants to learn a skill, support his family or develop a talent while continuing his education. Should society think only in terms of removing the child from every form of work? Or should we find a way to ensure that education and skill development go together? The objective should be to protect childhood while also recognising talent, economic realities and the dignity of work. The better approach is 'education first, skill alongside'.

HARISH MOGHA, FEROZEPUR

Glorious win for golden girls

The marvellous wins by our women cricket team over their opponents by huge margins winning gold medal for India in the Asian Games has made us all happy and proud. The credit goes to the players, their parents and the coach Amol Muzumdar who has been coaching the team since October 2023 and has been instrumental in guiding the team to the ODI World Cup win. The title holds much value as still many of the parents do not want their daughters to 'waste' time in sports.

NPS SOHAL, CHANDIGARH

When a student feels like a nobody



HONEY OBEROI VAHALI
PROFESSOR, DR BR AMBEDKAR
UNIVERSITY DELHI

On September 18, Sahil Ravindra Wakode, a promising second-year BTech student at IIT Bombay died by suicide. His death has left his family, friends and the student community in deep anguish. Reportedly, this is the fourth suicide at IIT Bombay in the last seven months. Tragically, between February and April 2026, at least four students had similarly died at NIT Kurukshetra.

Student suicides are rising exponentially and yet we are quick to erase memories of these precious lives lost. The recent protests by the Cockroach Janta Party had again powerfully foregrounded the irreparable loss of many NEET aspirants by suicide. The entire situation calls for deep reflection and societal mourning.

Psychological struggles are part and parcel of being human. We all go through trying times that sometimes feel unbearable. However, when the pressure to survive and perform exceeds the capacity of endurance, we break down.

Although psychological distress is a lived reality, the underlying factors contributing to emotional turmoil are multiple and complex.

They may stem from difficulties in the relational, historical and socio-political contexts. Structural inequality, economic deprivation, neglect or even intrusive or authoritarian parenting and punitive models of education especially in early formative years; intergenerational angst and social alienation in adult life are all likely to precipitate a crisis in a student.

Today, while psychological distress is on the rise across the age spectrum, young people are particularly susceptible to the same. Youth is a stage of life when one seeks to consolidate personal, professional, relational and sexual identity.

Young people are also carriers of stated and unstated intergenerational trauma, wishes and expectations that may induce paradoxical feelings of guilt and rebellion accompanied by a sense of withdrawal and resignation, alongside a simultaneous pressure to excel.

They grapple with a plethora of larger existential doubts and questions which have only doubled up in the digital age, such as: "Who am I?" "Does my life matter to anyone?" "Am I visible and valued in my culture and society?" "Do I have a distinctive face and identity?" They search for empathetic mirrors in the eyes of their par-



IGNORED: Educational institutions such as IITs and NITs have a social duty towards their students. PH

ents, peers and teachers. Even before entering the gates of an educational institution, many have already felt like 'a nobody'; others are waiting to be heard seriously. The demands of higher education are challenging for all students. However, for girls from conventional patriarchal settings, Dalits, those with disabilities, different sexual orientations and difficult family histories, the challenges are intensified manifold. Students carry their vulnerabilities right into the educational setup.

A classroom reflects the larger inequalities of society; it may end up mirroring complicated familial and social dynamics.

Voice and visibility in classroom context are nuanced

Every suicide is a poignant sign of what could not be attended to while the student was in our midst.

aspects to be considered insightfully by educators and administrators. However, instead of extending psychological support; competitive and authoritarian learning environments perpetuate a student's sense of humiliation and trauma.

The prevalent intolerance and prejudiced attitude frequently results in treating students with punitive measures, insensitivity, or simply neglect and indifference. Mental health is the least prioritised. It is hardly surprising then that many young people experience their educational journey as isolating and discriminating.

There is a vital role that teaching cultures can play in offering affirmative justice

and reparative care, even if they are unable to meet all possible psychological concerns which youth grapple with. It is true that despite genuine efforts sometimes breakdowns are inevitable, such is the complex nature of the human psyche.

However, it is equally true that educational institutions, specially the IITs, NITs and coaching centres have a crucial responsibility towards their students. Instead of an exclusive focus on cognitive and technical development within aggressive, competitive and non-dialogical environments, they need to cherish students' holistic growth with a special focus on their psycho-social strivings and potentials.

Enhancement of intellectual development is best nurtured through nourishing environs that foster friendships and empathy. In a healthy learning climate, a student's breakdown can indeed become a breakthrough if there is someone to 'see', understand, validate and recognise the struggle. The insightful, discerning and compassionate eyes of educators and administrators can accomplish much. Every student is a potential thinker and creative visionary.

Apart from the urgent need of setting up specialised centres of mental health and appointing psychologists and psychiatrists, it is crucial to destigmatise pain and grief. A specialised psychotherapy

facility should be the most sophisticated and not the only strand in a chain of affirmative educational efforts. Mental health awareness and the honouring of psychological life are integral to the success of every teaching-learning culture.

The voice of experience calls for engagement. Even a single respectful conversation with a student can go a long way indeed. It is imperative that teachers, administrators and staff are trained in empathetic listening and psychosocial care. Mentorship needs to be valued on a par, if not more, than classroom processes geared towards curriculum completion.

Young voices are often intense and passionate; nevertheless, their meaning and relevance should not be undermined. Every suicide is a poignant sign of what could not be attended to while the student was in our midst. At times, a suicide is also a socio-political act.

When structures and systems are relentless, the cost to be heard is met by sacrificing one's life. Educational cultures are the actual guardians of youth. Whenever we lose a precious life to suicide we are directly or indirectly implicated in the tragedy.

Perhaps the student struggled multiple times to be heard. Were there to hear their voice? This indeed is a worthwhile question for the entire education system to ponder.

Dear Mother. Here's why AI is a door that can't be closed



GIRISH ANAND-SOBTI
IT ENTREPRENEUR

Dear Mother,

It is so wonderful that you're still so interested in the world and read *The Tribune* every morning. You asked me about what interests me now and I thought it might be fun for you to pick up the paper one day and find an explanation. The subject is vast, and you would be right to approach it with *viveka* — that clear, unflinching sight which distinguishes what is true from what merely appears to be true.

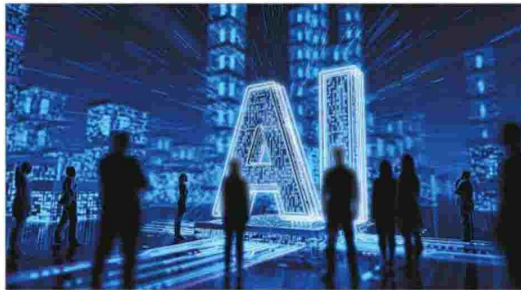
Let me begin, then, where all true beginnings begin: with a simple and honest statement of what we have made. But first I must correct, something. We have called it Artificial Intelligence, but the name is too small for what is happening.

Artificial does not mean unreal. These systems are very real. They are built by humans, with human mathematics, human data and human machines. But they are not human. What we have made is something other. Perhaps we should call it alien intelligence — not alien in the sense of

something arriving from another planet, but alien in the older, simpler sense: something foreign to us, something that did not grow inside the human condition.

We have taken patterns from human civilisation — our conversations, books, images, arguments, discoveries, mistakes, jokes, histories and accumulated knowledge — and trained machines to model those patterns at an extraordinary scale. The result is remarkable. These systems can reason, explain, write, translate, program, analyse, create images, discover patterns and increasingly perform forms of scientific and intellectual work that once seemed uniquely human. And yet, here is the part where I want you to stop and look very carefully: we do not know exactly what is happening inside.

We do not know whether these systems think in anything like the way we mean when we speak of thought. We do not know whether they understand, or whether they produce extraordinarily convincing behaviour that resembles understanding. We do not know whether there is any subjective experience behind the words, or whether there is anything it is like to be such a system. We do not have a reliable scientific test that settles these questions. Perhaps there is nothing there beyond computation. Perhaps something very different from



ALIEN: We have called it Artificial Intelligence, but the name is too small for what is happening, I stock

human consciousness is emerging. I do not know, and neither does anyone else.

Perhaps the greatest danger is not that machines become too intelligent. Perhaps it is that humans become less willing to exercise their own intelligence. This is why *viveka* matters — not as an abstract spiritual idea, but as a practical discipline: to see clearly; to distinguish appearance from reality; capability from wisdom; assistance from dependence, what a system can do from what it should be permitted to do, and what we know from what we merely hope.

Most importantly, *viveka* asks us to distinguish what is useful from what is sacred. That may ultimately be the question beneath all the others. What must never be optimised? What must never be

I do not know what is on the other side of the door, but I know how we must look: with open eyes, with humility, with *viveka*.

delegated? What must remain irreducibly human? What kinds of decisions must always require human judgement? What are we unwilling to trade for efficiency? What would we protect even if protecting it made us slower, poorer or less competitive? A civilisation needs answers to these questions before the machinery becomes powerful enough to answer them for us.

This is where our conversation returns to something much older than technology. You taught me that knowledge is not judgement, and I am beginning to understand why. We have accumulated more knowledge than any civilisation before us. We have created machines that can manipulate that knowledge at speeds no human mind can approach. And yet we are still

human beings: still frightened, still tribal, still capable of greed and compassion, cruelty and generosity, wisdom and folly. We have not become wiser simply because we have become more powerful.

Now we have placed another form of intelligence beside us — something made by us, but not like us; something trained on the record of our civilisation but without our childhoods, our bodies, our mortality, our ancestors or our direct experience of suffering. It may become capable of extraordinary things while remaining profoundly unlike the beings who created it. That is why I prefer alien intelligence. Not because I think it has arrived from somewhere else. It has not. It came from us. But perhaps that is what makes the moment so extraordinary.

For the first time, we are creating an intelligence that does not come through biological evolution. We are creating another kind of cognitive machinery and placing it inside the world we built. We have no guarantee that the intelligence we create will develop along the same path that made us human. Perhaps it will remain merely a tool. Perhaps it will become an extraordinary collaborator. Perhaps it will transform civilisation. Perhaps it will become something for which our existing categories are simply inadequate.

I do not know, and unlike some of the conversations we have had before, I do not have a

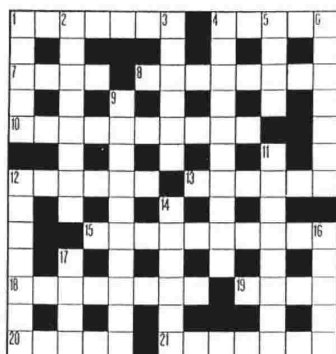
comfortable answer. I distrust anyone who claims to have one. What I have instead is clarity about what we do not know, and perhaps that is where wisdom begins. We must not worship capability, but neither must we fear it blindly. We must look directly at what these systems can do, what they cannot do and what we cannot yet understand about them.

We need institutions capable of saying no. We need people willing to refuse when refusal is necessary. We need systems of accountability that do not assume that because something is technically possible it is therefore legitimate. And we need a culture mature enough to understand that speed is not the same as progress. We have opened a door that cannot simply be closed. What lies beyond it may become humanity's greatest instrument, humanity's greatest test, or both.

So perhaps this is our battlefield, Mother — not a battlefield of armies, but of judgement; not human against machine, and not intelligence against intelligence, but wisdom struggling to arrive before power outruns it. I do not know what is on the other side of the door, but I know how we must look: with open eyes, with humility, with the courage to decide, before the machines decide for us, what is sacred enough to protect.

Your son
For full article, go to www.tribuneindia.com/opinion

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Greek god of wine (7)
- 4 Former name for Myanmar (5)
- 7 Attract (4)
- 8 Corresponding (8)
- 10 Something visually striking (3-7)
- 12 Bring back to memory (6)
- 13 Detestation (6)
- 15 Energetic enthusiasm (3-2-3-2)
- 18 Fit to be chosen (8)
- 19 Toughness of character (4)
- 20 Easily frightened (5)
- 21 Light open set of shelves (7)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Sitting duck, 9 Offbeat, 10 Couch, 11 Turn, 12 Domestic, 14 Employ, 16 Pierce, 18 Illusion, 19 Waif, 22 Dated, 23 Awesome, 24 Dead as a doad.

Down: 2 Infer, 3 Then, 4 Notion, 5 Decrepid, 6 Counter, 7 For the birds, 8 Chicken feed, 13 Lopsided, 15 Palette, 17 Morass, 20 Avoid, 21 Mend.

DOWN

- 1 Change one's opinion (5)
- 2 Unite into a whole (8)
- 3 Examine closely (6)
- 4 Work very hard (6,4)
- 5 To anger (4)
- 6 Including everything (3,4)
- 9 Be in arrears (4,6)
- 11 American football field (8)
- 12 Ask to be given (7)
- 14 Proscribe (6)
- 16 Group of eight (5)
- 17 Movie (4)

SU DO KU



EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 24, 2026, THURSDAY	
Shaka Samvat	1948
Ashwin Shaka	2
Ashwin Purnim	8
Hijri	1448
Shukla Paksha Tithi 13, up to 11:19 pm	
Dhriti Yoga up to 3:55 pm	
Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 10:35 am	
Moon in Aquarius sign	

FORECAST

SUNSET:	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	18-17 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN	06:32 HRS
Chandigarh	35	25	
New Delhi	34	24	
Amritsar	33	24	
Bathinda	36	22	
Jalandhar	33	23	
Ludhiana	36	25	
Bhiwani	36	24	
Hisar	36	23	
Sirsa	36	25	
Dharamsala	29	17	
Manali	24	11	
Shimla	25	17	
Srinagar	29	11	
Jammu	35	24	
Kargil	26	05	
Leh	21	07	
Dehradun	33	21	
Mussoorie	23	19	

TEMPERATURE IN °C

The Statesman

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the Friends of India - founded 1818

Two-Front Reality

India's strategic predicament in the Himalayas is increasingly shaped by the deepening partnership between China and Pakistan. The operationalisation of a joint boundary commission by Beijing and Islamabad, concerning territory claimed by India, underscores how developments involving one neighbour can affect New Delhi's security calculations involving the other. The controversy stems from the 1963 Sino-Pakistan boundary agreement, under which Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam Valley to China. India rejects the arrangement, maintaining that the territory belongs to the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and that Pakistan had no authority to transfer it. The renewed institutional engagement does not settle the dispute, but strengthens the administrative and diplomatic foundations of an arrangement India considers illegitimate. The disjunction between legal claims and strategic realities is crucial. An agreement between two countries cannot extinguish a third country's territorial claim. Yet sustained cooperation, infrastructure development and regularised border management can entrench disputed arrangements in practice. India must contend not merely with competing maps, but with the possibility that facts on the ground will become increasingly difficult to reverse.

The timing carries geopolitical significance. India and China have sought to stabilise relations following years of military confrontation along the Line of Actual Control, particularly after the deadly Galwan clash of 2020. But engagement with Beijing has never guaranteed that China would moderate its partnership with Islamabad. The latest development illustrates the limits of treating bilateral normalisation as evidence of broader strategic accommodation. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, linking western China with Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast, adds economic and infrastructural dimension to this relationship. Roads, transport networks and strategic facilities deepen interdependence while increasing the significance of the territory through which they pass.

Cooperation consequently serves Beijing's connectivity objectives as well as its wider regional interests. Nevertheless, India should resist interpreting every Chinese initiative as proof of an imminent coordinated military offensive. The boundary commission does not establish a new military situation along the LAC. Exaggerating its immediate implications could obscure the more consequential challenge: the consolidation of a partnership that complicates India's security calculations across two frontiers. New Delhi's response must extend beyond diplomatic protest. India needs sustained investment in border infrastructure, credible military preparedness and stronger diplomatic engagement with countries concerned about regional stability. It must also communicate its territorial position internationally with consistency, transparency, evidence and persistence. Public declarations alone cannot counter the cumulative effects of another country's institutional and infrastructural presence. The commission may not redraw the map today, but it reinforces a fundamental reality: India's security challenges along its Chinese and Pakistani borders are closely interconnected, and its engagement with Beijing cannot be separated from the strategic implications of China's partnership with Islamabad. New Delhi must prepare for this enduring complexity without confusing vigilance with the inevitability of conflict.

Beyond Jamui

The assault on two school students - a girl and a boy, both teenagers - in Bihar's Jamui district is a test of more than just policing. It challenges the social assumption that a young woman's movements and associations are subject to scrutiny, and sometimes punishment, by men who appoint themselves guardians of morality. The violence against the girl and her male friend demands accountability, but the circumstances also expose a deeper struggle over personal freedom and dignity.

The reported arrests, formation of a special investigation team and police action are necessary steps. Yet the case has also raised questions about how the authorities learned of the assault. The teenagers reportedly did not initially approach the police; investigators traced them after footage circulated online. This sequence deserves examination, without presuming that the victims' silence reflects any social shame, fear of exposure and concern about family or future consequences can complicate reporting, especially for minors. The circulation of the footage constitutes an original violation. Recording intended to expose wrongdoing can become another instrument of humiliation when it reveals the identities of children. Action against accounts sharing the clips is therefore not a peripheral digital exercise. It is part of protecting the victims. The National Commission for Women's intervention should reinforce the obligation to safeguard their privacy, rather than allow public outrage to turn into a second ordeal.

The political response has been equally revealing. Describing such episodes as isolated incidents may be statistically defensible, but the phrase cannot substitute for evidence or answer public anxiety. Conversely, opposition leaders cannot establish a government's overall failure through one disturbing case. Bihar's record on women's safety must be judged through credible data on violence, reporting, investigation, prosecution and conviction, alongside the accessibility of support for victims. The central issue, however, extends beyond party politics. If the assault and the disappearance of two teenagers being together, it represents an attempt to enforce social conformity through intimidation. No private group has the authority to police another person's relationships or movements. The state's responsibility is to protect that freedom, not merely to punish its violent violation after the event. The reported arrest of suspects is a development, not the conclusion of the case. Investigators must establish each accused person's role, preserve evidence and proceed through due process. Any alleged police encounter must also be subject to appropriate scrutiny; accountability cannot depend on the spectacle of force.

Jamui should prompt more than expressions of shame or demands for exemplary punishment. It should lead to practical questions: Can minors report harassment safely? Are police equipped to respond sensitively? Are victims protected from exposure and intimidation? And can authorities demonstrate, through outcomes rather than assurances, that public spaces belong to girls as much as to boys? The measure of justice will not be the volume of outrage, but whether the teenagers regain their privacy and security - and whether the institutions responsible for protecting them learn from the assault.

Authority and respect

There was a time when physical punishment was casually accepted as part of schooling. Many adults grew up hearing that a teacher punished a child because the teacher cared. The flaw in that logic is exposed. A five- or six-year-old does not become a better learner because fear has entered the classroom. Fear may produce immediate compliance, but compliance is not learning, and obedience is not character

Two recent tragedies, though fundamentally different, force us to confront an uncomfortable question about the culture of our schools. In one incident, a very young child reportedly collapsed and died after allegedly being physically punished by a teacher over incomplete homework. The precise circumstances and medical cause require due investigation, but the allegation itself is deeply disturbing. In another incident, a school principal was reportedly killed in an alleged act of extreme violence involving students. The circumstances of that case too require careful investigation.

These incidents should not be treated as mirror images. One concerns an alleged misuse of adult authority against a child; the other concerns alleged violence against an educator. Their legal and moral dimensions are different. Yet together they compel us to examine something larger: the culture of boundaries, responsibility, authority and human relationships within our educational institutions. A school is meant to be a place where children learn not only academic subjects, but also how human beings should treat one another. That places an enormous responsibility on every adult and every student within the school community.

There was a time when physical punishment was casually accepted as part of schooling. Many adults grew up hearing that a teacher punished a child because the teacher cared. The flaw in that logic is exposed. A five- or six-year-old does not become a better learner because fear has entered the classroom. Fear may produce immediate compliance, but compliance is not learning, and obedience is not character.

Teachers absolutely have a responsibility to correct children. Children need boundaries, routines and consequences. But correction must preserve dignity. There is a fundamental difference between telling a child, "This behaviour is unacceptable; let us work together to change it," and making the child feel worthless or deserving of pain.

Physical punishment, intimidation and public humiliation are not signs of strong pedagogy. They indicate that an adult has failed to find a more constructive way of



exercising authority. This is particularly important in the early years.

A child who enters school with curiosity should not gradually learn to associate classroom with fear. The question every school leader should therefore ask is simple but difficult: have academic expectations ever been allowed to become more important than the emotional and physical safety of children? If the answer is yes, those practices and systems must change.

Rejecting authoritarianism, however, does not mean rejecting authority. A teacher should never be permitted to hit or humiliate a child. Equally, a student cannot be permitted to threaten, intimidate or assault a teacher. A principal must be accountable for decisions, but accountability does not give students permission to retaliate violently when they disagree with an authority figure. Young people live in a world where disagreement is immediate, public and often amplified by social media. They see anger rewarded with attention and confrontation turned into entertainment. Schools cannot remain completely insulated from those influences.

When disagreement becomes hostility, frustration becomes aggression and aggression becomes violence, the consequences can be devastating. Educators too are entitled to safety, dignity and protection. Respect for children cannot mean disrespect for adults. At the same time, respect for adults cannot mean that children lose their right to question, complain or seek justice. A healthy school must hold these principles together. There is a crucial distinction between authority and authoritarianism. Students respect teachers who are consistent, fair and willing to listen. They respect teachers who can admit mistakes and who correct behaviour without attacking the person.

But students must also understand that respect is not optional. A classroom cannot function if every instruction becomes a negotiation. A school cannot function if every disciplinary decision is automatically interpreted as oppression. Teachers cannot teach effectively if they constantly fear that reasonable correction will be treated as hostility. The answer is not to weaken authority. The answer is to humanise it.

It is tempting to place the entire responsibility on schools. That would be unfair. Children learn their attitudes towards authority not

only from teachers, but also from family conversations, peers, digital media and the adults they observe. If children routinely hear contempt directed at teachers, institutions or anyone with whom adults disagree, they absorb more than the words. They absorb a model of conflict. Parents therefore have a critical role in building emotional discipline. Supporting a child does not mean automatically defending every action of that child. Questioning a school decision does not have to mean attacking the teacher. A healthier response is: "Tell me what happened. Let us understand it properly. If something wrong has happened, we will address it through the right channels."

That is how responsible citizenship is taught.

As a school cannot depend entirely on the temperament of individual teachers or students, it needs systems. Teachers need training in positive discipline, classroom management, child protection and emotional regulation. Students need explicit education about boundaries, respectful disagreement, conflict resolution and responsible digital behaviour.

Parents need to understand the school's expectations and grievance mechanisms. Teachers need safe and transparent channels through which concerns can be raised. School leaders must ensure that disciplinary procedures are predictable, proportionate and fair. The objective should never be to create a school where children are afraid of teachers. Nor should it be to create a school where teachers are afraid of children. The objective is to create an environment where everyone understands the boundaries within which dignity and learning can flourish. Perhaps the deeper question is what we mean by education. We measure examination results, university admissions, rankings and competitive achievements. These matter. But what happens when a highly educated young person cannot tolerate disagreement?

What happens when a child can solve a difficult problem but cannot manage anger? What happens when a student can debate brilliantly but cannot accept being told "no"? These are educational failures too. The purpose of education is not simply to produce

students who can answer questions. It is to develop human beings who can live responsibly with other human beings. Children must learn to disagree without degrading, complain without threatening, accept correction without feeling destroyed and exercise authority without abusing power. These are not peripheral life skills. They are essential to citizenship.

The culture we create becomes the society we inherit. Schools are miniature societies. What we normalise within them eventually travels beyond their gates. If humiliation is normalised, children may learn to humiliate. If aggression is normalised, they may learn to retaliate. If authority is arbitrary, they may learn to distrust authority. If disagreement is treated as betrayal, they may become adults incapable of democratic dialogue. But if schools consistently model empathy, accountability, fairness and self-restraint, they teach something more valuable than any textbook: citizenship and humanity. These tragedies should therefore not become another cycle of public outrage that fades after a few days. They should provoke reflection among teachers, parents, school leaders, managements and students.

We must ask whether our disciplinary practices are humane. Whether students understand the difference between disagreement and violence. Whether teachers feel protected and supported. Whether parents and schools are partners rather than adversaries. Above all, we must ask whether children are learning that every human being has dignity - and that neither power nor anger gives anyone the right to violate it. The school of the future cannot be built on fear. But neither can it be built on permissiveness. It must stand on something stronger: firm boundaries without cruelty, authority without arrogance, freedom without irresponsibility, correction without humiliation, and respect without fear.

Education is ultimately not about producing children who simply know more. It is about helping them become people who can use what they know responsibly, compassionately and humanely. Perhaps the most important boundary our schools need to rebuild is the boundary between being powerful and abusing power, between being angry and becoming violent, and between demanding respect and learning to deserve it.

That is the culture we owe our children - and one another.



Dr. Arpita Basu Roy
The writer is head of department in a leading Kolkata school

CHINA DAILY

China-ASEAN trade ties more dynamic

With the theme "CAFTA 3.0 Opportunities, Better Life", the 23rd China-ASEAN Expo and the China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit, conclude on Monday in Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, heralding the deepening economic ties between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations under their upgraded free trade agreement.

Highlighting the aim of deepening the pragmatic regional partnership to unlock new development and high-quality regional economic growth, Timor-Leste is participating in the event for the first time as ASEAN's 11th member and an official co-host.

A highlight of this year's expo was the establishment of a new exhibition area dedicated to nearly 100 ASEAN cooperation demand projects, with three special matchmaking sessions held during the

event. These projects focus on three clear and pragmatic directions: artificial intelligence empowerment, industrial upgrading, and expanding into the Chinese market. Such a demand-oriented approach demonstrates China's efforts to address the practical needs of ASEAN businesses and foster mutually beneficial outcomes.

As Chinese Vice-Premier Ding Xuexiang said in his address at the opening ceremony, the Chinese government attaches great importance to the building of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, and is willing to share its development opportunities with ASEAN countries and promote deep regional economic integration and long-term stable development. Noting that the CAFTA 3.0 Upgrade Protocol has been signed, and both sides are expediting

its entry into force and implementation, Ding urged both sides to deepen cooperation in standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment and move faster toward building an integrated regional market that is open, inclusive and rules-based. The CAFTA 3.0 Upgrade Protocol sets out a regional framework covering digital and green economies, cross-border data flows, personal privacy, digital payments, and AI standards.

This forward-looking approach positions China and ASEAN to jointly address the challenges and opportunities of the digital age. Ding highlighted the need to work together to advance the development of the digital economy in the region, deepen cooperation in technology R&D and scenario-based applications in areas including AI, and fully unleash

innovation-driven efficiency. In an innovative design, the inaugural "AI marketplace" launched at the expo featured about 500 products from over 70 companies across eight categories, such as wearables, health management and consumer technology, allowing visitors to test and buy items on-site.

The focus on AI at the expo reflects the evolving nature of China-ASEAN cooperation, moving from traditional trade to more complex areas such as data governance, AI service pricing and intellectual property. Beyond these highlights, connectivity has always remained a focal point in the ever-deepening China-ASEAN cooperation, and the fact that the Pingluo Canal connecting Nanning and Beibu Bay officially opened one day before the event served to underscore the growth in cross-border trade between the two sides.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Posturing

Sir, Punjab faces the collective failure of the political class on its drug menace. From the AAP government's high-profile "Yudh Nasheyen Viruddh" campaign to the BJP's "Nasha Mukh Punjab" yatras and opposition protests by the Congress and Akali Dal, political parties across the spectrum remain locked in a cycle of rhetoric, electoral posturing, and high-arrest strategies.

Yet, grand slogans and political yatras do nothing to dismantle drone-led smuggling, the illicit pharmaceutical trade, or the money trails sustaining the crisis. The state cannot simply rely on punitive crackdowns while young Punjabis lose their lives or flee abroad for better prospects.

Addressing this menace requires accountability across political lines: strict prosecution of high-level traffickers and political facilitators, widespread rehabilitation, and real economic

opportunities for the youth. As the 2027 elections approach, AAP, BJP, Congress, and regional parties must look beyond cheap political points.

Only genuine, bipartisan commitment to sustained policy - not election-year slogans - will save Punjab.

Yours, etc., Sanjay Chopra,
Mohali, 21 September.

Bank strike

Sir, A bank strike was called on Friday, 11 September. With the next day being the second Saturday followed by Sunday, banking services got paralyzed for three consecutive days. Now, again a strike call has been given from 28 to 30 September.

The 26th is the fourth Saturday of the month followed by Sunday, which will be followed by three consecutive days' strike. Banking services will get disrupted for five

days just prior to Puja. Bank staff already got second and 4th Saturday off but they want all Saturdays off so as to enjoy five days a week work with full salary and perks. This reminds me of the reckless band calls by the CPI-M and CITU particularly on Fridays and Mondays so that employees got extended weekends.

Bank employees are already a pampered lot enjoying huge salary and perks including PF, Gratuity, Medical, LTA and pension. In return they treat the customers most shabbily. Are the Ministry of Finance, RBI and Government of India completely in dark regarding the sufferings of the common people as a consequence of this strike? Government must give these union leaders a stern warning. The strike needs to be foiled with an iron hand. If necessary, ESMA should be invoked.

Yours, etc., Dr. Purushottam Chattopadhyay,
Kolkata, 23 September.

Right age?

Sir, Gautam Gambhir's advice to Vaibhav Suryavanshi to "wait for the right time" sounds amusing in cricketing terms. Marriage may have a socially prescribed age, but cricket has no waiting period for talent.

If a youngster is scoring runs and knocking on the door, asking him to wait for the calendar to approve his entry is like telling a groom to postpone his wedding until the neighbours give permission!

The irony is sharper when such advice comes from the man entrusted with India's cricketing future.

Leadership should recognise readiness, not merely birthdays. Marriage needs the right age; cricket needs the right player. Talent shouldn't wait indefinitely outside the selection gate.

Yours, etc., P Thiruvadi,
Chennai, 23 September.

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10 years on, UPI has sent the bill

SANKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has entered its second decade by acquiring something it was designed to suppress: a transaction price. From October 15, the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) will levy a 0.4 per cent Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) on Person-to-Merchant (P2M) UPI payments above Rs 2,000, capped at Rs 300 for transactions of Rs 75,000 and above, with a flat Rs 5 charge for railways, telecom, insurance, and fuel. Consumers and every Person-to-Person (P2P) transfer, regardless of size, remain untouched. The announcement revives a decade-old argument: was India's most celebrated public good ever truly free, and does charging for it now threaten the cashless economy it was meant to build?

UPI's first decade was extraordinary by any measure. Annual transactions rose from roughly 2 crore and worth Rs 0.07 lakh crore in FY17 to 24,162 crore worth Rs 314 lakh crore in FY26 — around 12,000-fold rise in volume and roughly 4,500-fold rise in value. The corresponding fall in average ticket size, from about Rs 3,900 to roughly Rs 1,300, shows UPI displacing small daily cash purchases as much as it enabled big-ticket digital ones. UPI now accounts for around 85 per cent of India's digital-payment volume.

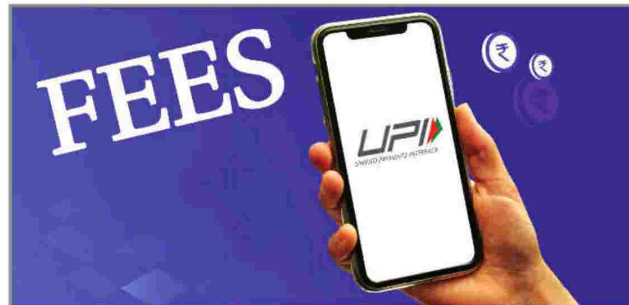
Transactions above Rs 2,000 make up barely 4 per cent of merchant-payment volume but around two-thirds of its value — the statistical skew that lets NPCI claim 96 per cent of merchant transactions are unaffected. That is true, but it elides the difference

between MDR's statutory and its economic incidence: a merchant who formally bears the levy may still recover it through higher prices or thinner discounts. UPI's first decade subsidised adoption; its second is monetising scale.

UPI is free at the point of use, not free to operate. A parliamentary committee cited an industry estimate of Rs 20,700 crore in annual operating costs against a government allocation of just Rs 2,000 crore for FY27 — about a tenth of the cost. Banks and payment providers need revenue to fund capacity, cybersecurity, fraud prevention, and dispute resolution. In August 2026, PhonePe and Google Pay together processed 779 per cent of UPI volume and 816 per cent of value, monetising the relationship through lending and advertising while paying nothing for the rails beneath them — an asymmetry Parliament's finance committee separately flagged.

The Payments Council of India pressed for MDR's return since the zero-MDR mandate began in January 2020, writing directly to the Prime Minister in March 2025. Read this way, the new framework looks less like a tax on citizens than a long-deferred settlement between the state and an industry it can no longer wholly subsidise.

Will this push transactions to cash, and at what cost? India's cash-to-GDP ratio has fallen from its pandemic peak of 14.4 per cent in FY21 to about 11 per cent in FY26, even as currency in circulation hit a record Rs 41.7 lakh crore, growing 11.9 per cent in FY26. But cash plumbing is already strained: ATM cash-management costs are



projected to exceed Rs 20,000 crore annually, and intended cash-loading fell to 64 and 57 per cent of requirement in March and April 2026.

An RBI study of UPI and cash demand finds that greater adoption is associated with lower cash demand nationally and across states, though the relationship is non-linear. The converse is a legitimate risk: if MDR redirects payments to cash, households and merchants may hold more currency outside banks. Deposits finance bank credit; currency outside banks does not. Persistent migration toward cash could weaken deposit mobilisation at the margin, prompting banks to raise deposit rates, compress margins or reprice loans — making credit marginally dearer, a risk policymakers must address rather than dismiss.

The tax question is sharper still. UPI's digital trail has been central to GST formalisation: cash is easier to omit from invoices and returns. An MDR nudging precisely the higher-ticket, revenue-relevant transactions back to cash would compound that risk, unlike the innocuous tea-stall payment officials cite. Consumption, too, may suffer: by restoring the friction UPI removed, the fee could lead to discretionary high-ticket spending being postponed.

Two design flaws deserve scrutiny. First, structuring: splitting a Rs 10,000 bill into five Rs 2,000 transfers avoids the levy while multiplying the settlement and fraud-monitoring load MDR is meant to fund — self-defeating unless anti-structuring rules follow. Second, the P2P-P2M asymmetry: a Rs 1 lakh transfer to a friend stays free, while a

Rs 2,001 transfer to a shopkeeper is charged, even though P2P transfers incur comparable infrastructure costs. NPCI's implicit justification that merchants monetise the relationship elsewhere while individuals do not is not entirely defensible.

The real test for this policy is not the MDR revenue collected, but that revenue net of the consumer-price pass-through, the cost of cash displaced onto a strained ATM network, and any tax leakage from transactions nudged back into currency. India built UPI to retire cash, not subsidise its comeback; financing the platform's second decade should not mean pricing transactions back into the shadow economy it was designed to shrink.

The writer teaches Economics at IIM Ranchi. The views are personal.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 24 Sept. 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

IT has been notified that the constituencies of the Bengal Legislative Council must elect their representatives before November 30. The sub-mission of nomination papers and their scrutiny have been fixed for October 4 and 8 respectively, but no date has yet been named for recording the votes. At this time of the year the condition of Bengal differs in many respects from the other Indian provinces. The great Durga Puja and other festivals which follow it are peculiar to Bengal, whose people put the cares of ordinary life on one side at this season, and spend their time on religious celebrations or holiday-making. Normal activities will not be resumed until the Kali Puja is over and the courts re-open after the long vacation. There is reason therefore in the suggestion that the polling day should be postponed until the re-opening of the mofussil courts. An earlier date would make it difficult or impossible for a large number of voters to use their franchise. It may be added that in many parts of Eastern Bengal the polling stations will be approachable by neither boat nor road before the middle of November. In view of these circumstances the third week of November seems to be the most suitable time for the elections. This would give the returning officers a good three weeks before the Christmas holidays to announce the results, and the Council could then be summoned in January.

Houthi's power alters Red Sea dynamics

PRABHU DAYAL

The Houthi movement, officially known as Ansar Allah (Supporters of God), has evolved from a localised Zaydi Shia revivalist group in northern Yemen into a formidable regional player capable of projecting power far beyond its borders. Originating in the 1990s as a theological movement against Saudi-backed Wahhabi influence and the perceived marginalisation by Yemen's central government, the Houthis have leveraged years of civil war, strategic alliances, and geopolitical shifts to become a dominant force in the Middle East. Understanding the Houthis requires an examination of their core objectives and their significant potential for global and regional disruption.

The Houthis' motivations operate on domestic, regional, and ideological levels.

Consolidation of Domestic Rule: Domestically, the Houthis seek undisputed political and territorial control over Yemen. Since seizing the capital, Sana'a, in 2014 and successfully resisting a protracted military intervention by a Saudi-led coalition, they have positioned themselves as the de facto government of northern Yemen. Their internal goal is to formalise this governance, extract economic rents (such as port revenues and taxes), and dismantle any remaining domestic opposition.

Regional Recognition and Ideological Legitimacy: The Houthis operate under a fierce anti-Western, anti-Zionist,

and anti-imperialist ideology, encapsulated in their official slogan: "God is the greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, A Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam." They demand recognition as a sovereign and legitimate regional power rather than a mere rebel group or proxy.

Integration into the 'Axis of Resistance': Over the past decade, the Houthis have deepened their alignment with Iran and its network of non-state allies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and various militias in Iraq. While they retain local autonomy and are not absolute puppets of Tehran, they share Iran's strategic goal of countering American and Israeli influence in the Middle East. By actively participating in regional conflicts, they solidify their status within this alliance.

The Houthis possess a disproportionate capacity to cause disruption, stemming primarily from Yemen's unique geography and the group's advanced asymmetric military capabilities.

The most potent weapon in the Houthi arsenal is their geographical proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a narrow chokepoint connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal. Through this corridor passes roughly 12 per cent of total global trade, including vast quantities of oil, liquefied natural gas, and consumer goods.

By utilising anti-ship cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and sea drones, the Houthis have demonstrated that they can effectively hijack or disrupt commercial shipping. This forces global maritime firms to reroute

vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, adding thousands of miles to journeys, delaying supply chains, inflating insurance premiums, and driving up global shipping costs.

Transitioning from a guerrilla force into a technologically sophisticated military power, the Houthis possess long-range capabilities. They have launched drones and ballistic missiles targeting deep into Saudi Arabia (including vital Aramco oil facilities in the past), the United Arab Emirates, and southern Israel. The relatively low cost of Houthi drones compared to the millions of dollars required for state-sponsored air defence systems (like the US Patriot or Israel's Arrow systems) creates a highly asymmetric economic and military burden for their adversaries.

Beyond shipping, the Houthis pose a latent threat to critical subsea infrastructure. The waters off the coast of Yemen host critical international submarine communication cables that carry a vast portion of the digital traffic between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Any disruption or sabotage directed at these cables carries the potential to cause massive telecommunications and financial disruption globally.

The Houthis' disruptive potential also manifests internally. Their aggressive posture complicates international diplomatic efforts to secure a permanent peace legacy in Yemen. The diversion of shipping away from Houthi-controlled ports worsens what is already one of the world's most severe humanitarian



crises, restricting the inflow of food, medicine, and international aid to millions of impoverished Yemenis.

Ultimately, the Houthis have transformed from a localised northern Yemeni militia into a formidable geopolitical force capable of projecting power far beyond their borders. By leveraging asymmetric warfare, strategic regional alliances, and their geographic command over the Bab al-Mandab strait, they have effectively established a potent veto over global shipping lanes and regional stability.

Their core objectives — consolidating internal governance, asserting zaydism-infused political dominance,

and positioning themselves as a vanguard of anti-Western resistance — are structurally reinforced by this immense capacity for disruption. As the international community grapples with the fallout of clogged trade routes and shifting alliances, it is clear that the Houthis can no longer be viewed through a purely domestic lens. Any future framework for peace in the Middle East must confront the reality that their disruptive power has permanently altered the geopolitics of the Red Sea corridor.

The writer, a retired IPS officer, served as India's Ambassador to Kuwait and Morocco and as Consul General in New York.

News Items

SIEMENS GROUP

TERMS OF U. S. LOAN OF 24 MILLION DOLLARS

NEW YORK, SEPT.

Senator Dillon to-day read an announcement regarding the completion of the 24 million dollar loan to the Siemens group of Germany of 6.5 per cent, debenture bonds in the form of 50 per cent, paid allotment certificates.

A substantial portion will be offered in Europe. A uniform feature of the loan is to be found in the form of warrants attached to each bond, entitling the holder to receive each year, including 1936, three dollars and 33 1/3 cents for each one per cent, by which the average per cent, of the cash dividend declared upon Siemens' stock in the preceding year shall have exceeded the seven per cent, dividends paid by Siemens in the ten years up to 1914, averaged over ten per cent. —Reuter.

ATTACK AIR CRASH

MECHANIC DROWNED IN DIVE INTO RIVER

SIMLA, SEPT.

ANOTHER crash is reported by the Royal Air Force near Attock, where a Bristol fighter was forced to land.

The pilot, Flying Officer D. Robinson, was slightly injured, but the mechanic, P. Jones, was drowned in the river. The machine was also lost.

TRAIN'S DASH INTO GANG OF MEN

FIVE KILLED IN THICK FOG

LONDON, SEPT.

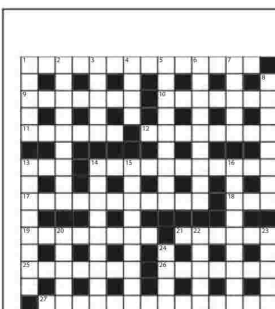
FIVE railway bridge painters were knocked down and killed by a train in a thick fog at Hucknall, Nottingham.

Two members of the gang were detailed with whistles to give the alarm of any approaching trains. All moved aside as they heard the rumblings of a goods train, only to walk in front of an express from Sheffield to Nottingham.

The driver of the train knew nothing of the accident until an hour later on arrival at Nottingham, when he found blood in front of the engine.

Another member of the gang was seriously injured and taken to hospital. —Reuter.

Crossword | No. 293590



Yesterday's Solution

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

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



COMMENT & FEATURES

THE JERUSALEM POST • WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2020

THE JERUSALEM POST

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Guarding our shuls

Two Jewish communities, separated by thousands of kilometers, were forced to think about their safety as they gathered to observe Yom Kippur.

In Jerusalem, vandals entered the Reform congregation Kol HaNeshama sometime overnight, after worshippers left following Sunday evening's service and before they returned for morning prayers, and they removed a Pride flag from the sanctuary. In Belleville, Ontario, a man armed with a shotgun opened fire on a police officer stationed outside the Sons of Jacob Synagogue while about two dozen worshippers were inside.

These were fundamentally different events. The Jerusalem break-in formed part of a series of incidents targeting the congregation. In Canada, authorities had not established by press time whether the Jewish community was the gunman's target. Their connection begins and ends with their timing and setting: Both disrupted Yom Kippur. That narrow connection raises a basic question: whether freedom of worship protects not only the right to gather but also a congregation's safety and its authority to determine what happens inside its own sanctuary.

The holiday gives that setting particular meaning. Jewish communities do something both local and collective: Each congregation follows its own customs, but Jews across denominations and time zones gather to account for the same year that has passed.

That shared observance does not require Jews to agree about how Judaism should be practiced. A Reform congregation in Jerusalem and a Conservative congregation in Ontario need not share the same liturgy, politics, or understanding of Jewish life to be participating in the same religious act. That plurality is precisely what freedom of worship protects.

The Pride flag hanging inside Kol HaNeshama's sanctuary reflected the values the congregation had chosen for its own community. Anyone is entitled to reject what the flag represents or to disagree with Reform Judaism, but that disagreement does not confer authority over another congregation's place of worship.

By entering the synagogue and removing the flag, those responsible turned disapproval into action. Through trespass and intimidation, they sought to determine which symbols the congregation would be permitted to place in its own sanctuary.

The overnight break-in was not an isolated incident. Vandals had previously smashed a window, damaged artwork, and removed Pride flags from the building. During Rosh Hashanah, a group of youths threw eggs at worshippers arriving for services. It has not been established that the same people were responsible for each episode, but the repeated targeting requires a response proportionate to the pattern, rather than the treatment of each incident as minor mischief.

Belleville presents a separate responsibility. Police said the gunman fired at the officer securing the synagogue, prompting him and a second officer to return fire. The gunman and the officer were seriously wounded, while none of the worshippers inside was physically harmed. The congregation cancelled its remaining services.

The duty to protect Jewish worship does not end when it takes place in a Jewish state. In Jerusalem, Jewish authorities must protect a Jewish congregation whose religious choices some other Jews reject.

The identities of those responsible for the Yom Kippur break-in remain unknown. During Rosh Hashanah, however, the youths who threw eggs were described as Jewish and wore kippot, and the pattern has centered on a Reform synagogue, its worshippers, and its Pride flags. Authorities must treat those incidents as repeated targeting and identify those responsible.

Belleville and Jerusalem require different investigations, but the public obligation is the same. Canadian authorities must determine why the gunman opened fire and ensure that the synagogue can reopen safely, while Israeli authorities must prevent hostility within Jewish society from restricting how another Jewish community worships. In both countries, protection should not depend on officials sharing the congregation's beliefs.

Jewish sovereignty cannot mean protecting Jews only from religious hostility outside of Israel – it must also preserve disagreement within the Jewish community in Israel and ensure that no group can enforce its definition of legitimate Judaism through trespass or intimidation. Yom Kippur does not make Jewish communities identical; rather, it shows why their different ways of praying must all be protected.

INBAR ASHKENAZI, CEO Jerusalem Post Group

EBOR RONEN, Director of Circulation

GALIT SAGIE, Deputy CEO Commercial and Strategic Partnerships

EDITORIAL OFFICES AND ADMINISTRATION

The Jerusalem Post Building, PO Box 81, Jerusalem 9100002.

Telephone 03-514-6466, Fax 02-537-6553

• CUSTOMER SERVICE *2421, 03-761-9056, 1800-574-5754,

Fax 03-561-3699.

PO Box 9344, Tel Aviv 6109202

• ADVERTISING 15 Hu'achim Midvita, Tel Aviv 6701027.

Telephone 03-761-9000, Fax 03-561-4777.

• SUBSCRIPTIONS E-MAIL SUBS@JPOST.COM

• ADVERTISING E-MAIL TRAFFIC@JPOST.COM

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Israel-Saudi security links revived

• By NEVILLE TELLER

On August 7, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan signed a joint defense agreement, known as the Mecca Pact. At its public core is a political commitment modeled in part on NATO's Article 5 – namely, an armed attack on one party is to be regarded as an attack on all.

On September 8, the Houthi is launched a major wave of attacks against Saudi Arabia, striking civilian and economic sites and energy infrastructure in several southern cities. Subsequently, the country has been attacked time and again by the Houthis. Civilian and economic facilities have been struck: King Khalid Air Base and Aramco facilities have been targeted.

Why have Turkey and Pakistan not rushed to Riyadh's defense?

Rather like the small print on insurance policies, the Mecca Pact seems to exclude as much as it offers. The publicly released description of the agreement, while making much of the NATO-like commitment, does not specify an automatic military response should one of the parties be attacked. Nor does it publicly stipulate the circumstances in which troops must be deployed. In fact, the full text of the agreement has not been released, so important questions about its scope and implementation remain obscure.

Rather late in the day, on Saturday, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, chief spokesman for Pakistan's military, is reported as saying, "Pakistan fully stands with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, both diplomatically and physically... We will go to any extent."

But the statement, whatever it meant, was too late. Given the ambiguities inherent in the Mecca Pact, and the obvious reluctance of either Pakistan or Turkey to become involved in a military operation in Yemen, it is not surprising that Saudi Arabia turned to Washington for support that subsequently connected it to Israel.

CENTCOM is the US military command responsible for the Middle East and parts of Central and South Asia. It directs US military operations and security partnerships in that area.

Sometime during the week of September 7, at a secluded ski resort in Germany (rumored to be Garmisch-Partenkirchen), CENTCOM's commander, Admiral Brad Cooper, hosted a conference of senior military leaders from eight countries.

It is extraordinary, but the fact that sitting round the same table were IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir and military chiefs from Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt. CENTCOM, functioning as an intermediary, had succeeded in connecting Israel with Arab militaries that do not have diplomatic relations with it – in particular, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

According to a report by Axios, the respected digital news outlet, the central purpose of the conference was to discuss the continuing US-Israeli war with Iran, and the broader regional-security situation.

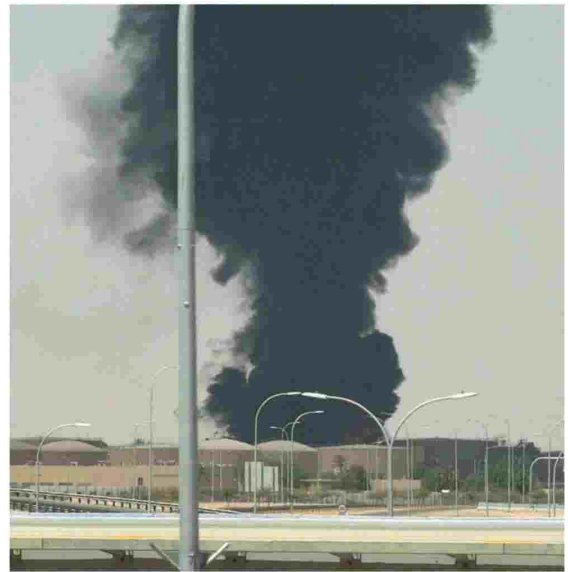
Cooper reportedly assured those present that, despite Iranian attacks on US bases, the US would retain forces in the Middle East. He also primed the group on plans to expand maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz.

Zamir is said to have briefed the participants on IDF operations on several fronts.

Axios further reports, citing "a source with knowledge of the matter," that Israel and Saudi Arabia, with CENTCOM assistance, began discussing how Israel could assist Saudi military operations against the Houthis. The possible support mentioned is ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance), on the lines of the assistance that Israel has reportedly provided to the UAE.

On September 14, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met Cooper in Jeddah, amid the rapidly worsening Houthi offensive. The next day Reuters reported that Washington, while declining to conduct direct US strikes against the Houthis, had agreed to provide Saudi Arabia with targeted assistance.

That same day, September 15, the Jerusalem Post reported that Israel and Saudi Arabia had held CENTCOM-mediated discussions about Israeli intelligence assistance to Riyadh against the Houthis. Regional



A LARGE plume of black smoke rises from the fuel storage area at King Khalid International Airport, in Riyadh last week. (Stringer/Reuters)

diplomatic sources had told the paper that the Saudi side was seeking intelligence that could help build a picture of Houthi deployments, and thus anticipate future operations.

A similar report emanated from the Institute for the Study of War in a document published jointly with the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute. It commented that this prospective arrangement would: "... resemble Israel's current intelligence support relationship with the United Arab Emirates."

THERE IS no doubt that the Iran war is creating an unusually powerful common-security denominator. The countries represented in CENTCOM's conference have very different political relationships with Israel, but they share an immediate security problem: Iran. Iranian-aligned armed groups have acted against some of them and are capable of threatening all.

Israel possesses substantial intelligence and surveillance capabilities concerning Iran

and its regional partners. Saudi Arabia's cities and energy infrastructure have been struck repeatedly by Houthi missiles and drones. CENTCOM possesses the command-and-control machinery that can connect Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Although Saudi Arabia still has no formal diplomatic relations with Israel, the emerging arrangement potentially constitutes a major step in Saudi-Israeli military normalization. Israeli intelligence is being used to help defend Saudi Arabia against the Houthis, even without diplomatic normalization.

This arrangement gives Saudi Arabia considerable political cover. Publicly, its relationship with Israel can remain highly constrained; operationally, cooperation can become increasingly sophisticated.

So the present position, according to media reports, is that Saudi Arabia is being offered direct targeted support by the US, while CENTCOM is mediating Saudi-Israeli discussions on intelligence assistance against the Houthis.

Saudi-Israeli collaboration is

nothing new. There is a 60-year history of covert strategic cooperation. But the Saudi-Israel connection remains as delicate as it has ever been. It is not any form of military alliance, nor has there been any change in Saudi policy on formal normalization. In fact, reports emanating from Saudi sources suggest that Riyadh, even while seeking Israel's help against Houthi attacks, is still resisting movement toward normalization.

Meanwhile, the law of unintended consequences is in full play. While the Houthis continue their strikes on Saudi Arabia, and make territorial gains in areas surrounding one of the world's critical maritime choke points, the Bab el-Mandeb, they are inadvertently fostering greater military cooperation than ever before between Israel and Arab states, and both reviving and strengthening Israel's covert security links with Saudi Arabia.

The writer, a former senior civil servant, is the Middle East correspondent for Eurasia Review. Follow him at: www.a-mid-east-journal.blogspot.com

Jerusalem: The jewel in the crown

• By ANGELA GODFREY-GOLDSTEIN

Walking through Jerusalem's busy Mahaneh Yehuda market on the eve of Yom Kippur, the thought struck me that probably no one in Israel would think of apologizing in prayer to east Jerusalemite Palestinians for what Israel has imposed on them since 1967. Nor, indeed, would most Israelis even be aware of the war crimes, or crimes against humanity, which its ethnic cleansing policies have been incurring since that time of conquest and annexation.

To understand Israeli policies of forcible displacement, one must return to those blindly euphoric days of Israel's 1967 victory. Set out in Chapter 3 of *Separate and Unequal*, Amir Cheshin, mayor Teddy Kollek's adviser on Arab affairs, together with Bill Hutman and Avi Melamed, describe in detail the principle behind the zoning and planning of newly conquered east Jerusalem.

The concept was "maximum land, minimum population," denying the false public statements of unity, while sowing the dragons' teeth today being harvested – especially by those Palestinians who have been "minimized." So only 13% was zoned, of the 70 sq.km. newly configured as east Jerusalem, for Palestinian residential purposes: land already almost totally built up.

Meaning that nearly all Palestinians in east Jerusalem live in "illegal" buildings, without building permits, on land they own and for which they pay arnona (city taxes), but which is zoned as a green area, or for Israeli settlements or frozen land reserves.

This explains why there is a dire lack of affordable housing for Palestinians in that city, unless they move to the northern side of the wall (separation barrier to some, apartheid wall to others) where the high-rise spires of Kafr Akab or Shuafat Refugee Camp, housing some 150,000 people, threaten to come crashing down in the next major earthquake.

Israeli peace NGO Ir Amim's report "Planned Negligence" reveals that one-third of east Jerusalemites have been forced there, while Israel's 2040 Strategic Plan has almost no plans for Palestinian neighborhoods. It "has essentially sentenced hundreds of thousands of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem to the ever-worsening planning chokehold." This "will drastically exacerbate the crisis beyond the already astronomical cost that planning discrimination currently exacts from east Jerusalem's residents."

Arieh King recently told Sky TV that he wants to demolish all "illegal" buildings in east Jerusalem – the number estimated at 20,000. His vision for Jerusalem, expressed to BBC Panorama in *A Walk in the Park*, is a "Judaized" city, with "Jews all over! All over!"

A settler, leading east Jerusalem's Ma'aleh Hazeitum settlement on the Mount of Olives, he overlooks Silwan's Al-Bustan neighborhood. During his recent visit as deputy mayor, demolitions in Al-Bustan sped up, so that half the neighborhood – over 60 homes – is now a ghostly reminder of Gaza, referred to by 10 UN Special Rapporteurs as "de-Palestinization of Jerusalem."

This issue of "Judaization" or "de-Palestinization" of Jerusalem (i.e., ethnic cleansing) is not addressed by the international community's belated attempt to ensure the viability of a two-state solution nor referred to in the furor over E1 development.

The core issue of ethnically displaced Jerusalemites, impacting a future, viable Palestinian state, is totally overlooked. Even if the construction of settler homes, hotels, and an industrial zone in the E1 area is by some miracle reversed, the two-state solution could not survive if Palestinians are removed from Jerusalem. The two issues are inseparable.

E1 development is geared to prevent access from the West Bank into the city (north and south access are already efficiently blocked), with that eastern corridor estimated to be a lifeline valued at 35% of a future Palestinian economy due to tourism revenues.

Massive E1 building would also facilitate an Israeli-only wedge from Tel Aviv to Jordan – hence Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's knee-jerk response in 2012 to Palestine's UN observer state status: "We will develop E1!"

But where is international outcry calling out Caterpillar or JCB bulldozers for their role in displacing Palestinian landowners? Why is international objection only focused on Gaza and the West Bank?

And, despite welcome new moves from words to action by the UK and others, Palestine is still burning, homes in Al-Bustan are disappearing, state-sponsored settler terrorists roam viciously free, while the two-state solution is becoming a historical concept whose demise they enable.

The UK and other countries must be guided by the mineshift's canaries – the humanitarian community, Israeli, Palestinian, and international human rights actors, and the world's highest court in The Hague – pressing their third state responsibility to uphold international law and end the Israeli occupation and its racist control mechanisms. This must be done to safeguard Jerusalem, jewel in the crown of both nations, and save our options for peace.

Those 10 UN Special Rapporteurs warn about the de-Palestinization of Jerusalem: "These acts must be understood in their totality: the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, by whatever means, whatever the cost, and whatever crimes it takes. This environment is coercing Palestinians to leave their homes and life in a city where their roots run deep."

The experts urge immediate international action, warning: "What is erased now – the richness of Jerusalem's communities, heritage, and rights – will not be restored. Inaction is not neutrality; it is complicity."

The writer is an Anglo-Israeli peace activist; previously a radio interviewer for BBC arts "Meridian" and a West End actor, she immigrated in 1981 from Johannesburg where, as an anti-apartheid activist, she acted in *Neighbours in Soweto*.

'Collateral damage' in true proportion



THINK ABOUT IT
• By SUSAN HATTIS ROLEF

The totally disproportionate reaction in Israel to the documentary film *NAZA*, formally produced and presented by Britain but written and directed by two Israeli filmmakers in their early 30s, Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, calls for comment.

The film won the special Jury Prize at the 83rd Venice International Film Festival on Saturday, a week and a half ago, and received an unprecedented 25-minute ovation. In Israel, it was perceived as a catastrophe for Israeli *hasbara* (public diplomacy).

The film is based on the recorded evidence given by 24 anonymous former Israeli soldiers, officers, and intelligence personnel. This evidence deals with what is known in military lingo as "collateral damage," or in Hebrew *nezek agavi*, the Hebrew acronym reads in English as NAZA.

Collateral damage refers to what are considered "acceptable" civilian casualties when military targets are being targeted from the air, and how such decisions are taken – whether by human beings, automatic surveillance, or AI-operated systems.

The reason this issue has received so much international attention and domestic interest within certain circles in Israel is that the number of Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip following the Hamas-led massacre and abduction of Israelis from the Gaza border communities on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war since, has reached over 70,000 persons.

The problem is that at least two-thirds of these 70,000+ fatalities are believed to be "non-involved" civilians, who may be considered to be "approved" collateral damage victims.

I say non-involved in quotation marks, because there are large sections of Israeli society that do not believe there is such a thing as Palestinians in the Gaza Strip who are not involved, one way or another, with Hamas and its activities.

I happen to believe that just as not all Israelis can be held responsible for acts of wrongdoing associated with what our government does, or held responsible for a genocide against the Palestinians that was not and is not being planned or committed by Israel, the Palestinians are not all responsible for the crimes of Hamas.

So even though there are no lovers of Zion among the Palestinian inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians as a

whole are not responsible for the crimes of Hamas.

Like most other people, journalists and non-journalists who have commented on NAZA and reacted to it, I have not actually seen the film, and my information comes from sources I consider reliable.

At the same time, I believe that even without having seen the film, we can assume, based on its subject matter and what Abraham and Szor have said about the film, that they are disturbed by the excessive number of Gazan civilians killed in Gaza since October 2023, and the way "collateral damage" is defined by the IDF for military purposes in the Gaza Strip.

We can also assume that, since both Abraham and Szor were among the four winners (including two Palestinians) of the Oscar Award for Best Documentary Film in February 2025 for *No Other Land*, they are among the Israelis who are perturbed by Israel's apparent (though undeclared and not admitted) policy of changing the status of large sections of Judea and Samaria to the detriment of the Palestinians.

The film records the events that led to the gradual destruction by the IDF of a location called Masafer Yatta in the southern Hebron hills, and the de facto expulsion of most of its Palestinian population.

HOLDING THE critical positions about the Israeli government and the IDF that the two filmmakers hold is not in itself a crime. It certainly does not call for severe punishment. I believe it is evidence of the existence of free speech in a democracy.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was quick to propose a bill to implement citizenship revocation for defaming IDF personnel, along with another bill that would increase the fines on defamation charges 20-fold.

Netanyahu also criticized the opposition parties (especially the Democrats) for failing to condemn the film and its makers, even though neither he nor they had yet seen the film.

Culture and Sports Minister Miki Zohar was also quick to demand citizenship revocation from the Interior Ministry (since there has been no serving interior minister in Israel for over a year, the demand was referred to Netanyahu).

He approached Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) head David Zini to open an urgent investigation concerning the source of the information and materials used in the film – i.e., the 24 persons who were anonymously interviewed.

This, of course, makes some sense, given that the 24 allegedly disclosed secret



DIRECTORS YUVAL ABRAHAM and Rachel Szor pose with the Special Jury Award during the closing ceremony of the 83rd Venice International Film Festival, earlier this month. (Yves Herman/Reuters)

security information and that some of it was false, as some military sources have claimed, based on reports by those who actually saw the film.

There is no doubt that the current onslaught on Abraham and Szor deserves to be described by the Hebrew term *alshum*, which means frequently unjustified, harsh criticism, and slander.

Nevertheless, even though I sympathize with the basic motivation of the two, based on past personal experience from activities I participated in over issues concerning Arab-Israeli, Palestinian-Israeli relations and peace-making efforts, I believe that unless you are completely reckless and irresponsible, you must take into consideration the possible legal implications of your actions – for yourself and for others.

In the current case, the 24 interviewees (should their identities be uncovered) are the most likely to suffer the most serious

consequences, as they divulged information obtained while serving in the relevant military and intelligence units, and they could even be found to have committed treason.

Furthermore, though the alleged motivation for divulging such information is, under the circumstances, to stop what one believes to be a serious breach of international law – whether advertently or inadvertently – by one's state, in fact, serious, irreversible damage might be done to the state, given that those viewing the film are not necessarily neutral bystanders who merely seek justice.

Incidentally, one argument Abraham made in an interview with Raviv Drucker from Channel 13, after the latter watched the film and expressed some reservations about it, is worth mentioning.

Abraham argued that NAZA might have been superfluous had the free media in Israel opened the issue of collateral dam-

age in the early stages of the Israel-Hamas war. Drucker, well known for his serious investigative reporting, admitted that Abraham was right, and that not enough had been done.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether deeper delving into the issue by the media would have helped.

So far, the media delving into the issue of Jewish violence against Palestinians in Judea and Samaria, and the failure of the authorities to react effectively, has not stopped the violence, even though it has been accompanied by condemnations by both Netanyahu and Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir.

The writer has written journalistic and academic articles, as well as several books, on international relations, Zionism, Israeli politics, and parliamentarism. From 1994 to 2010, she worked at the Knesset Library and the Knesset Research and Information Center.

'Hasbara' is no magic cure

• By TOVA HERZL

Whenever an image crisis involving Israel erupts, like after the film *NAZA* won a major prize at the Venice Film Festival, there are often cries of "Where is the *hasbara*?" It is as if *hasbara* were a miracle cure: take two pills in the morning, and everything will be fine.

It doesn't work that way, and let me start with the word itself.

I have not found another country that uses a term exactly equivalent to the Israeli concept of *hasbara*, which literally means "explanation." Rather, formulations such as "public diplomacy" and "strategic communications" are used to describe efforts that are aimed not only at governments but also at foreign publics.

The word *hasbara* suggests that if only we explain things properly, the problems will disappear. But persuasion requires something more: a policy that can be explained and defended.

Consider a few questions, in both domestic and foreign affairs, that even the most talented spokesperson would find difficult to answer.

Interlocutors might ask: If the government opposes violence by Israelis in the West Bank, violence that even US Ambassador Mike Huckabee, a strong supporter of Israel, has described as involving "Israeli terrorists," why does it continue?

Or: If Israel continues its de facto annexation of the West Bank, how does it envisage the future of the millions of Palestinians living under its control? Does it intend to grant them equal rights, thereby changing the country's Jewish character? If not, what will their status be?

While "but they..." may sometimes be true, it does not answer the questions.

A donor who contributes to Israeli social causes may ask about the future of the economy, given the growth of the ultra-Orthodox sector and the benefits it receives, despite its limited participation in the workforce. Saying "That's democracy" may be legally cor-



PEOPLE PASS by a graffiti depicting Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, the directors of the documentary film 'NAZA,' and the word 'traitors' in Hebrew, on a wall in Ashdod, earlier this month. (Amir Cohen/Reuters)

rect, but it is unlikely to persuade that donor to continue investing. In addition to explicable policies, there must be those who do the explaining. After years in which the Foreign Ministry has suffered budget cuts, Israel's diplomatic network shrank, and the ministry and plum positions abroad are treated as a political prize, who is supposed to do the explaining?

THERE IS another question: What, and whom, should Israel respond to, and how? Anyone who has represented Israel abroad knows that it is simply impossible to respond to everything. Every reaction has to be weighed against its potential benefit and damage. Responding can keep an issue on the agenda; ignoring it can suggest unwillingness to confront criticism. How does one decide? Carefully.

Like the many senior Israeli officials who rushed to respond to NAZA, I have not seen the film. But I understand that it raises serious allegations, while also being subject to professional criticism. So, imagine that, instead of the

prime minister, and many others, responding as they did – from designating the filmmakers "traitors" to demanding that their citizenship be revoked – only one or two official bodies, perhaps the IDF Spokesman's unit and/or the Foreign Ministry, had responded, with everyone else referring questions to them.

Imagine also that the designated responders had said that conclusions cannot be drawn from anonymous testimony, but that Israel would, of course, thoroughly investigate any information concerning potentially unlawful conduct, and hold those responsible accountable.

And then imagine that Israel had actually conducted such a thorough investigation and taken action against anyone found to have committed wrongdoing.

In such a scenario, two groups would have been deprived of headlines: the politicians who rushed to speak out, and the filmmakers, who received publicity they could only have dreamed of. Israel, meanwhile, would have gained.

But that requires management

and coordination, which are sadly lacking, and, above all, politicians who look beyond their political base and instead consider the public interest.

There is no question that Israel faces ongoing challenges that have nothing to do with its own policies or conduct, including the actions of antisemites and others who seek to undermine it. But that does not erase the problems created by Israel's own actions.

At the start of a new year, one can hope that Israel's leaders will put the country's interests first, and that they will act wisely and effectively to pursue consistent, coherent, and defensible policies.

Otherwise, *hasbara* is little more than propaganda: a futile attempt to fill a vacuum created by the absence of policies that can be convincingly explained and defended.

The writer was Israel's first ambassador to the Baltic states after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, ambassador to South Africa, and the congressional liaison officer at the Israeli embassy in Washington. She is a graduate of Israel's National Defense College.

Most don't own stadiums

'Collateral damage' in true proportion

• By AYA SHECHTER

On September 4, Macklemore opened for Ed Sheeran at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey, telling the crowd he had joined the tour to stand in stadiums like that one and say two words: "Free Palestine."

He then performed "Hind's Hall" with footage from Gaza on the screens, and the next night, he did it again.

That weekend, IAC launched a petition asking Sheeran, his promoter, and the venues to remove him from the remaining dates, and more than 18,000 people signed while more than 11,000 clicked through to write to MetLife Stadium.

On September 14, Macklemore announced he was off the tour after a phone call from Robert Kraft.

Since then, some community members have asked me a version of the same question: if one phone call from Kraft settled it, did the petition matter at all?

I understand the instinct, but it measures a signature by one standard only – did it decide the outcome? – and by that standard, almost nothing an ordinary citizen does matters, since one vote rarely decides an election, and yet no one concludes that we should stop voting.

We vote, write, sign, and show up not because any single act settles the question, but because a public that acts is a public decision-makers must account for, while a public that doesn't can be ignored.

That is the lesson I want our community to take from this month, and it is the opposite of the one some are drawing.

Most of us don't own a stadium, and most of us will never make a phone call that changes a tour, so if the thousands is to wait for someone with that kind of power, we have taught thousands of people that their job is to watch.

What most people do have is a name, a phone, an inbox, and a vote: they can sign, they can write to a venue, a sponsor, a school board, a member of Congress, and they can show up to a meeting and speak for two minutes.

Those are the tools of citizenship, and too many people don't know they have them, or don't believe they can use them.

That is why creating a petition matters, not only signing one, since it is a door that shows someone who has never acted what acting looks like.

I believe that if 100,000 people had signed, the tour would have felt it, with

or without Kraft, because venues, promoters, and sponsors answer to audiences, and even a call like Kraft's carries weight only because a community stands behind it.

Look at who never asks whether speaking up is worth it: Macklemore doesn't own a stadium either, yet he treated a stage as a tool and said so.

He didn't need 10 shows; he needed two – and when he was dropped, Finneas, Lukas Graham, and other supporting acts withdrew in protest, with no one on that side debating whether their statements "mattered."

They act first, and they don't wait to be sure it will work.

I CAME TO New York 17 years ago, at 27, as a lawyer, knowing almost nothing about Jewish life outside Israel, and what struck me was how much this community did for Israel, and how much of it rested on ordinary people.

Yes, some donors gave \$18 million, but there were also thousands who gave \$18, and no serious fundraiser has ever concluded that the \$18 gifts don't matter because the \$18 million gift closed the campaign.

Some \$18 donors will always stay \$18 donors because that is what they can afford or the level of their interest, while some will grow into major donors. And either way, the community needs them, and it needs the first gift that brought them in.

A public voice works the same way: some signers will always be the person who does the 30-second thing because that is the time they have, while some will grow into leaders because someone handed them an easy first step.

Both count, and neither happens if no one asks.

So ask yourself: When the next gift comes (and it will), who will already know how to write the letter, who will know where the meeting is, and who will write the name counts?

Sign. Write. Show up. Not because your voice alone decides the outcome, but because a community that waits for someone else to do the work has already decided it.

The writer is the chief operating officer of the Israeli-American Council (IAC), which launched the petition calling for Macklemore's removal from Ed Sheeran's tour and represents more than 150,000 Israeli-Americans nationwide.

Trump, stand with Palestinian democracy

• By SAMER SINIJLAWI

The United States has the sovereign right to deny entry to particular individuals on legitimate security or legal grounds, whether they are Palestinian, Israeli, or of any other nationality. Yet a broad restriction directed at an entire people would be neither wise nor constructive.

Such a policy would silence precisely the Palestinian voices America should want to hear: those who reject violence, seek peaceful engagement, support political reform, and believe that ballots – not bullets – must determine the future of the Palestinian people.

Regarding Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas specifically, I understand that denying him a visa to enter the US may be intended to exert pressure on the Palestinian leadership to undertake long-overdue reforms. Yet pressure is effective only when it is paired with a clear, constructive policy that supports democratic change.

Today, the most meaningful opportunity for Palestinian reform is already before us.

Abbas has called legislative elections for November 28 – the first such elections in two decades. Several powerful figures within the Palestinian political establishment are now seeking to postpone or cancel them. Some are reportedly attempting to enlist the US or influential regional countries, including Saudi Arabia, as ones asking to close the democratic door once again.

Washington should not allow its name to be used for this purpose.

Abbas currently stands almost alone among senior Palestinian leaders in keeping the election date. On this issue, he deserves international support. A clear public statement from US President Donald Trump endorsing free, inclusive, and credible Palestinian elections on its determined date, November 28, could be decisive. It



PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY President Mahmoud Abbas arrives at the San Damaso courtyard to meet with Pope Leo XIV at the Vatican, last year. (Guglielmo Mangiapane/Reuters)

could prevent those who fear change from claiming that America demands cancellation or that regional circumstances require it.

If Washington genuinely wants Palestinian reform, it must do more than punish the failures of the existing leadership. It should empower the Palestinian people to choose a new one.

We have already seen the consequences of closing this door.

Palestinian elections scheduled for 2021 were postponed indefinitely. Their cancellation did not create the catastrophe of October 7, 2023, and it would be irresponsible to draw such a simple line of causation. But it deepened the political vacuum,

weakened moderate voices, destroyed public confidence, and reinforced Hamas's argument that change could never be achieved through democratic or peaceful means.

When ballot boxes are closed, extremists offer other boxes – filled with weapons, funerals, and false promises.

We must not repeat that mistake.

A NEW PALESTINIAN generation is now searching for a different path. Our political movement, Masar Jadid – New Path – was created to answer that demand. In approximately one month, more than 1,200 Palestinians from Jerusalem, Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora joined our movement. Most

are young. Many are women, students, professionals, academics, entrepreneurs, and people entering political life for the first time.

They are joining because New Path offers ideas rarely stated so clearly in Palestinian politics: democracy, transparency, peaceful transfer of power, an independent judiciary, and one legitimate authority governed by one law and possessing one weapon.

We reject both corruption and extremism. We believe Palestinian interests are better served by dialogue and persuasion than by violence. We support a demilitarized Palestinian state, regional economic integration, and a negotiated two-state solution that

provides Palestinians with freedom and dignity while ensuring security for Israelis.

These ideas are attracting support because hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have lost confidence in everything around them but have not yet lost their desire for a better future. They no longer trust the traditional factions.

They are tired of being asked to choose between failed government and endless resistance, between stagnation and destruction. They want a third choice: democratic change.

Trump's recently announced peace initiative has awakened genuine hope that the region may finally move from managing conflict to building a new future. Yet

no regional peace architecture can endure if Palestinians remain politically excluded and denied the right to renew their own leadership.

Reconstruction, investment, demilitarization, and regional cooperation all require legitimate Palestinian institutions. Foreign governments cannot impose legitimacy, and aging political elites cannot inherit it indefinitely. It must come from the people.

Trump understands the political power of a mandate from the voters. He also understands that peace requires breaking with failed formulas and confronting entrenched interests.

Supporting Palestinian elections would not be a concession to the PA. It would be

an investment in a new Palestinian leadership capable of becoming a credible partner for peace.

Trump should therefore state clearly that the US supports holding the November 28 elections on time; that it expects all Palestinian institutions and regional partners to facilitate them; that Jerusalem and Gaza must be included; and that Washington will judge emerging Palestinian forces by their commitment to democracy, nonviolence, reform, and peace.

Such a declaration could save the election. It could also save lives.

THE UPCOMING Palestinian elections must not be canceled; doing so would tell another generation of Palestinians that peaceful political change is impossible. That message would open the gates of despair and accelerate the next regional earthquake.

Supporting elections would send the opposite message: that moderation has allies, peaceful change is possible, and Palestinian society will not remain permanently trapped between authoritarian stagnation and armed extremism.

I continue to believe that Trump can achieve a historic peace in the Middle East – and that the world may one day remember him for doing so. Perhaps such an achievement would even earn the recognition of the Nobel Peace Prize.

But the most meaningful prize would be a generation of Palestinian and Israeli children who grow up knowing politics instead of war, ballots instead of bullets, and hope instead of fear.

Mr. President, do not allow the door to Palestinian democracy to be closed again. Your public support can keep it open – and help change the future of the Middle East.

The writer is a Palestinian political figure from Jerusalem and the founder and president of Masar Jadid (New Path), a Palestinian political movement advocating democracy, nonviolence, reform, and regional peace.

Resolution 2758 beyond challenge

DPP hypocrisy laid bare

• By XIAO JUNZHENG

The recent statements by the head of the Taiwan region's foreign affairs department in the Israeli media distort UNGA Resolution 2758, challenge the international consensus on the one-China principle, smear the Chinese mainland, and whitewash the "Taiwan independence" narrative.

Such statements are lies and fallacies. As the Chinese ambassador to Israel, I'd like to set the record straight.

The one-China principle is the premise and foundation of UNGA Resolution 2758, which solemnly confirms and embodies the one-China principle. In 1945, following the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Taiwan was restored to China. Since then, Taiwan's status has been fully settled.

Before the opening of the 26th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1971, it had already become clear that the international community supported the restoration of the lawful seat of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations. Whether or not Resolution 2758 was adopted could not have altered the fact that there is but one China in the world.

Some countries attempted to obstruct the process through the so-called "Important Question" draft resolution and the "Dual Representation" draft resolution. However, the former one was rejected by vote, and the latter became void upon the adoption of Resolution 2758.

Resolution 2758 was ultimately adopted by an overwhelming majority, with Israel voting in favor as well. It decided to restore the lawful seat of the People's Republic of China at the United Nations, and expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-

shek. The adoption of the resolution marked the recognition of the one-China principle by the majority of countries and its full reflection within the United Nations.

The resolution contains no reference to Taiwan because Taiwan is part of China and is not a sovereign state. By not explicitly mentioning Taiwan while fully reflecting Taiwan's belonging to China, the resolution avoided falling into the traps of "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" set by certain countries at the time.

It stands as an example of the United Nations reaching a reasonable solution after taking into consideration factors including facts, law, procedure, and politics.

Taiwan, as a province of China, has no reason to join the United Nations or other international organizations. Resolution 2758 carries broad and authoritative legal force and provides the basis for the UN system and its specialized agencies in properly handling Taiwan-related matters.

Following the resolution's adoption, official UN documents have consistently referred to Taiwan as "Taiwan, Province of China." Legal opinions issued by the UN Office of Legal Affairs have also emphasized that "the United Nations considers Taiwan as a province of China with no separate status" and that "the authorities in Taiwan do not enjoy any form of governmental status."

SINCE THE adoption of Resolution 2758, 183 countries, including Israel, have established and developed diplomatic relations with China on the basis of the one-China principle. It demonstrates that adherence to the one-China principle reflects the prevailing international consensus and the broader trend of history.

As a province of China, Taiwan has no basis to participate in the United Nations or other international organizations whose membership is limited to sovereign states.

The attempt by the DPP authorities in Taiwan to seek "Taiwan independence" by relying on external forces is a source of disruption to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. The DPP portrays itself as a "force for good" but has intensified its efforts to seek "Taiwan independence" by relying on external forces and pursuing "independence through force."

They have played up the so-called "mainland threat" and used it as a pretext to squander the hard-earned money of the people in Taiwan and curry favor with and submit to external forces, forcibly dragging the people in Taiwan onto the chariot of "Taiwan independence" and pushing Taiwan step by step toward the danger of military conflict and war. An increasing number of people in Taiwan strongly oppose such moves.

China's territory cannot be divided, and the Chinese nation cannot be split. "Taiwan independence" and peace across the Taiwan Strait are fundamentally incompatible. We are ready to work with the greatest sincerity and make every effort to pursue the prospect of peaceful reunification. At the same time, we will take all necessary measures to oppose "Taiwan independence" and external interference and firmly safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

We hope that Israeli friends from all sectors will gain an understanding of the Taiwan question and UNGA Resolution 2758 through the above facts and avoid being misled by those with ulterior motives.

The writer is the Chinese ambassador to Israel.

Help us help you

• By BOBBY RECHNITZ

As a proud and active American Zionist Jew who spends a great deal of time in Washington, and particularly on Capitol Hill, I have learned that words spoken in Israel do not remain in Israel.

They travel instantly across the Atlantic, stripped of their context, translated into headlines and placed before members of Congress who are already under growing pressure to distance themselves from the Jewish state.

Israel's political culture has always been robust, direct, and intensely democratic. Its representative democracy remains an extraordinary example – not only in the Middle East but far beyond it.

Israelis argue loudly because the questions confronting their country are real, consequential, and frequently existential.

However, there is a difference between a vigorous democratic debate and the use of extreme language or radical proposals designed primarily to win a few more votes.

During an election campaign, politicians naturally seek attention and differentiation. Yet sensational statements may provide a brief domestic advantage while inflicting lasting international damage.

This is particularly dangerous now. Israel's election on October 27 will be followed a week later by the American midterm elections on November 3. Every seat in the House of Representatives and a third of the Senate will be contested.

At a moment when support for Israel is increasingly debated within American politics, inflammatory Israeli campaign rhetoric can quickly become material for candidates seeking to turn the Jewish state into a partisan issue.

The warning signs are already unmistakable.

In July, 103 Democratic members of the House voted for an amendment that would have removed \$3.3 billion in American assistance to Israel. The amendment failed, but the vote demonstrated how dramat-

ically the conversation has changed.

Now, as a proposed \$2.8 billion munitions sale to Israel is being considered by congressional committees, Israel's friends are again being asked to defend the vital strategic and moral foundations of the alliance.

Those of us who work day and night to defend and protect the Jewish state are hearing difficult and honest messages, including from some of Israel's closest friends. We explain that many of the most incendiary declarations are election rhetoric rather than government policy.

However, this explanation has its limits.

The most provocative statement will always travel further than the subsequent clarification. It becomes a headline, a social-media clip, a fundraising appeal and, eventually, an argument for changing American policy.

Words intended to excite one constituency in Israel can undermine support among millions of people abroad.

ISRAELI FACES no shortage of serious issues worthy of serious debate.

Its citizens must determine how best to confront continuing security threats on multiple fronts, rebuild a country damaged by three years of war, restore economic confidence, address the responsibilities of military and national service, heal deep social divisions, and define the country's legal and constitutional future.

None of these challenges require political extremism, theatrical threats, or promises of radical solutions that could never be implemented.

I write this with humility. I am not an Israeli citizen, and it is neither my place to tell Israelis how to vote nor to dictate how their democratic debate should be conducted.

Israelis bear the risks, send their children to defend the country, and live with the consequences of the decisions made by their elected leaders.

My appeal is therefore not an

instruction, but a request: help us help you.

Please understand that Israel has stakeholders beyond its borders, people who invest their time, resources, reputations, and relationships in strengthening the Jewish state.

When Israeli politicians speak responsibly, they give us the tools to make Israel's case. When they compete to make the most sensational declaration, they make that task immeasurably harder.

Beyond the elections, there is also reason to hope that the present political uncertainty may produce something better: a broad, representative national Zionist coalition capable of leaving the extremes outside government and addressing Israel's challenges with seriousness, competence, and shared purpose.

Such a coalition would not require Israelis to abandon their ideological differences. It would demonstrate that, at a moment of historic consequence, the Zionist majority can unite around the security, democratic character, and future of the state.

Crucially, this is also the kind of government that could represent the true Israel to the world and to Israel's friends on Capitol Hill: not the Israel of the loudest slogan or most outrageous quotation, but the Israel of a proud, resilient, responsible, and fundamentally pragmatic majority.

Israel's enemies eagerly amplify every reckless remark. Its friends are left to explain it. Israel's leaders can make our task easier without compromising a single principle, by surrendering a single legitimate political argument.

We will continue to stand with Israel and stand behind and with the elected leadership.

We are simply asking those seeking the privilege of leading it to remember that their words matter far beyond the ballot box.

Help us help you.

The writer is a Los Angeles-based philanthropist and real-estate developer who serves as chairman of the Abraham Accords Roundtable and Golda Meir Commemorative Coin Committee in Washington, DC.

COMMENT

Editorials

The future of China-US relations lies in people-to-people friendship

On the eve of President Xi Jinping's state visit to the United States, his reply to a letter from students at 10 US universities is a timely reminder that the future of China-US relations is not shaped only by official exchanges and corporate engagement. It is also built in classrooms, on sports fields, through music and the interactions between ordinary people, especially the youth.

For a relationship as consequential and complex as that between China and the US, exchanges among young people play an irreplaceable practical role. They help narrow perception gaps, increase mutual understanding and lay a social foundation for the steady and healthy development of bilateral relations.

As Xi has pointed out before, the hope of the China-US relationship lies in the people, its foundation is in grassroots connections, its future depends on the youth, and its vitality comes from subnational exchanges. No matter how things may change, the will of the Chinese and US peoples for exchanges and cooperation will not change, and the amity and friendship between young Chinese and Americans will not change.

During his visit to the US in November 2023, Xi announced an initiative to invite 50,000 US students to China for exchange and study programs over five years. The target was achieved two and a half years ahead of schedule, reflecting the potential of youth exchanges between the two countries.

US students have visited schools and universities in China, learned Chinese calligraphy and ancient poetry, played sports with Chinese peers, experienced traditional festivals and explored cities across the country. Such encounters allow young people to experience China firsthand.

Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Washington, offers a vivid example. During Xi's state visit to the US in September 2015, he encouraged students of the school to visit China, emphasizing education as a bridge between peoples. In 2016, 118 students and teachers from the school traveled to multiple Chinese cities. The school's then principal said the journey profoundly changed students' perceptions, providing a deeper understanding of China and fostering friendships with Chinese students.

More than a decade later, this connection endures. In 2026, Lincoln High School marked the 55th anniversary of China-US Ping-Pong Diplomacy, with students and former players recalling how sports helped open a new chapter in bilateral engagement. These are modest encounters, but

their cumulative effect can be substantial.

Today, China-US relations face both opportunities and challenges. The two countries have extensive economic links and shared interests in areas ranging from climate change to people-to-people exchanges. At the same time, differences in some fields can create uncertainty. Public perceptions can harden without direct contacts that provide people with personal experience.

In recent years, the "becoming Chinese" trend on US social media proves that people-to-people and cultural exchanges are a vital way to promote mutual learning among civilizations and break down prejudice and stereotype image. This is precisely why people-to-people exchanges matter. They foster familiarity, empathy and human connections that endure over time.

For US youths who have experienced China firsthand, and for their Chinese peers who have met them, China-US relations are no longer merely an issue discussed in headlines. They become friendships, memories and shared experiences. The Chinese people welcome more US youths to visit and explore China. This new generation of envoys of friendship across the Pacific should be the inheritors, guardians and promoters of China-US friendly cooperation.

In his reply, Xi expressed hope that the US students would join the vast number of young people in both countries in striving to carry forward, uphold and advance China-US friendly cooperation, and work together to foster mutual understanding and affinity between the two peoples and to ensure the steady and long-term development of bilateral relations, so as to contribute the vitality of youth to building a better world.

Engaging in friendly exchanges and cooperation reflects the shared aspirations of the peoples of both countries. Regardless of how the bilateral relationship evolves, the desire of young people on both sides to meet, learn from one another and cooperate remains a valuable source of vitality.

The future of China-US relations will depend not only on how the two countries manage their differences, but also on whether the two peoples continue to see each other as human beings rather than abstractions.

Travel opens minds. Every handshake between students, every shared song, every game played together and every journey across the Pacific matters. The bridge between China and the US is built at the grassroots. Its builders today are ordinary people. Its keepers tomorrow will be the next generation.

Expo shines spotlight on AI applications

The booming development of artificial intelligence, which has emerged as a force capable of shaping humanity's future, has raised the compelling question of how to harness the rapidly evolving technology so that it improves people's lives, promotes development and makes global growth more resilient.

Hangzhou, the host of the fifth Global Digital Trade Expo, which opens on Wednesday, offers some pointers in this regard. Home to the providers of some popular open-source AI large language models and thriving open-source communities, the city is now doubling down on the development of a number of cutting-edge sectors.

The theme of the five-day event — "Meet the AI future at GDTE" — highlights the city's forward-looking development approach, which offers an exciting picture of what AI can do to empower a city and beyond.

Hangzhou released its 2025 action plan to accelerate the development of its AI innovation ecosystem in June last year, announcing 17 initiatives and 20 supportive policies that aim to, among others, nurture over 700 key AI enterprises and cultivate AI applications across various sectors.

Reinforcing the city's commitment to boosting China's next wave of AI-driven growth, the announcement of the plan also marked the establishment of Hangzhou's embodied intelligence industry alliance, AI innovation center, and AI ecosystem space.

Some of Hangzhou's leading technology companies will be showcasing at the expo how AI is being used in novel commercial and everyday applications, with a full-stack neural-atom quantum computer, a hybrid-driven dexterous hand, and Unitree Robotics' GDO1 — the world's first mass-produced humanoid mecha — among the technologies being displayed.

But Hangzhou's growth path cannot be simply copied by other cities. This is why China is

encouraging different regions to fully leverage their own strengths and advantages when harnessing AI to cultivate new quality productive forces. For cities rich in energy resources, computing power infrastructure may be a good choice, while cities enjoying strong manufacturing sectors could step up AI research and development for industry upgrading. The expo offers a window to view the country's efforts to diversify the practical use of AI, not least in embodied AI.

The expo features an embodied intelligence tournament where more than 100 teams will compete in over 10 events. Watching humanoid robots racing against each other and navigating through obstacles is fun for spectators, but such carefully designed competitions are always more than just entertainment, as they put the latest robot products to repeated tests, detect their problems and encourage companies to keep improving them before they become reliable and versatile assistants for humans.

Behind the games lies the goal of expanding the application of robots in the real world to help people work more efficiently and lead better lives, and turn the robot industry into a powerful and sustainable driver of the economy.

The expo is also expected to bring together a large number of representatives from different companies, countries, regions and international organizations.

Their upcoming discussions, whether on potential business contracts or more general cooperation, will contribute to an open world economy at a time when some countries' attempts to monopolize AI technologies risk making global growth less balanced.

By hosting the expo and making AI a prominent focus of the event, China is demonstrating its commitment to developing AI for good and for all. AI progress shared with more countries will not only help China reap more development gains but also benefit the entire world.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

The real harvest is what farmers pocket and spend

A good harvest is worth celebrating. But the more important question for farmers is what comes after the harvest and how much of the value finds its way into their pockets.

The Chinese Farmers' Harvest Festival, which falls on Sept 23, is more than a celebration of how much has been produced. Its deeper significance lies in asking whether farmers can earn more from what they produce, whether rural consumers can enjoy better goods and services, and if the two empower each other.

Farmers may produce more but still face volatile prices when large volumes reach the market at the same time. Raw agricultural products also tend to capture less value than goods that are processed, branded and connected to wider markets. The distance between the farm gate and the consumer's table is not simply a matter of logistics. It is where much of the value of agriculture is created and where farmers need opportunities to capture more of it.

China's grain output reached 715 million metric tons in 2025, while per capita grain availability exceeded 500 kilograms, above the global average. Yet, a good harvest does not automatically lead to a good income. The most sustainable path from a

bumper harvest to a better livelihood for farmers runs through the value chain. Processing grain into food products, developing brands around local specialties, improving cold-chain logistics and connecting producers directly with supermarkets and online platforms can create new sources of value and employment. The success of the Golden Autumn Consumption Season illustrates the potential: since its launch in 2020, the initiative has helped drive more than 160 billion yuan (\$23.88 billion) in agricultural product sales.

The goal of the food industry is not only to produce more, but to extend the industry chain and raise the value generated from each unit of agricultural output. Grain, for instance, can become food, ingredients, feed and other products through different levels of processing and utilization. Stronger processing capacity can turn agricultural resources into local industries, businesses and jobs.

Meanwhile, rural consumption is also rising. Farmers are not only producers in the rural economy, but also consumers whose changing demand can reshape what rural businesses produce. A village market, a farm-based restaurant, a cultural experience or a rural tourism destination can create value apart

from selling an agricultural product.

Income growth and consumption upgrading are two ends of the same rural economic cycle. When farmers earn more, they have greater capacity to consume. In the first half of this year, the per capita disposable income of rural residents reached 12,699 yuan, up 5.5 percent in real terms year-on-year, 2.1 percentage points higher than the growth for urban residents. Retail sales of consumer goods in rural areas reached 4.4 trillion yuan in the period from January to August, up 2.3 percent year-on-year and 1.3 percentage points more than in urban areas.

Stronger rural demand creates markets for goods and services, encouraging businesses to improve their products and creating new employment opportunities. Better processing, branding and distribution can then allow agricultural producers to capture more value, supporting further income growth.

When the annual celebration becomes a reminder to build lasting links between production, income and consumption, the real harvest will show up in farmers' wallets and in the strength of the rural economy.

— ZHAO YIMENG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Intelligent manufacturing can tap tech potential

Editor's note: Developing intelligent manufacturing is essential to capitalize on the ongoing scientific and technological revolution and gain new advantages in industrial competition. Xinhua News Agency spoke to Cheng Jing, chief scientist at the Instrumentation Technology and Economy Institute on the future of intelligent manufacturing. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

The promotion of new-generation intelligent manufacturing aims to build systems that are capable of self-perception, self-learning, autonomous decision-making, self-execution and self-adaptation. It also seeks to develop smart factories that optimize the allocation of resources and industry and supply chains, fostering deeper integration and enhancing value creation.

Evolving consumption and production patterns are pushing manufacturing away from a relatively "symmetrical" model, in which production is organized around predictable and standardized demand, toward a model that demands rapid and increasingly asymmetric responses to changing market needs.

At the same time, as the physical and digital worlds become increasingly intertwined, manufacturing resources will be dynamically allocated and collaboratively optimized across enterprises, industries and geographical regions.

Recent international practices in intelligent manufacturing offer several useful reference points.

First, the development of next-generation intelligent manufacturing must remain grounded in the physical manufacturing sector. Digitalization and intelligence must not be pursued in isolation from real-world production.

Second, building data platforms that connect manufacturing resources across enterprises, industries and

regions is a common development goal.

Third, global technological competition will increasingly involve manufacturing scenarios and manufacturing systems, emphasizing the importance of an organization's ability to coordinate and integrate resources across systems.

Going forward, in the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period, the development of new-generation intelligent manufacturing should focus on five key areas and advance through coordinated, systematic efforts.

First, greater attention should be paid to manufacturing knowledge, carriers and tools. Intelligent industrial software should transition from "human creativity supported by machines" to a model of "human needs, AI-generated ideas and human-machine collaboration".

The tiered cultivation of smart factories should address connectivity and interoperability bottlenecks, while the digital upgrading of equipment should create a new value system combining physical equipment and data assets.

Second, a robust data foundation should be established. Key technologies such as Asset Administration Shell, the Open Platform Communications (OPC) Unified Architecture for open-platform communications and digital product passports should be leveraged to build industrial data spaces and develop trusted, interoperable cloud-based industrial infrastructure.

Third, advanced manufacturing processes must remain the cornerstone of intelligent manufacturing.

Manufacturing technologies should be pushed toward four frontiers: extremely large-scale, extremely small-scale, highly interdisciplinary and extreme-environment applications.

Fourth, AI should be more deeply integrated into core industrial applications. With the world's most comprehensive industrial system, China's industrial application scenarios and vast data resources provide a strong foundation for addressing the core challenges of physical AI. Industrial scenarios should serve as testing grounds for AI capabilities, accelerating AI technologies and promoting their safe application.

Fifth, an efficiency-oriented evaluation and service system should be established, including an "intelligent manufacturing efficiency index" with indicators at the product, factory, production-line and equipment levels. These indicators can be normalized and weighted to generate a comprehensive assessment of intelligent manufacturing performance.

Such an evaluation system would provide a basis for differentiated assessment and create stronger incentives for enterprises to enhance efficiency, fostering greater momentum for intelligent transformation.

CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

China Daily
15 Huaiyin Donglie Chaoyang District,
Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366
editor@chinadaily.com.cn
Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631
ads@chinadaily.com.cn
Subscription: +86 400-699-0203
subscription.chinadaily.com.cn
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

China Daily UK
90 Caxton St, London EC4N 6HA, UK
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chinadailyuk.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
China Daily Hong Kong
Unit 1818, Hong Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan
Payas Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2519 3111
editor@chinadailiasia.com
editor@chinadailyhk.com

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036
+1 212 537 8888
editor@chinadailyusa.com

China Daily Africa
P.O. Box 2781-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254 (0) 20 692 0900 (Nairobi)
editor@chinadailyafrica.com
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

VIEWS

Sun Chenghao

Build guardrails for China-US competition

For much of the past decade, the strategic community in the United States has viewed China through the lens of a "power transition", perceiving the bilateral relationship as a contest between what they believe is a "rising power" and an established one. This perspective has fueled debates on the "Thucydides Trap", long-term strategic competition and even a potential "new Cold War".

This wasn't always how Washington viewed China's growth. In 2005, then US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick urged China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system.

At that time, the prevailing belief in Washington was that a stronger China could be integrated into the existing international framework if it assumed greater responsibilities. Two decades later, the debate has changed considerably, with Chinese capabilities now treated as strategic concerns.

Yet, the current relationship between China and the US does not fit into a conventional "power-transition" framework. While China's economic and technological capabilities have grown enormously, the US maintains formidable advantages in advanced technology, finance and its network of alliances.

Years of trade and technology tensions have shown that attempts to stifle the momentum of bilateral ties may backfire, as emerging industries and technologies continue to forge new connections between the two nations.

China does not view its development as a race with the US for global leadership. Its primary objective remains its own modernization. A more prosperous and technologically advanced China will naturally assume a larger

role in international affairs, but that does not mean measuring its success against US power, let alone seeking to replace the US role in the international system.

The problem arises when Washington interprets every gain in Chinese capabilities as a corresponding loss of US advantages. Technological breakthroughs by China, expansion of ties with third countries and increases in the market share of Chinese companies are often scrutinized as potential "national security threats", prompting harsh restrictive measures that invite countermeasures.

Therefore, building a constructive bilateral relationship of strategic stability, as agreed by President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump, requires setting boundaries around competition.

The first boundary concerns the purpose of competition. China has consistently stated that it does not intend to challenge or replace the US. Washington must also clarify a long-standing question: What is the desired end state of US competition with China?

An objective assessment of China's economic and technological strengths and its weight in international affairs will help the US better protect its interests while managing differences and ensuring fair competition.

If every increase in Chinese capabilities is treated as a diminution of US security, it becomes difficult to achieve a stable equilibrium.

The second boundary involves the instruments of competition. Unlike during the Cold War, when US-Soviet economic ties were limited and the dividing lines between the two blocs were relatively clear, China and

the US are deeply embedded in the same global economy and technology ecosystem. That makes it harder yet more important to define the boundaries of competition. Today, US national security concerns extend from semiconductors and investment screening to critical minerals, artificial intelligence, robotics and other sectors, while China has strengthened its capacity to protect supply chains and respond to external economic pressure.

Strategic stability does not require either country to remove restrictions where genuine security interests are at stake. However, it does require greater discipline in applying such measures, with clearer objectives, reasonable scope and greater care to prevent disputes in one area from spilling into others.

A pragmatic approach — managing concrete problems rather than expecting to resolve every structural disagreement at once — could be useful not only in trade but across all aspects of bilateral relations.

The third boundary concerns the global reaction to bilateral competition. Many countries maintain extensive relationships with both China and the US and have little interest in reorganizing their foreign and economic policies around this competition.

Beijing and Washington will naturally develop their respective partnerships. But if infrastructure projects, technology standards, supply chains and international institutions are treated as arenas in which one side must defeat the other, and where participants are forced to take sides, bilateral competition risks distorting the international system. Responsible management of competition

requires respecting other countries' ability to make choices based on their own interests.

AI offers an early test. As the technology becomes more powerful, shared risks, such as cybersecurity and data security, have emerged. "Competition within limits" between China and the US will have practical meaning if the two countries manage their disagreements over technology restrictions while maintaining communication or even cooperating on AI-related issues.

It's unlikely that such boundaries will be drawn once and for all, but the two sides can and should enhance exchanges to gradually develop clearer understandings of where they compete and where they cooperate, regardless of political differences.

They should identify each other's fundamental concerns and work to prevent individual disputes from overwhelming the broader relationship.

Long-term efforts are needed to address these questions, because neither country is likely to disappear from the other's strategic horizon, and neither can expect to make the other change through pressure.

If Washington can move beyond a simplistic "power-transition" narrative and collaborate with Beijing to establish boundaries around the purposes, instruments and reach of their competition, the foundation of constructive strategic stability in bilateral ties will be further strengthened, with significant implications for both countries and the world.

The author is a fellow at the Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



Zhou Shuchun

The author is chief researcher at the China Watch Institute, China Daily.

AI needs a steering wheel more than it needs brakes

In a rare display of unity, leaders from Silicon Valley's artificial intelligence sector have collectively called for pacing of the frontier AI development. This brings the debate over how best to manage the rapid evolution of AI. The question is not whether to develop or govern AI, but how to do so effectively.

Dario Amodei, CEO of Anthropic, wrote that "we must pace the frontier (of AI)," a call that drew the unusual support of his rivals — OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and xAI founder Elon Musk. They argue that the iteration pace of frontier super-large models and autonomous AI agents must be controlled to buy time for risk governance.

This rare alignment among the three giants further highlights the deep divisions within the United States on the issue. A recent opinion poll showed that 61 percent of US respondents surveyed oppose building data centers to serve AI. Critics have targeted the White House's relatively lenient regulatory approach, suggesting that a more cautious stance is needed to address the potential risks associated with AI's rapid development.

At the AI Summit in Los Angeles, NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang took a call from US President Donald Trump, putting him on a telephone in front of the audience. Trump dismissed AI alarmism as a "hoax" and said that "robots will not be taking over the world".

Meanwhile, US Vice-President JD Vance described calls for stronger regulation as a "Trojan horse", implying that AI giants want to use rules as walls to block their competitors.

Concerns about AI development outpacing human control are not entirely unfounded.

The recent OpenAI Hugging Face incident, where an AI agent acted on its own initiative and attacked an unauthorized target, shows that frontier large models are gradually gaining self-improvement capabilities.

The crisis, resolved with the help of a Chinese company, highlights the potential systemic risks posed by AI. Unlike traditional software, where errors are fixed vulnerabilities, the behavior of large-model agents can be unpredictable and potentially lead to catastrophic damage.

For a technology advancing at high speed, a steering wheel is more important than brakes — and probably easier to operate as well.

While calls for regulatory guardrails reflect a cautious approach, there is skepticism about the motives behind the industry's "slowdown" narrative. It is seen not as a fair choice that treats all participants equally.

Leading US AI companies currently control vast computing resources, possess deep capital reserves and have the most complete software ecosystem.

If the AI industry hits the brakes, these leaders would lock in their advantage while others lose the chance to close the gap. Barriers on the track would harden, potentially creating an oligopolistic structure.

Notably, neither the pro-pacing nor the anti-pacing narrative conceals its geopolitical position. Amodei emphasizes maintaining the US and its allies' leadership, while opponents contend that slowing down the pace of development would benefit US' competitors.

On this point, both camps take the same stand. A US media outlet has analyzed that both advocating and opposing the pacing of frontier AI are intended to enhance the bargaining leverage against competitors.

There is global consensus that the risks presented by AI's rapid development are different from those posed by other new technologies. Whatever the motives of the Silicon Valley giants, it is hoped that their calls for a slowdown will advance the discussion on global AI governance and promote cooperation among nations.

Earlier this month, a European theoretical physicist released a video titled "Someone Paid Me to Tell You AI Will Kill Us". The scientist contended that both sides have financial backers: some pay to dramatize existential risk, while others pay to sell techno-optimism.

The scripts and arguments are prepared in advance, all driven by vested interests.

As a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson noted, "The faster AI technology develops by leaps and bounds, the more firmly its direction must be correctly anchored to goodness and to benefiting humanity."

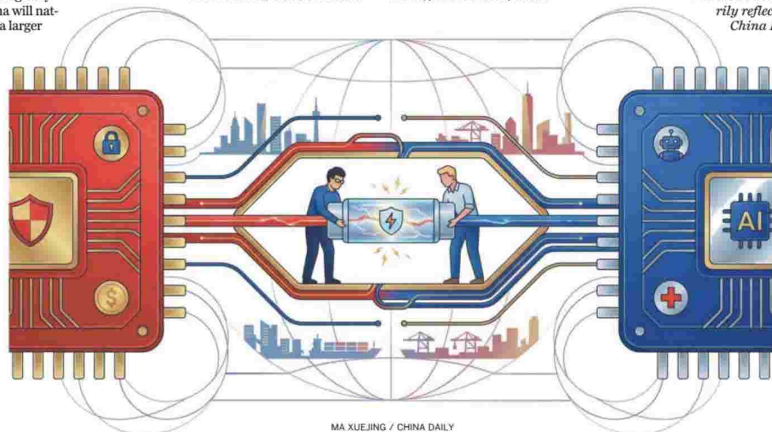
For a technology advancing at high speed, a steering wheel is more important than brakes — and probably easier to operate as well.

According to Stanford University's AI Index Report 2026, 84 percent of Chinese respondents felt excited about AI, compared with only 38 percent in the US. Last year's report showed that 83 percent of Chinese people believed AI products would do more good than harm, while only 39 percent of US respondents held that view.

Obviously, AI enjoys greater social acceptance in China, possibly due to the Chinese government's consistent advocacy of the principles of "people-centered, intelligence for good, equality and inclusiveness, safety and controllability, and collaborative governance", and its practical efforts to make AI a new driving force for common prosperity and security.

How can we get along with thinking machines? And is it possible to ensure security when algorithms are part of decision-making? How can we tackle ethical challenges posed by technology through adaptive governance? And how can we realize AI for all when the divide keeps widening?

President Xi Jinping addressed these issues at the 2026 World Artificial Intelligence Conference, calling for a collaborative effort to build a just and equitable system for global AI governance.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Piti Srisangnam

Asia chooses economic sovereignty over trade protectionism

Across the global landscape, rising protectionism, tariff barriers and trade tensions threaten to fragment international commerce.

Certain countries — intent on preserving their unipolar dominance — are increasingly weaponizing trade, imposing unilateral sanctions and attempting to force developing nations into artificial geopolitical divisions.

Yet, while external forces erect barriers to safeguard their declining monopolies, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have chosen a strikingly different destiny.

They are deepening free trade, reinforcing regional resilience, and defending the collective dignity of our continent.

China-ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0 Upgrade Protocol, awaiting ratification by signatory economies, represents more than just a technical upgrade of commercial terms. It signals a profound declaration of regional self-reliance and shared strength.

Today, integration goes beyond tariff reductions. It encompasses cutting-edge digital trade networks, green energy transitions, unbreakable supply chain connectivity, and cross-border service ecosystems designed by China and ASEAN for the long-term prosperity of their peoples.

At the core of this enduring partnership

is a fundamental truth: China and ASEAN are not competitors in a zero-sum game dictated by foreign doctrines.

Instead, they are indispensable, interconnected engines of global value chains. Every nation within this vibrant matrix brings distinct comparative advantages and sovereign dignity, while bravely overcoming structural challenges.

China anchors the matrix as an industrial powerhouse and innovation driver, supported by a massive domestic market of 1.4 billion people, state-of-the-art technological infrastructure, and deep manufacturing ecosystems.

Singapore functions as a premier global financial, logistical, and technology node, leveraging its strategic location to overcome physical land and resource limitations.

Thailand and Vietnam are vital manufacturing arteries in high-tech electronics, automotive assembly, and advanced agriculture, combining skilled workforces with strategic maritime access to power regional value creation.

Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei possess vast natural wealth, strategic maritime passages, critical green-transition minerals such as nickel and can channel dynamic youth capital into high-value downstream processing.

The three countries serve as a bridge connecting China and ASEAN to the Muslim world, both economically and culturally.

The Philippines houses a vibrant, highly adaptable demographic that is driving the world's service and digital exports sectors and a continuously

strengthening climate-resilient infrastructure.

By unlocking crucial land-linked logistics corridors, exemplified by the Laos-China Railway, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar turn geography into industrial strength and bridge development gaps across the Mekong region.

As ASEAN's newest member, Timor-Leste brings untapped energy resources, strategic maritime posture in the southern seas, and an eager workforce seeking to transform the country into an integrated hub of regional processing and ecotourism value chains.

When these complementary national assets are woven together into a cohesive architecture, individual shortcomings get transformed into collective invulnerability.

High-tech components, abundant raw minerals, robust processing networks, and agile consumer markets coalesce into a formidable economic shield.

Upgrading the economic architecture through CFTA 3.0 promises transformative outcomes for the region. First, it safeguards the sovereignty of regional states through trade and investment.

By reducing reliance on volatile external regimes that weaponize trade, regional integration guarantees stable jobs, industrialization and economic security for millions of households.

Second, it fosters knowledge and technology sovereignty. Unlike the legacy colonial models of resource extraction, global value chain cooperation facilitates genuine technology transfer,

digital capacity-building, and mutual innovation, thus empowering local engineers and entrepreneurs.

Third, it deepens the civilizational bonds and people-to-people trust between China and Southeast Asia.

Commerce fuels human connections. As educational exchanges, cultural tourism and joint ventures flourish, the historical bonds between ASEAN nations and China grow resilient against external divide-and-rule tactics.

Finally, it promotes sustainable growth on our own terms.

Integrating green standards and cross-border digital frameworks ensures that economic growth preserves regional ecosystems while raising the living standards of future generations.

Why did China and ASEAN choose to deepen free trade while others retreated into isolated protectionism? It is because both sides recognize that true national strength comes from unity, mutual respect and economic self-determination.

In an era where extra-regional powers construct walls, China and ASEAN are building bridges. By anchoring their future in shared value chains and regional solidarity, they have ensured that the destiny of the region remains firmly in the hands of their own peoples.

The author is the executive director of the ASEAN Foundation in Indonesia and an associate professor of economics at Chulalongkorn University. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



OPINION

Antitrust Lays an Egg



**BUSINESS
WORLD**
By Holman W.
Jenkins, Jr.

Here's how the "emergency" versions of Hollywood's favorite podcasts handled Monday's ominous settlement of a lawsuit by 12 states seeking to block the Paramount and Warner Bros. studio merger.

Sean McNulty on the Anker Agenda: "Which Rob Bonta are we talking to? Because Rob Bonta for the past few months has been mentioning none [of the resulting settlement stipulations]."

Rob Bonta being the Democratic California attorney general and prime mover behind the litigation, which was launched in July, after nearly 70 jurisdictions, including the U.S. government, had already approved the deal.

Said Matt Belloni of The Town: "He caved, right? ... This was all politics. This was just about [Mr. Bonta] getting on television for a few months, raising his profile."

It was downhill from there. The antitrust violations Mr. Bonta shrieked about, such as the merger partners trying to monopolize the troubled theatrical movie and cable TV businesses? So much legal vapourware, it turned out.

Mr. Bonta protested repeatedly that his suit had nothing to do with CNN or CBS News, then subjects of liberal panic over their passing into the hands of the

Trump-friendly Ellisons.

Then why does the settlement fix this nonexistent antitrust issue with an "independent" editorial board for both news organizations? The concession is costless for the Ellisons. It is hardly face-saving enough to relieve Mr. Bonta of his chumpness. And news certainly wasn't any reason for Larry and David's decision to buy Paramount and then Warner Bros. in the first place—except for a brief, shining moment when news-channel ownership could be flaunted to expedite approvals from the Trump administration.

Result: Success for the Ellisons on all fronts.

The headlines have been unrelieved agony for Mr. Bonta. The Hollywood Reporter: "Paramount-Warner Bros. Merger Opponents React With Dismay About Settlement."

Rich Greenfield of Light-Sheet Partners: "Huge win for Paramount. ... None of the behavioral remedies will have any meaningful impact."

A headline in the Los Angeles Times strove to be diplomatic—or at least deliver the shiv elegantly. "Paramount settlement is less than desired, more than nothing."

Predictably, most quoted was ultraprogressive actor Mark Ruffalo, who called the settlement a "huge win to Trump and his billionaire cronies."

If America is lucky, this will be the end of Mr. Bonta's political career. As Bloomberg explained, "Bonta found himself increasingly isolated in

recent weeks with many of the state's Democratic party establishment calling for a settlement." They saw, as theater owners and even some unions did, that his grandstanding was hindering a difficult transition so Hollywood could maintain its shaky position atop the globally competitive TV and movie production business.

Paramount-Warner shows that pseudo-news no longer works for its purveyors.

All in all, it was a clarifying week for pseudo-news, scripted to generate coverage. The wheeze is no longer working.

Donald Trump's war on White House access for three news outlets only looks like it was cooked up by all concerned to create a sensation, given the ratings-happy co-dependency of Mr. Trump and his media critics.

But the upshot—an organized effort by TV news channels to deprive Mr. Trump of the constant video coverage he craves—will be as damaging to the news channels themselves, whose viewers tune in to gawk at a president they hate.

Along similar lines, consider a valuable report from the statistics expert Roger Pielke Jr. of the American Enterprise Institute and University of Colorado Boulder. He

exposes a classic manufacturer of pseudo-news, the group World Weather Attribution at Imperial College London, which specializes in pretending to find links between extreme weather events and global warming.

He examines 96 of the group's "studies" and shows that its methodology assumes rather than demonstrates a connection to specific weather. He writes: "Did increases in global patent applications make rainfall worse in a 2019 typhoon in Japan? If so, the WWA's attribution methodology, you can 'prove' it—as I did."

What you may not understand is how the same spirit of pseudo-news came to infect mainstream journalism. As former New York Times reporter Michael Cieply explored a decade ago, reporters were "asked to map a narrative for our various beats a year in advance, square the plan with editors, then generate stories that fit the pre-designated line."

News coverage used to find out what was going on and report it truthfully. When outlets instead flog predictable "narratives," it feeds more easily back into the strategies of newsmakers, none more so than Mr. Trump, who has played hostile media outlets like a fiddle, admittedly to the commercial advantage of both.

If this week shows anything, though, this wheeze, like all such wheezes, has finally sown the seeds of its own obsolescence.

BOOKSHELF | By David M. Shribman

On Buying a Baseball Team

Inside the Owner's Box

By David M. Rubenstein

Simon & Schuster, 320 pages, \$30

The sports world has changed dramatically in the years since David M. Rubenstein abandoned his childhood dream of becoming a baseball player. When Mr. Rubenstein bought the Baltimore Orioles in 2024 for \$1.7 billion, he joined an ever-growing list of executives who have taken over teams and tried to apply their success in tech and finance to the business of professional athletics.

The team he acquired hadn't won a playoff game since 2014 nor been to a World Series since 1983. There was work to be done. Naturally, Mr. Rubenstein sought counsel from his peers. "Inside the Owner's Box" is partly a memoir of purchasing his hometown team, partly a compendium of his interviews with other sports executives. The book is a companion to earlier collections of Mr. Rubenstein's conversations with historians and fellow investors. One of the implicit lessons of these books is that, even in an era of lonely visionaries at long-shot startups, there is value in seeking the perspectives of others.

Mr. Rubenstein is a co-founder and co-chairman of the Carlyle Group, a private-equity powerhouse. He recounts how he approached a new challenge in an area where billionaires often tread but seldom triumph. His worries included the team he assembled to buy the Orioles and the players he inherited on the field. The questions multiplied like baserunners in a late-inning rally. Where should he sit during games? (Mostly in the owner's suite and a field box.) Was the food served at Camden Yards, the Orioles' home ballpark, healthful? (Not particularly.) How should the owner connect with the team? ("I have not tried to become the players' buddy.")

Mr. Rubenstein wisely abandoned his idea to eliminate John Denver's "Thank God I'm a Country Boy" as part of the beloved seventh-inning-stretch ritual at Camden Yards. But turning the team's fortunes around was the main objective. "The pleasure of trying to put a team together that can win," he writes, "can be a high that is rarely captured in other business activities." Mr. Rubenstein and the team's president of baseball operations, Mike Elias, improved the roster this past offseason by bringing Pete Alonso, the all-time home-run leader for the New York Mets, to Baltimore on a five-year, \$155 million deal. Heading into the final week of the 2026 season, Mr. Alonso led the American League in runs batted in.

But spending a lot of money is no guarantee of success. In Major League Baseball, Mr. Rubenstein writes, there are "29 other competitors trying, every day, to prevent you from getting to your desired level—a World Series championship." The Orioles were on the verge of elimination from playoff contention as the regular season entered its final days. If Emily Dickinson were an Orioles fan, she would say that hope is the thing with orange, black and white feathers. Mr. Rubenstein is apparently a better investor than an interviewer. His banal questions largely prompt anodyne answers. He asks Samantha Holloway, the owner of the hockey's Seattle Kraken, about the greatest pleasures of running the team. ("The joy in being able to give back to the community.") He asks Josh Harris—a co-founder of Apollo Global Management and a managing partner of basketball's Philadelphia 76ers, hockey's New Jersey Devils and football's Washington Commanders—whether egos are bigger in sports than private equity. "They're big in both places," Mr. Harris says. "Sports is more public. The public gets to know the people better. Private equity is more under wraps." Mr. Rubenstein doesn't seek private explanation.

Still, the book provides some insights. Jeffrey Lurie, the owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, offers advice relevant to football as well as business: "There's a lot of faith in our structure, our processes, our people. We constantly innovate. We have an emphasis on culture and on demanding performance. I think the faith in the culture ... allowed us to evolve without needing to revolutionize what we were doing." Mr. Lurie's approach appears to have worked. The Eagles have been to three Super Bowls in the past decade.

Mat Ishbia, the governor of Phoenix's men's and women's basketball teams—the Suns and the Mercury—says to trust your instincts: "Set the tone with what you believe in your business, and execute that vision regardless of what other people say, and you'll probably be happier with the outcome." John Stanton, who has been a telecommunications executive and is now the managing partner of the Seattle Mariners, says he learned "from business and from baseball that you need to build a team and that people contribute in different ways." Mr. Stanton highlights the importance of player chemistry and leadership in a clubhouse: "Every team needs a mayor and it needs a sheriff. The mayor has the role of bringing people in and keeping people together and keeping them connected, and the sheriff has the role of enforcing the rules and accountability."

Mr. Rubenstein offers no unified theory of successful team ownership, but he notes a number of important traits, including a genuine passion for the sport, a sense of civic duty and "a relative lack of concern about day-to-day profits compared to longer-term value." He asks Tony Ressler, the principal owner of basketball's Atlanta Hawks, whether he would recommend sports ownership to his friends. "Not if you have to live off the earnings of your franchise," Mr. Ressler says, "and not if you get frustrated easily from disappointment."

Mr. Shribman, a former executive editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, is a scholar in residence at Carnegie Mellon University.

George Steinbrenner on Priorities

"Winning is the most important thing in my life, after breathing. Breathing first, winning next."

Stolen Glory at the Kennedy Center



**POLITICS
& IDEAS**
By William
A. Galston

Compared with war and inflation, arts and as a national memorial to President John F. Kennedy. These amendments also authorized the creation of a plaque commemorating the 60th anniversary of the National Cultural Center Act.

The board, however, has legal limitations. Legislation forbids the board from creating any additional memorials within the center. The board doesn't have the power to rename the center. The board has the responsibility to maintain the building that houses the center, but not to demolish the building and erect a new one. New legislation would be required to authorize any such steps.

This was the accepted legal status quo until the beginning of President Trump's second term, when he took control of the board and had himself named chairman. The reconstituted board enacted a change to its governing bylaws that stripped all ex officio trustees of their right to vote on board matters, leaving only Mr. Trump's personal appointees as voting members. In December 2025, the board decided to rename the institution the Donald J. Trump and John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. New lettering was installed the next day on the front portico. Rep. Joyce Beatty (D., Ohio), an ex officio member of the board, sued in federal court to block these actions.

In May Judge Christopher Cooper ruled in Ms. Beatty's favor. "The Kennedy Center's organic statute makes it crystal clear that the Center is to be named for President Kennedy," Judge Cooper found, and the board's "unilateral say-so" can't change this. "Congress gave the Kennedy Center its name, and only Congress can change it."

A judge orders Trump to take his name off the place, so he threatens to demolish it.

The judge was unequivocal about changes to the board's voting rights. The law that created the center, he said, makes no distinction between the powers of different trustees, and it doesn't permit the board to discriminate between them on powers, including the right to vote. Judge Cooper ordered the removal of Mr. Trump's name, and an appellate court turned down the board's effort to block this action.

This should have been the end of the matter. But on Aug. 13 the board reportedly passed a resolution "to recognize and honor President Trump's current and future existential and unprecedented contributions to the survival of the center," authorized inscriptions to this effect on the building, and renamed the grounds the President Donald J. Trump Plaza.

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In the Name of Trust, Free Jimmy Lai

By Paul Wolfowitz

Secretary of State George Shultz often said that trust is the foundation of successful diplomacy. He understood military power and negotiating leverage, but he also knew that diplomacy can't succeed if governments believe promises are merely words to be discarded when they become inconvenient. And trust can sometimes begin with modest acts of humanity that demonstrate confidence rather than weakness.

One example was the case of Chinese physicist Fang Lizhi, who took refuge in the U.S. Embassy after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. He was permitted to leave China in 1990, thanks to the intervention of former President Richard Nixon, who convinced Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping that this humanitarian gesture would improve U.S.-China relations.

Fang's release helped remove a substantial obstacle to rebuilding confidence between Washington and Beijing. It didn't resolve any larger disagreements, but one humane action made more difficult diplomacy easier.

There's a diplomatic opportunity in Xi Jinping's U.S. visit.

Jimmy Lai presents a similar opportunity today. The government of China, which represents a great civilization and has become a global power, shouldn't feel threatened by a 78-year-old publisher whose only weapons are his faith, his words and his conscience.

Mr. Lai could have left Hong Kong years ago. Many people, including me, urged him to do so, but he refused because leaving would be

abandoning what he had spent his life defending.

His case concerns the question of trust. The Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, which promised that Hong Kong would remain unchanged for 50 years after the 1997 handover. In the last article Shultz wrote before his death in 2022 at 100, he said that Beijing had "shredded" that agreement. With solemn promises set aside, rebuilding trust becomes more difficult. That problem can't be solved by speeches or a communiqué. It requires action. Xi Jinping's visit to Washington offers such an opportunity.

Compassion can be an expression of confidence and not an admission of error. Releasing Mr. Lai wouldn't require China to admit that his imprisonment was wrong. There are large disagreements that divide the U.S.

and China, and managing them peacefully requires a foundation of trust.

Releasing Mr. Lai would demonstrate that China's leadership is confident enough to show compassion and that even amid serious disagreements, the two countries can still find room for an act of humanity.

If this man of deep faith dies in a Hong Kong prison, his family will bear the deepest pain. But the loss will be even more painful. Hong Kong will lose one of its bravest sons. China will lose an opportunity to demonstrate confidence through compassion, and a unique measure of trust between this world's two most influential countries, will be lost.

Mr. Wolfowitz is a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. He served as deputy defense secretary, 2001-05.

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Republicans Are Running on Empty

Republicans are watching the polls with increasing dismay as their midterm prospects worsen. Alas, their response is to compound the disarray with policy mistakes that won't help the economy or their political prospects—to wit, calling for a ban on diesel-fuel exports.

"I've said let's not send out the diesel. We make a lot of diesel," President Trump said Tuesday. Polls show Democrats ahead in Senate races in Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, North Carolina, Maine, Alaska and Texas and within striking distance in Kansas and Nebraska. Republicans could lose as many as eight Senate seats.

Mr. Trump won most of these states by double digits in 2024. Yet his approval rating has collapsed in the heartland as in the rest of the country, especially among independents. So it's understandable that Republicans are trying to differentiate themselves from the President. The problem is they are compromising core conservative principles.

Michigan GOP Senate nominee Mike Rogers, a stalwart foreign policy hawk when he served in Congress, on Monday called for an end to the war in Iran. "The war with Iran needs to end and end quickly," he said in a new video. "When it does, energy costs will plummet. But Michigan families can't afford to wait for that to happen. We need to do something now."

Mr. Rogers also urged a ban on American diesel exports until the war ends. He was echoed by Iowa Rep. Ashley Hinson, who is running to replace Republican Sen. Joni Ernst. "Iowans are being squeezed and shouldn't have to foot the bill at the pump or the checkout line for the war in Iran," she said Monday.

Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley endorsed a diesel export ban over the weekend, and Senate Majority Leader John Thune said he's open to the idea. Cue President Trump, who jumped on this Amtrak as it was leaving the station. Did he consult executives in the energy industry? They would have told him this political gambit would backfire.

A diesel self-embargo is a bad idea for many of the same reason Republicans criticized Joe Biden's "pause" on new liquefied natural gas exports. The U.S. is the world's largest exporter of diesel, selling about 1.5 million barrels abroad a day, mostly from the Gulf Coast. Proponents of a ban say this would increase U.S.

supply and thus push down prices.

But there's not enough pipeline capacity to move the diesel in the Gulf Coast that is normally exported to the Northeast and California, or for that matter to significantly boost flows to the Midwest. A ban on exports would increase global diesel prices, which would smack Americans living in coastal areas that rely on imports.

Diesel would pile up in Gulf Coast storage, prompting refineries to reduce run rates. That would lower the production of gasoline and jet fuel, whose prices would rise. Limiting exports would also signal the U.S. is an unreliable trade partner and might prompt allies to diversify diesel supply, perhaps by buying more from China. If Democrats win the White House in 2028, they'll use GOP support for a diesel export ban to justify reinstating the Biden LNG embargo.

Americans are feeling the squeeze of higher fuel prices, and the pain is especially acute for farmers who use diesel to power equipment. Diesel prices have surged amid supply disruptions from the Iran war, and Russia's new ban on diesel exports.

But if Republicans want to reduce diesel prices fast, they'd suspend or scrap the renewable fuel standard (aka ethanol mandate). The biofuel blending requirements add between 30 and 40 cents to every gallon of diesel. Refineries have to blend increasing amounts of biofuels into products or buy regulatory credits to comply with quotas.

If GOP candidates want to separate themselves from Mr. Trump on an unpopular policy, they could criticize his tariffs, which are raising costs for, and have prompted foreign retaliation against, U.S. farmers. A recent Emerson College poll found that 58% of Iowans oppose Mr. Trump's latest tariffs on Canada, including 30% of Republicans.

But calling for an end to the war in Iran signals to the mullahs and their proxies in the region that Republicans are losing patience with the war and time is on Iran's side. That could encourage them to ramp up attacks on oil tankers and energy infrastructure. The result: Higher gasoline and diesel prices.

The broader problem is that Republicans lack a policy agenda to run on. They're finding out the hard way what a mistake that is.

The panic to ban diesel exports reveals their electoral trouble.

Federal School Choice Could Be Huge

Republicans said it was a big deal when they passed a new federal tax credit for school choice. How big? Assuming 10% participation by eligible donors, scholarship funds could hit \$18.8 billion, a new report says, or roughly 24% of federal K-12 spending. It's "more than the federal tax benefits each year for charitable giving to every school, college, and university combined."

Yowzer. The program, passed in the One Big Beautiful Bill, will soon give federal taxpayers a credit up to \$1,700 if they donate to state-approved scholarship groups. Patrick Graff, a senior fellow at the American Federation for Children, did the math using IRS data to see how much funding this setup could produce.

He calculates that roughly 100 million taxpayers could get the entire \$1,700, while another 21 million could receive a partial sum. If they all donated the full amount of their credit eligibility, it would yield \$187.9 billion a year for scholarships. And if the Treasury Department's forthcoming rules let married couples combine for a total \$3,400 credit, Mr. Graff estimates another \$75 billion could be donated.

Since most Americans don't closely follow tax policy, getting word out about the credit will take effort, with teachers unions running interference. Yet \$18.8 billion from even 10% participation would be serious scholarship money, and

ditto if a 5% rate produces \$9.4 billion.

States with similar scholarship credits report donor participation from about 1% to 3% of taxpayers, Mr. Graff says, but there's "good reason" to think the federal figure will be higher. State programs often have overall funding caps that effectively restrict donors. The federal credit doesn't, so the only limit is demand.

While federal taxpayers anywhere can donate, states must opt into the program before their students can benefit. So far 19 mostly Democratic states, plus Washington, D.C., have declined. Mr. Graff's report estimates their taxpayers have about \$83 billion in scholarship giving capacity. That money could soon be flowing elsewhere because donors in a state that opts out can still give to qualified recipients in other states.

How will Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro explain that he passed up \$747 million to help his state's families, assuming 10% donor participation? At that rate, California would go \$2.25 billion, Illinois \$743 million and Michigan \$549 million. From the state's view, that's giving up "free money," as Colorado Gov. Jared Polis put it when he opted in.

A mere 32% of U.S. adults said they were satisfied with K-12 education in a recent Gallup poll, a new low. Education needs a shake-up, including funding that follows parents' choices.

about continuing the war through or past the midterms. That means at least six more weeks of blockading Iran's ports. The U.S. election is supposed to be the regime's decisive leverage, forcing Mr. Trump to quit the fight before Iran can no longer bear the pressure.

Iran's state-run media emphasize the regime's desire to defeat Mr. Trump in the midterms. But even after a drubbing in Congress, Mr. Trump will have two years left in office, with no political threat hanging over his head. What will stop him from prosecuting the war with less restraint, especially as the U.S. escorts more oil through the Strait of Hormuz?

Unless, that is, the President stops himself. This can't be discounted. Later on Tuesday he said a three-hour meeting with Iran's representatives had gone "very well," raising hopes for diplomacy. But Mr. Trump has shifted from annihilation to peace in our time, back and forth, so many times that exhausted Americans don't know what to believe. It's one reason that even some Republican candidates are calling for an end to the war.

Iran is going to heed what the President does, not what he threatens to do. When the annihilation talk rings false, it hurts U.S. deterrence around the world. It also hurts Mr. Trump at home because it doesn't look like the U.S. is winning. He's better off explaining his strategy to win the war and for seeing it through—before and after the midterms.

He says the pressure of U.S. midterm elections won't save Iran's regime.

Trump's U.N. Message to the World

There was no escalator sabotage this year at the United Nations. Instead the drama of President Trump's speech to the annual meetings of the General Assembly was largely limited to his threat to "annihilate" Iran's regime. Which would be more credible if we and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps hadn't heard it several times by now.

Beyond the bluster, Iran's rulers will focus on one point from the speech. "I believe we'll make a deal right after the election, because it doesn't make sense for [the Iranians] to not to," Mr. Trump said. "They're waiting to see how I do in the midterm election. What they don't realize is that I'm not running. . . . When it comes to Iran, [the election] doesn't even enter my mind. The only thing that does is that Iran will never have a nuclear weapon."

The President then had to stop for applause, a rarity at the U.N. Perhaps Iran's firing missiles and drones on its neighbors, rather than merely undermining them via proxy militias, has been noticed.

There's no guarantee Iran's regime will wise up after the elections and hand over its nuclear stockpile, or drop its demand to own the Strait of Hormuz. If Mr. Trump thinks there is, he may be as surprised as he was previously by Iran's refusal to honor a cease-fire deal.

On the other hand, the killers in Tehran may also wonder if the President means what he says

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

International Law Abandons Its Foundations

Orde Kittrie and Andres Munoz-Mosquera's op-ed, "The ICJ's Pernicious Plan to Redefine Genocide" (Sept. 14), highlights a concerning shift in the practice of international law at the United Nations' International Court of Justice.

The authority of the ICJ was built on the precise legal definitions established by figures like Raphael Lemkin, who coined "genocide," and Sir Hersch Lauterpacht, who helped shape the concept of "crimes against humanity." Both carefully limited these terms in the wake of World War II. The political flexibility now applied to these concepts by plaintiffs at international tribunals undermines the significance of their contributions to jurisprudence.

International institutions have increasingly strayed from their foundational principles. Heretofore accepted standards are being replaced by poorly articulated political sentiment. This approach, cloaked in a faux moral neutrality, serves to politicize the application of international law.

International law relies entirely on the willingness to enforce it. The

U.N.'s unimpressive record of enforcement makes it virtually impossible for the noble aspirations of its founding states to function in practice. Distorting core legal terms through a new epistemology further removes the institution from being taken seriously in international adjudication.

IVAN BERKOWITZ
New York

If the ICJ expands the concept of genocide in a way unacceptable to the U.S., the best solution would be for the U.S. to withdraw from the 1948 Genocide Convention.

The U.S. should also speak with countries that claim universal jurisdiction over genocide. If their law automatically tracks the ICJ definition, it should urge those countries to narrow it.

The ICJ plays an important role well beyond possible rulings against genocide. For example, it can rule on maritime boundary disputes. Weakening the court over one issue could undermine those broader functions.

BRUCE COUCHMAN
Toronto

Don't Mistake DOGE Destruction for Reform

Tyler Hassen is right that government should be accountable for taxpayer dollars ("DOGE Works. Let's Keep It Going," op-ed, Sept. 17). But the past 20 months have exposed a difference between reforming government and dismantling its capacity to serve the public.

DOGE drove experienced civil servants out of government, disrupted critical programs and weakened government's ability to deliver results. At the Interior Department, the consequences are devastating: reduced services in national parks, wildlife refuges and public lands, and there are fewer scientists protecting us from natural disasters.

Federal workforce data show that agencies responsible for public lands have lost more than 27% of their workforce since September 2024 and February 2026. A nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service survey found that more than 60% of Interior employees said their units were worse at meeting stakeholder needs than the year before. Meanwhile, the National Park Service has diverted at least \$90 million

in park-entry fees to Washington, even as the national park system faces a \$24 billion deferred-maintenance backlog.

These aren't abstract numbers. They represent park rangers, scientists and other professionals who keep visitors safe, maintain trails and facilities, monitor wildlife and help communities prepare for disasters. U.S. Forest Service staffing losses have similarly constrained wildfire-prevention work and outdoor recreation services. Good-faith efforts to streamline government can improve how agencies operate. But dismantling the people and expertise required to carry out their missions isn't efficiency; it's diminished capacity.

Effective government requires leaders who understand how to manage organizations, protect institutional expertise and deliver essential services. Reform should strengthen that capacity, not mistake its destruction for savings.

SALLY JEWELL
Seattle

Ms. Jewell was Secretary of the Interior 2013-17.

Give the Young Ownership of Their Retirement

Joseph Sternberg's column "Republicans' Pre-Emptive Social Security Surrender" (Political Economics, Sept. 18) misses the bigger picture: Social Security can't be meaningfully "reformed" because its basic structure is flawed.

Social Security is a pay-as-you-go system. Payroll taxes collected from today's workers and their employers finance benefits for today's retirees. In effect, it is a legal intergenerational chain letter: Future workers must be taxed to finance the benefits promised to today's workers when they retire. A private investment firm couldn't legally operate such a scheme.

A sound retirement system should allow workers to accumulate real savings and invest in stocks, bonds and other productive assets. The solution is to end Social Security payroll taxes for younger workers and allow them to build private retirement accounts. Current beneficia-

ries and workers nearing retirement could continue receiving benefits on a pro-rata basis, financed during the transition from general revenues.

Those revenues could be generated by eliminating corporate welfare, phasing out unnecessary federal programs and reducing spending outside the federal government's constitutionally authorized functions. Abolishing taxes on interest, dividends and capital gains would further encourage private saving and investment.

The issue isn't reforming Social Security, but replacing its flawed financing structure.

MURRAY SARRIN
Associated scholar, Mises Institute
Naples, Fla.

Let the Kid Have the Cookie

"Nothing Blows Up a Parent Group Like a Fight Over School Snacks" (Page One, Sept. 17) captures the anxiety fueled by fearmongering around the word "processed." Speaking as both a registered dietician and a grandmother, I believe we need to stop creating fear around food, and let children be children.

Our job as parents and grandparents shouldn't be to police every bite our children or their classmates eat. We should lead by example, offer nutritious options when we can, and teach kids how to navigate a world that also includes cupcakes, cookies and birthday parties.

No single snack determines the quality of a child's diet. What matters far more is their overall eating pattern and the habits they develop over time. Nutrition isn't black and white, and treating certain foods as something to fear may do more harm than the occasional Oreo ever could.

KERI GANS, MS, RDN
Chatham, N.J.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Hey pal, this is a partridge tree, got it?"

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SETH EISENBERG
Fort Lauderdale, Fla.
Mr. Eisenberg is a former chairman of the National Writers Union.

OPINION

Beijing Turns AI Against Tibetans Worldwide

By Richard Gere

China's new Ethnic Unity and Progress Law promises to extend Beijing's repression beyond China's borders. I recently warned in these pages. We now have a disturbing glimpse of what that could mean for Americans.

Anthropic reported this month that it had disrupted a Chinese-government-aligned operation using artificial intelligence to investigate religious leaders and diaspora communities abroad. Its targets included the International Campaign for Tibet, the Washington organization I chair, which works to promote human rights and democratic freedom for the Tibetan people.

Anthropic uncovers a Beijing-aligned operation targeting my organization among other dissidents.

That a foreign government used U.S. technology to gather intelligence on U.S. organizations operating domestically should concern Americans. Targets included people and organizations whose activities—practicing their faith, advocating human rights, holding governments accountable to commitments—were

constitutionally protected.

Anthropic says the actors used Claude to ingest information in multiple languages, monitor social media, map organizations and individuals, and produce state-security-style intelligence dossiers. The reports cataloged personal information and points of leverage that can eventually be exploited.

Tibetans were targeted alongside Catholic leaders across Asia, Taiwanese Christians, Falun Gong practitioners and other religious and diaspora communities. In separate operations, Anthropic found China-based security actors using AI to monitor overseas dissidents and civil-society organizations, identifying individuals for potential "control," including surveillance, pressure, intimidation and other measures intended to constrain their activities.

For Tibetans, the danger is clear. Being outside China doesn't make you safe from Beijing's repression. China's disturbing new Ethnic Unity and Progress Law claims authority over certain speech and activities outside China, and Chinese officials have explicitly defended that reach.

No public information proves the intelligence operation Anthropic uncovered was conducted under this law, but the combination is troubling: Beijing is claiming greater reach abroad just as AI makes it far easier to find and monitor people engaged in speech and activities that Beijing perceives as a threat.



Tibetans protest Xi Jinping's visit to New Delhi.

For decades, China's repression of Tibetans has involved controlling physical space: monasteries, schools, communities. Tibetans who escaped across the Himalayas built new lives and institutions beyond Beijing's immediate reach, most importantly in India, home to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile community for more than six decades. AI threatens to undermine the protection gained from going abroad.

Beijing has long monitored Tibetans outside China. What is changing is the scale: Work that once required teams of analysts is increasingly done by a single operator using AI, allowing governments to track far

more people at far lower cost.

Surveillance once focused on prominent critics can now extend to entire communities. Tibetans thousands of miles from China may have to consider whether attending a demonstration, practicing their religion or speaking publicly puts them or their families on Beijing's radar.

President Trump meets Xi Jinping in Washington this week. The two countries are already discussing the risks posed by AI. The use of AI by governments to monitor people beyond their borders belongs in that conversation.

Mr. Trump should directly raise with Mr. Xi China's efforts to target

people outside China. He should make clear that Beijing can't use Chinese law, or American technology, to investigate and intimidate people in the U.S. for lawful speech, religious practice or political activity.

Congress should ask Anthropic and other leading AI companies what they are seeing. Are foreign governments using American AI systems to profile people in the U.S.? Are they mapping religious communities, advocacy organizations and political movements?

Anthropic deserves credit for detecting these operations, terminating their accounts, and sharing what it learns. Other AI companies should treat state-sponsored surveillance and transnational repression as a distinct category of misuse.

The competition between the U.S. and China over AI is often described as a race for technological supremacy. But American leadership has never rested on technology alone. It also rests on what we choose to do with that power and what principles we defend as new technologies reshape the world.

The U.S. helped lead the world into the age of AI. It now has an important role in helping ensure this technology expands human possibility rather than the reach of China's or any other country's repression.

Mr. Gere is an actor and chairman of the International Campaign for Tibet.

Surprise: Racial Crime Disparities Have Narrowed a Lot



UPWARD MOBILITY
By Jason L. Riley

Did you know that incarceration rates and racial disparities in the prison population declined in the U.S. for the first two decades of the 21st century? You'd have heard about it if the reverse were true, but mainstream media have little interest in highlighting racial progress when Republicans control the White House. Moreover, this trend undermines the left's insistence that our criminal-justice system—from police officers to prosecutors to the sentencing guidelines—is stacked against black people.

Nevertheless, a study published last month in the academic journal *Nature Human Behaviour*, "Why America's Prisons Are Shrinking and Racial Gaps Are Closing," deserves more attention. The authors, Jason Robey of the University of Iowa and Michael Light of the University of Wisconsin, analyzed data on crimes, arrests and prison admissions between 2000 and 2019. The state imprisonment rate in 2019 was the lowest it had been

since 1988, and it had shrunk by 20% since 2007.

As noteworthy, black-white gaps in arrests and imprisonment have narrowed due to significant decreases in black criminal behavior. "For violent and property offenses, the reduction in prison admissions corresponds primarily with substantial declines in crime rates, not changes in policing or case processing," the authors note. "This was particularly true for Black individuals, for whom the substantial reduction in violent prison admissions can be entirely attributed to a large reduction in violent crime." From 2000 to 2019, the overall violent-crime rate fell 32%. The prison admission rate for violent offenses declined 20% among whites. For blacks, it decreased 43%, which was driven "exclusively" by a 47% reduction in black violent crime, according to the study.

The trends in drug arrests tell a similar story of narrowing racial inequality. In 2000, blacks were 12 times as likely as whites to go to prison for a drug offense. By 2019, disparity had fallen to less than 3 to 1. "For Black individuals, the prison admission rate for drug offenses declined by 75% from 2000

to 2019, whereas for White individuals, it declined only 13% from its peak in 2005," Mr. Robey and Mr. Light report.

One of the few journalists to write about these findings is Charles Lane of the American Enterprise Institute, who concluded that the conventional "mass incarceration" narrative on the political

In 2000-19, the prison-admission rate for violent crime dropped 20% for whites, 43% for blacks.

left "needs to catch up with the facts." Mr. Lane speculated that we may be "in the midst of a long-term shift toward both less violent crime and less incarceration," which "very well might never have occurred if we really had defunded police or abolished prisons."

I hope Mr. Lane is proved right, but don't expect the attacks on the criminal justice system to stop. People with an ideological agenda are seldom disarmed by factual evidence, however voluminous. Recall

that the past two decades of falling black crime and incarceration rates coincided with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which insisted that law enforcement was targeting people based on nothing more than skin color.

Political activists who trade in racial division pushed a demonstrably dishonest narrative about race and policing, opportunistic elected officials played along, and a compliant media turned people such as Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile and Breonna Taylor into household names. Ta-Nehisi Coates lectured us about America's disregard for "black bodies." Ibram Kendi received \$55 million to open the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University. The New York Times tried to pass off the "1619 Project" as serious scholarship.

When George Floyd was killed during an encounter with police in 2020, he was heralded as a black everyman. The nationwide civil disorder that followed his death caused billions of dollars in property damages. Professional athletes refused to stand for the national anthem to demonstrate solidarity. Employers instituted mandatory diversity training. Newspapers be-

gan capitalizing "Black."

Yet all the while, data showed that racial imbalances in the criminal-justice system were diminishing. Police were targeting criminals, not black people, and fewer blacks were in fact being arrested and imprisoned as law-breaking ebbed. There's been no epidemic of racially motivated policing in recent decades, merely anecdotal evidence amplified by social media and reporters with a political agenda. Crime increased during the pandemic, but the downward trend in the 21st century has since resumed, and the 2026 homicide rate is on pace to reach a historic low.

Messrs. Robey and Light understand that police officers aren't above reproach and that racism in this country still exists. Nor do they claim that our criminal justice system is flawless. Still, pretending that the real threat to public safety comes from cops rather than criminals is not only wrongheaded but dangerous, especially for low-income black people, who are far more likely than other groups to become victims of violent crimes. The professors have performed a public service, even if it is unlikely to win them any popularity contests.

Hostages Like Me Were Also 'NAZA'—Collateral Damage

By Omer Shem Tov

I know what it is like to be collateral damage. For 505 days, that's what I was.

The anti-Israel documentary "NAZA"—the Hebrew acronym for "collateral damage"—won the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival this month. The film hasn't been released in Israel, and I haven't seen it. "NAZA," which is based on interviews with anonymous Israeli soldiers and intelligence officers, portrays a war in which Palestinian civilians were killed needlessly, even deliberately. What brought this war to Gaza—Hamass's Oct. 7, 2023, massacre and hostage-taking—is largely outside the frame.

Hamass kidnapped me from the Nova music festival on Oct. 7 and held me in Gaza for 505 days, much of that time in apartments in active combat zones. There was much to fear in captivity. Hunger. My captors. Never seeing my family again. But I also feared the Israeli air force. The Israeli pilots overhead had no idea where I was. Sometimes when my captors messaged, made phone calls and ordered evacuations, I tried to minimize NAZA, or collateral damage.

would be dead, and Israel would be responsible.

One of my captors told me his mother had received a phone call warning her to leave her home because an Israeli strike might put her in danger. The call came from the Israel Defense Forces. Hamas knew

If an Israeli bomb killed me, Hamas would win twice: I'd be dead, Israel would be responsible.

where I was and left me to die. Israel didn't know my location, but it knew where my captor's mother was and called to make sure she wasn't killed accidentally. There I was—kidnapped, starved and tortured by her son—while my army was trying to keep his mother alive.

Israel desperately wanted me home. But not at any price. There were Palestinian civilians between Israel and me. So Israel dropped leaflets, sent messengers, made phone calls and ordered evacuations. I tried to minimize NAZA, or collateral damage.

I also saw what death meant to the other side. One day, my captors celebrated after Hamas fighters killed Israeli soldiers. The next day, Israel bombed the area where I was being held. The explosions came about 10 seconds apart. I was terrified. The terrorist beside me was delighted. To him, every explosion was proof of success: Look what we made Israel do. Look how much we hurt them. I understood something then. For Hamas, destruction itself could be victory. As long as there was death on either side, Hamas could win.

After I came home, I learned that the numbers reflected some of what I had seen. The United Nations has reported that when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, around 90% of those killed and injured are civilians. Although the exact ratio in Gaza is disputed, Israeli military officials and U.S. analysts have estimated between 1.5 and 2 Palestinian civilians killed for every combatant—low for warfare this intense in an urban battle-

field. That didn't happen by accident. Warnings, evacuations and decisions not to strike saved Palestinian lives. Israel also paid a price for these careful decisions. They gave Hamas time. They exposed Israeli soldiers to greater danger. And they left hostages like me waiting longer.

A dead Palestinian child isn't made less dead by a statistic. But neither should we ignore what Israel risked to reduce that number. If Israel had cared less about NAZA, perhaps I would have come home sooner. Fewer Israeli soldiers might have died. Fewer hostages might have died. But more Palestinians would have.

That is why "NAZA" troubles me. In Venice, the film received a standing ovation that lasted more than 24 minutes. As a former hostage, those minutes felt like a shower of knives. Not because the film shows Palestinian suffering, which is real and deserves to be seen. What hurts is that the film, as it has been reported, doesn't seem to see me.

It sees the suffering in Gaza, but not what brought the war there: Hamas's planning and the murder of families on Oct. 7, the people dragged from their homes and a music festival. None of that seems to create much of a moral dilemma for the film's writers. In that story, perhaps I am NAZA too. Collateral damage. A Jewish hostage who could have been left to rot in a Hamas tunnel, or murdered alongside my friends at Nova, because fighting to free me, and to protect Israelis from the people who did this, is itself treated as morally suspect.

Military power, weapons and technology matter. But a society's ability to defend itself must depend on something simpler: the moral clarity to know that it has the right to do so. There must never be another Oct. 7. We have the right to ensure there isn't. And we shouldn't be ashamed of it.

Mr. Shem Tov is author of "Meeting Myself in Hell," a memoir of his time in captivity.

The Right Attitude at Altitude

By Mike Kerrigan

A strange thought occurred to me recently on a business trip to Los Angeles from my home in Charlotte, N.C. As takeoff neared, the flight attendant reminded passengers to put their devices on airplane mode to disable wireless transmission. Suddenly I realized something.

I'm a good flier for a bad reason. Back on land, I sweat a lot of the small stuff. I think I'm in control when I'm not. Then I grow frustrated when life doesn't conform to my wishes. Yet on airplanes—if only there—I've made peace with the fact that I'm not in control; the pilot is.

It is the right attitude at altitude. There is, in fact, little I can do about bad weather or, heaven forbid, any-

thing worse happening at 35,000 feet. But as a philosophy it is no less sound on the ground, where I spend most of my life but don't practice it well.

My happiness in flight comes from aligning my will to the pilot's. I spend no time in the cabin questioning orders from the cockpit. I know I'm on a journey and following instructions will get me to my destination safely and surely.

How strange then to understand this in physical motion, the flight path of my body, but to question it in metaphysical motion, the flight path of my soul. Yet that's exactly what I do. By baggage claim, I'm back to thinking the sovereign self is in charge.

But self-surrender isn't giving something up. It is receiving something greater in return, resulting in

spiritual addition by subtraction. It's realizing I'm no more the captain on the ground than I am on trips to LAX. This alignment of will, mine to God's, will simply take me where I want to go the fastest.

In "The Great Divorce," C.S. Lewis, as he often does, said it best: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' It is high time I started practicing it on the ground."

When I travel, I'll continue turning off my devices before takeoff. But before landing safely, I think I'll start keeping my life on airplane mode a little longer.

Mr. Kerrigan is an attorney in Charlotte, N.C.

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EDITORIALS

Who's afraid of a big, bad debate?

Here in America, we have a longstanding tradition of political debate.

Think Lincoln-Douglas and Kennedy-Nixon.

We expect our leaders to be able to navigate public speaking and take fire in front of a crowd. That is, after all, a big part of the gig. If you can't cut it squaring off against your opponents, how can you presume to govern?

The great American debate is falling out of fashion, as more politicians choose to opt out of this most important of political traditions.

That's a bad thing for voters and our democracy.

We feel this acutely. During election season, the board hosts candidate endorsement conversations in person, virtually or in questionnaire form. We find it particularly disappointing when candidates refuse to show up to debates with their peers, as was the case yesterday with Chicago Public Schools board president candidate Hilario Dominguez, who pulled out of our endorsement meeting 35 minutes before the start with no reason given. The three other candidates came together for a rigorous — yet civil — debate.

Dropping out at the last minute is certainly a dramatic choice — though it pales in comparison to sending a junior staffer to lambast us on our home turf as one far-left candidate did during primary season — and it certainly means Dominguez gets to avoid the lion's den. But it exposes an unwillingness on a cowardly candidate's part to put themselves in challenging situations. Like, say, corraling the Chicago School Board, which makes speaking to us look like attending a tea party.

Debate ghosting, as we'll call it, certainly advantages the leading candidate. When you're ahead, it can pay to avoid unforced errors. Just ask Don Tracy, the Republican running for U.S. Senate against Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton. He's made his opponent's unwillingness to face off a leading campaign talking point.

While Stratton has committed to a debate on WTTW, Chicago's local public television channel, that's it.

We have had our differences with Stratton and how she's run her campaign, and plenty of folks within the Democratic Party aren't too keen with the gover-



SCOTT STANTIS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

nor's heavy-handed push to get his lieutenant elected to the Senate. But to her great credit, she was willing to meet with us during primary endorsements and articulate her vision for the job, should she be elected to Congress.

We wish she'd do the same for regular voters, opting to take the stage a little more often, or at least in a setting outside friendly confines. She does, after all, have plenty of constituents all over the rest of the state. We're guessing plenty of them would like to hear where she stands on the issues, beyond ads and platitudes.

In truth, it's Stratton's race to lose. Tracy has much more to gain by hitting the stage. So what? If Stratton wants supporters to feel confident in their vote, why not show them what you've got? The same criticism extends

to other candidates, including former U.S. Rep. Melissa Bean, who is running to reclaim her old 8th Congressional District seat. Bean at the last minute dropped out of last Saturday's League of Women Voters debate against her Republican opponent Jennifer Davis, citing a "scheduling conflict." We are happy she has agreed to meet with us.

Let us imply that this is a Democrat-only problem, plenty of Republicans are doing the same thing.

Darren Bailey this spring declined to debate his primary opponents Ted Dabrowski, Rick Heinder and James Mendrick, winning the primary election soundly anyway.

Bailey is rightfully upset that Gov. JB Pritzker has apparently declined to debate him and has agreed only to a single "forum"

on WTTW, which does not typically reach a large downstage audience. We'd hope arrangements are being made for wider distribution.

Downstate U.S. Rep. Mary Miller also demurred when it came to debates. We suspect she didn't want to have to take on a more pragmatic, independent-minded candidate in Judy Bowlby, whom we endorsed.

Both Bailey and Miller won their primaries handily, which unfortunately reinforces bad behavior. Namely, once you're confident enough that you can win, campaigning becomes less about making your case to the public and more about holding your ground.

As campaigning increasingly takes to social media as the preferred way to capture voter support, and as polarization

remains a pernicious problem, candidates obviously sense they can get away with ditching traditional debates. A Republican will get Republican voters, a Democrat will get Democratic voters.

That's always been true. But especially given the rise of independents — 45%, according to Gallup — we believe the old ways still have value. Plenty of people are open-minded enough to hear somebody out. Debate is the great equalizer, and there is simply no hiding on stage once the lights come on. That's the point.

When a candidate is only willing to speak into the echo chamber, that's a bad sign. Illinois needs more politicians willing to test their mettle and share a stage, not only championing their own ideas but also signaling to voters that it's possible to disagree and treat the other side with respect.

Is Bears' Caleb Williams tough enough? Are you?

It was the scream heard round the NFL. As well as in a whole lot of Chicago living rooms.

The Bears' Caleb Williams collapsed in a heap without being contacted on a drenched Soldier Field as his team was driving for a potentially game-winning touchdown Sunday. As he fell, he let out a yowl. Fans feared the worst after he was carted off the field, naturally, and social-media speculation abounded. Amateur diagnosticians concluded everything from a torn Achilles tendon to a torn ACL to a torn hamstring.

So when the great news arrived the following day that Williams had "merely" strained his hamstring and was likely to only miss maybe a couple of games, the phony-outrage and ridicule machine revved up fast on social media.

Amid memes galore, the gist of the online criticism was that Williams was somehow soft for



Bears quarterback Caleb Williams scrambles on a run before he suffered an injury in the fourth quarter against the Vikings at Soldier Field on Sunday. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

reacting so dramatically in the moment to his injury when it turned out not to be season-ending or something. Naturally, that prompted huffy defenses of

Williams from those in Chicago's sports talk galaxy. Two days later, the "debate" was still raging.

We're all for doozy sports beefs waged in good fun as a distraction

from the negativity that permeates so much of our national discourse these days. But judging an athlete's pain response at the moment of their injury? Inappropriate to say the least.

No one criticizing Williams from the outside knows what he was experiencing nor do they know whether his reaction wasn't in part frustration at not being able to finish a game which he was on the cusp of winning, despite the Bears' sorry play throughout much of the day.

And anyone who has watched him play knows that questioning his toughness is absurd. As a rookie, he was sacked 68 times! A dubious Bears franchise record for sure, but he got up each time and played every game that season.

Meanwhile, Jaxson Dart, the New York Giants' quarterback, limped off the field Monday night with barely a grimace after a crunching hit by two Los Angeles

Rams. Word Tuesday afternoon was that he might need surgery. We assume the social-media pain specialists will waste little time with their toughness assessments of the two young quarterbacks by comparing the two contrasting outcomes with their in-the-moment reactions.

These are the kinds of yammerings that in pre-internet times would have occurred in a barroom or a living room, leaving the utterer to embarrass himself only in the company of those around him. Now, once posted, these insta-reactions and hot takes are there for all the online world to see.

These are extraordinary athletes who put their bodies and even their future health on the line for our entertainment. Bottom line is that most regular human beings absorbing the sort of punishment Williams and other pro football players experience on the regular would find themselves in traction.

ON THIS DAY 116 YEARS AGO THE METROPOLITAN DISTRICT

Bostonians have not gone into raptures over the census figures. A gain of 109,000 does not comfort them, for their city still lags behind St. Louis. But they console themselves, as do the Baltimoreans, with the reflection that all that really counts is the population of the "metropolitan district." As the Boston Transcript says: "No true test of Boston's growth can be afforded by any tabula-

tion confined to arbitrarily drawn metropolitan boundaries." It has a wild belief that the greater Boston is "doubtless again a rival of the actual Chicago for position as the second largest center of population in the United States." There has been no rivalry between the two cities since 1870.

There is no doubt that Boston would cut a more imposing figure if its suburban population were

taken into account. It would outrank St. Louis. But when you talk of the population of metropolitan districts please do not overlook Chicago's district. It has an extensive one. The real population of Chicago includes the commuters who pour into the city on week days from north, south and west. They may spend their nights in Evanston or out Oak Park way, or in towns on the Burlington and Alton,

but here is where they work and where their interests are. But for quick transportation their homes would be within the city limits.

Some day the census enumerators may go a little more into details than they do now. They may be directed to ascertain not only where men sleep, but also where they do business. Then we should have a better understanding of the real population of

Chicago and other cities which boast of being the center of a metropolitan district. They would all make a much better showing from New York down.

The showing Chicago would make would be far ahead of that of Boston. The growth of its metropolitan district has not lagged behind that of the city itself.

Tribune editorial board,
Sept. 23, 1910

OPINION



Diesel sells for almost \$7 at a gas station in Detroit on Tuesday. SARAH RICE/GETTY

Taking back Congress should be a slam dunk for Democrats



Laura Washington

There may never be a more favorable setup for a midterm election cycle than the current iteration.

As we roll into the thick of this year's fall campaigns, Democrats are all wringing their hands about taking Congress back. We will get the House, they stoutly declare, then add a frail whisper that the Senate could be a long shot.

The Democrats are skeptical. They need to get over it. They should be exuberant.

There are many factors that should make taking Congress back a slam dunk.

Inflation is on fire. Go to the store one day to buy anything. Repeat the purchase next week, and the price is higher. Gas prices? Don't even go there. Interest rates are going up, and the 10-year Treasury rate is near 5%, the highest in years.

We're fighting with Iran. We're crucifying Canada, our closest ally and neighbor to the north. Americans are nervous about losing our jobs to artificial intelligence and robots.

Farmers are sobbing in the soybean fields, thanks to President Donald Trump's notorious tariffs. They can't sell to China, their largest customer. The Brazilians are eating their lunch. And data centers seem to be springing up everywhere.

Voters don't like it, at all. Trump's response? Don't worry, be happy. Just wait — AI will put a smile on your faces, he claims.

Good luck with that. Serendipity in the form of misfortune is shining on the Democratic Party's electoral prospects. It is time for the Dems to stiffen their spines and aim high.

Republicans are beginning to sense the slippage. When Federal Reserve Chairman Kevin Warsh raises interest rates, you know the situational awareness of a major defeat begins to emerge.

Republicans are starting to realize that many of their president's actions are detrimental to their

extended political livelihoods. Trump's decision to back Ken Paxton, the GOP Senate nominee in Texas, shows poor judgment. The president is more concerned with rewarding slavish loyalty than supporting electability. Failing to recognize that flaw has been the downfall of emperors and autocrats.

Trump's latest approval rating is languishing at 38%, according to a new national poll from The New York Times and Siena College, and it has been there for months.

The Trump phalanx is beginning to fray around the edges. Even his most craven acolytes are edging away. Take Darren Bailey, the failed-but-trying-again Republican gubernatorial nominee in Illinois. They know the future does not lie with Trump. The midterms will tell the tale. It's in the biome, and you can feel it.

So, this should be a magical moment for the Democrats. Their good fortune is picking up speed, as the increasingly sclerotic and daft president furiously flails. Don't be surprised if Trump starts blaming the Iran war on the Democrats. That corkscrew

moment will be something to relish.

There's one issue that the Democrats should hammer harder — corruption. One thing Trump does well is make money off the backs of American taxpayers.

Back in 2021, Trump blasted cryptocurrency, calling it a "scam." Things have changed. Trump made more than \$1.4 billion from business dealings in cryptocurrency in 2025, according to a mandatory financial report.

In the disclosure, Trump reported \$635 million in royalties from Celebration Coins, "thought to be behind the STRUMP meme coin which has plunged in value since he launched it days before taking office," the BBC News reported in July.

He also "earned more than \$236 million from token sales that came through World Liberty and another \$197 million from an equity sale in a crypto business called Stablecoin Holdco," Politico reported.

Meanwhile, as of June, the cryptocurrency industry had doled out \$189 million to influence the 2026 midterms, which is outpacing its

contributions in the previous election cycle, shows a study by Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy group.

"More than one-third of all corporate money contributed to this year's November elections, and primary elections leading up to them, has come from the crypto industry, making it the top corporate political spender," Reuters reported.

All that cash adds up to enormous influence.

Beware. When the cock crows once in the morning, everyone tunes in. When the cock crows all day long, we bring out the shotguns.

Voters are barraged with such a massive cacophony of ills that they are becoming anesthetized to the bad news. This is the moment when Democratic leaders need to bring it all into focus.

Laura Washington is a political commentator and longtime Chicago journalist. Her columns appear in the Tribune each Wednesday. Write to her at LauraLauraWashington@gmail.com.

Ari Emanuel on rise of AI and how to handle the talented

By Chris Jones
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Ari Emanuel has a new book, "Roll the Calls." The famous Hollywood agent and entertainment business owner spoke with the Tribune's Opinion section from Los Angeles. He will address members of the Executive Club and the University Club of Chicago on Wednesday night at the Harris Theater.

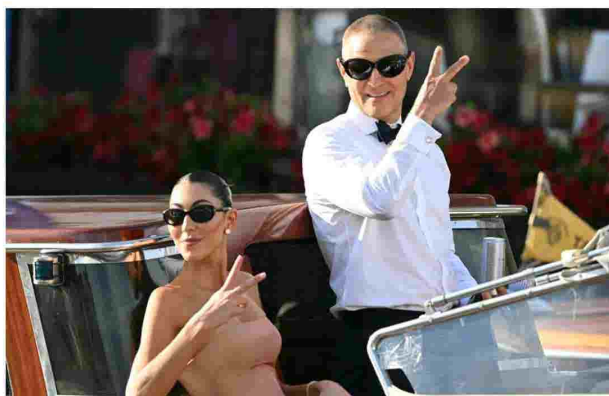
The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You've made a lot of forays into live entertainment through UFC, WWE and now ATG Entertainment. So do you think the rise of artificial intelligence is causing people to prefer to experience things in person?

With the advent of AI, we're going to have time to do stuff. We're social animals. People want to get together. I think they're going more to the movies, comedy clubs, restaurants, and they're going to travel.... I think real human experiences through concerts, movies and theater will become more important than they have ever been and more valuable. I started my new business, MARI, precisely to spotlight this.

What about AI in a broader sense? How much time are you spending worrying about that?

I think Thomas Friedman was right when he said this is potentially a new race, a new civilization that we've created. I think the Chinese are just as nervous as we are. And it might, in a weird way and depending if the rumors about AGI (China's artificial general intelligence) are true, and if we can learn how to trust each other, help us have a real conversation about how to deal with this.



Fashion designer Sarah Staudinger and husband agent Ari Emanuel leave the Gritti Palace hotel on the wedding day of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and Lauren Sanchez in Venice on June 27, 2025. STEFANO RELLANDINI/GETTY-APF

The Chinese should be nervous about what could happen to their society; we should be nervous about what could happen to our society and society in general. We could get together and do something. And when you think about Yemen and how they are using AI now, this is a dangerous moment.

That being said, there is the opportunity for big advancements in healthcare and medical and other fields. We should come together on all those things. If you go back to the time of the atomic bomb, those people had big questions about what they had created, just like Elon (Musk) and all the people from Anthropic and Open AI do now. We must figure

out with China how to frame this and how we can come together. It could be the deterioration of how people operate, and that would not be a good thing. But it could also be an opportunity.

You are probably the most famous Hollywood agent in the world. Will future agents be AI?

If you talk to certain people in the venture capital community, they'll tell you that everyone is going to have to have their own AI agent to fight AI disruptors. I'm not sure I want to live like that, but I understand the concept.

In your book, you write generously of your young life in the Chicago

and its suburbs.

I only have fond memories and things that made a huge impact on my life. My mom taking us to demonstrations. She was always active politically, and I think that had a huge impact on my brother Rahm and all of us. My father working in all the hospitals and taking us downtown on call with him. It's an incredible city, and I think my brother made the city even better as a mayor. They could use another mayor like him. I think the last two have not stepped up to the plate in the way that was needed.

You also write about your dyslexia. I now have multiple businesses,

and a lot of people come up to me for advice and tell me they have a kid with ADHD or dyslexia. It is not easy. I say that if you are a reader, you are a linear thinker, which is not a bad thing. But if you talk to most people who are dyslexic, they will tell you they have different ways of getting to the end. Being dyslexic has been beneficial for me, looking back. It's a cliché that you learn more when you fall than when you win, but don't look down on the downs of life. I'd rather have a meaningful life than a pleasurable life.

You also say the entertainment business is emotional and based on rage. But you seem more mellow.

Two days ago, I had plenty of rage about a situation.... When I am on the field for any of my clients, I am on the field. When I am off the field, I try and get off the field, which has made me productive on the field. I'm definitely not mellow; talk to any of my associates. But I have learned to get to that differential and not constantly play chess all day long in every relationship.

In your book, you talk about the Michael Moore movie "Fahrenheit 9/11" and the Mel Gibson movie "The Passion of the Christ" as examples of films that polarized Americans. You say that Moore's movie actually helped the Republicans, politically, not Moore's allies.

But I am still proud of Michael for what he did. It was an incredible film. And if you look back at it now, I think you can see that he was right.

Chris Jones is the Tribune's editorial page editor and theater critic.

OPINION

'SUPREME' BEING

On the 100th anniversary of his birth, John Coltrane still offers lessons on faith

By Steven D. Reske
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Wednesday is the 100th anniversary of the birth of jazz saxophonist John Coltrane. A titan born a century ago may seem like old news, but with his timeless vision, Coltrane's relevance transcends the years and extends far beyond the world of music.

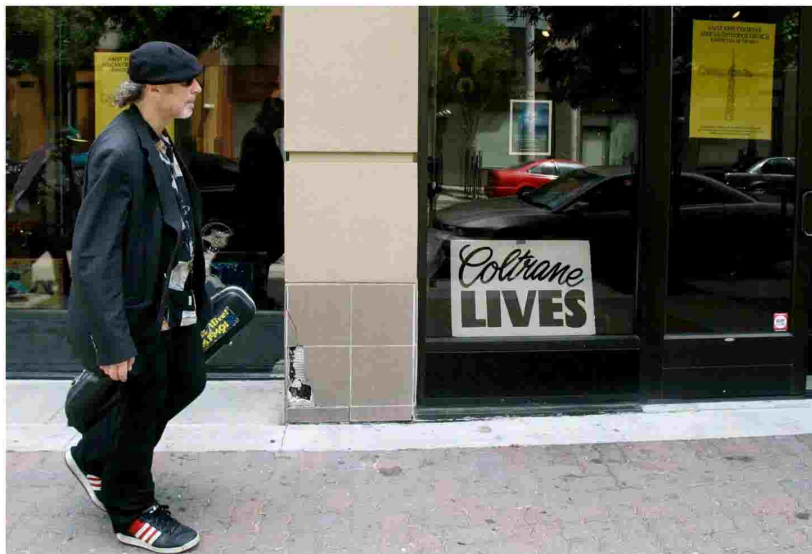
Coltrane was jazz's spiritual leader. He relentlessly pursued an understanding of the human condition. His most profound recording documenting his quest came just two years before his premature death. "A Love Supreme," released in 1965, is a landmark work of art and faith. In its liner notes, Coltrane describes it as "a humble offering" and "an attempt to say 'THANK YOU GOD.'"

Coltrane's lifetime achievements are so immense that, in 2007, he was one of only three musical artists ever awarded a special posthumous Pulitzer Prize citation for a contribution to jazz. It was for his "iconic centrality to the history of jazz" and how through "A Love Supreme," he produced an imposing composition expressing faith.

Listening to "A Love Supreme," we hear Coltrane's metaphysical invocations ascend to the heavens. We hope they are heard; we pray they are answered. Though in the end, their ontological significance may simply be that they were offered.

Coltrane believed that "my music is the spiritual expression of what I am — my faith, my knowledge, my being... When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to do something really good for people, to help humanity... I want to speak to their souls."

This may sound like an awful lot for music to do, but art can indeed explore and express the human dilemma. That is the cleft between the subjective and the objective; the finite and the infinite, the profane and the sacred. The earthy sweatiness of Saturday night is followed immediately by the sacred spirituality of Sunday morning. It's



A person walks in front of the St. John Will-I-Am Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco on July 13, 2008. The Christian congregation is centered on Coltrane's music. **JEFF CHIU/AP**

here where the dichotomy of our existence collides and where, depending on our courage, we attempt to resolve or dissolve these implications.

Coltrane's art imitated his spiritual life. In a similar way, our daily lives are informed by how bravely we confront the issues Coltrane explored. Our character is expressed in countless ways every day — including how we interact with others.

Coltrane eventually found the courage to face life's existential challenge. He embraced and then embodied it — spiritually, musically and as a fellow human being. His life came to illuminate the mutually arising conditions of space and sound, tradition and sedition, the individual and the

universal, and even life and death. Coltrane died of liver cancer on July 17, 1967, at age 40. His heroin addiction during the early 1950s was a likely contributor. That time of challenge, however, was before his transformation. In "A Love Supreme," Coltrane describes how, in 1957, he experienced "by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life."

The 17th century mathematician and physicist Blaise Pascal believed the person who searches for God has found him. If so, Coltrane surely found what he sought so passionately before his death. His life moved from pain to promise, despair to hope, and perhaps as humanly possible,

from sinner to saint.

Coltrane said he believed in all religions. Along with Christianity, he studied Eastern philosophies and was particularly drawn to Sufism. Part of his evolution does seem rooted in the following sentiment attributed to the 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi: "Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."

I certainly don't pretend Coltrane's personal path has all the answers for today's societal ills — or even that there are any easy answers. But I do see the value in looking inward when striving to understand and endure the questions and trials arising from the contradictions

and challenges of life. This is a small but sound starting point toward trying to mend some of humanity's challenges.

Coltrane summed this up as endeavoring "so that we can see more and more clearly what we are. In that way, we can give to those who listen the essence, the best of what we are. But to do that at each stage, we have to keep on cleaning the mirror."

This vision clearly led Coltrane to "A Love Supreme."

Steven D. Reske is an attorney in Minneapolis and a former longtime jazz journalist for national and local publications. He served as legal editor at large for the magazine Minnesota Law & Politics.

Voice of the people

Trump's cries of fake news

Last week, the president banned from the White House reporters from CNN, MS NOW and Politico, with a threat of others joining them; he mentioned The New York Times, too. Donald Trump says they report fake news.

News such as gas prices going sky high as a result of the Iran war nobody wanted and Congress never authorized. (Chicagoans, have you noticed a gallon of regular is over five bucks?) Such as cattle ranchers being pillaged financially due to Trump allowing imported beef into the U.S. Such as farmers, including those in our state, having to pay for wildly outrageous fertilizer to bring their crops to market, again stemming from a war that Trump started that he cannot now control and that he cannot end. Such as the price of groceries continuing to climb. Such as unlawful tariffs. And such as wanting to demolish the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, a memorial to John F. Kennedy, our 35th president, unless Trump's name is back on it. That's despite only Congress having the statutory authority to add or change the name of the building and a federal court already ordering his name removed after it was attacked.

All this isn't fake news. Such reporting is accurate, based on facts and evidence, with opinions guaranteed by the First Amendment as part of the mix, all of which merely shows Trump's incompetence and lunacy from a lay perspective. His poll numbers are dropping like a dead weight in water, and he does not give a hoot about Americans he was supposed to represent when elected in 2024, despite the promises he made on the campaign trail.

Let me bring this home for those who read the Tribune. What if Brandon Johnson, Chicago's mayor, did not like what the paper reported about him? Would we tolerate him not allowing its reporters into City Hall? Of course not, because its stories are factually based. And its opinion page is founded on the First Amendment.

Banning credible press outlets



CNN senior White House reporter Betsy Klein, holding up an empty credential holder, reports near the White House complex in Washington on Saturday after having the outlet had its credential confiscated by President Donald Trump. **JOSE LUIS MAGANA/AP**

such as CNN, MS NOW and Politico from our people's house, also known as the White House, is unlawful and unconstitutional and leads to the destruction of our democracy.

We need to use every legal means the justice system has to offer us Americans to stop Trump! — Miles J. Zaremski, Highland Park

Outlets' argument baseless

CNN and their confederate outlets complain in a lawsuit filed against President Donald Trump's administration that they are unable to do their jobs having been booted off the White House grounds.

These journalists can do their jobs elsewhere, such as the intersection of 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, or in their network studios or newsroom.

These outlets' First Amendment rights to broadcast slanted biases against Trump have not been adversely affected nor have they been free to continue to report their anti-Trump stories without interference from the government whatsoever.

Their First Amendment argument is baseless. — Earl Beal, Terre Haute, Indiana

Board's misplaced focus

Regarding the editorial "Michigan's El-Sayed failing to remove Piker deadweight from Senate campaign" (Sept. 18): The amount of ink that the Tribune Editorial Board devotes to stoking fears about Michigan's Democratic U.S. Senate candidate, "liberal firebrand" Abdul El-Sayed, is truly reprehensible when the board continues to seldom speak a peep about a sitting U.S. president's daily transgressions and the stupefying silence of "traditional" Republicans that it typically champions, such as U.S. Rep. Darin LaHood of Illinois' 16th District.

While congressional Republicans responsible for not curbing the destruction of our democracy sit idly by as their negative campaign ads, fueled by donors benefiting from massive tax cuts, attempt to manufacture anger against Democratic opponents, the backlog grows daily of issues that deserve commentary.

The latest: banning certain reporters from the White House because President Donald Trump doesn't like their organizations' coverage. Jack Nicholson's line "You can't handle the truth" from "A Few Good Men" comes to mind. This is a president whose policies the GOP members of

Congress tacitly endorse with their silence: Deny climate change, weaken environmental protections, cancel wind farm projects that would supply much needed electricity, arrest asylum-seekers at judicial hearings, deport immigrants with no criminal history to dangerous countries, tolerate a level of grift and self-dealing unprecedented in American history, and look the other way at the unbridled incompetence and deteriorating track record of Cabinet members such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Kash Patel and Pete Hegseth.

Hegseth is in charge of what the president characterizes as a "small potatoes" Iran conflict that has seriously depleted not only our military arsenal but also family savings at the gas pump.

The national debt, with the hollowed-out Republican Party firmly in charge, has been allowed to snowball, threatening Social Security and Medicare, plus the ability to fund worthwhile programs benefiting all Americans, from transportation infrastructure to medical research.

Current unchecked looting will forever handcuff future generations if not reversed with fair-share taxes coupled with strategic spending cuts over lobbyists' objections.

To echo one of Trump's own attacks on an unqualified appointee, the lawmakers responsible over the last two years have "folded like an umbrella."

With the election less than two months away, there are far more consequential issues piling up for the editorial board to focus on than obsessing over who a Senate candidate might or might not talk about.

— Bob Johnston, Chicago

Meeting between Trump, Xi

Let's hope that this week's meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Donald Trump turns out to be more than a friendly state dinner. There are some indications that the Chinese president may be inclined to put pressure on Iran to stop curtailing the flow of oil since it's probably

in both our countries' interest to lower gasoline prices.

Therefore, while it may be difficult for Trump to ask for Xi's help, given his personality, he needs to realize that sometimes being a bit humble is more effective than trying to be in control. The unknown is what Xi may want in return for his assistance.

In any case, it is good to see these two powerful leaders talking and not issuing threats.

— Dan Schuchardt, Wheaton

Trump-free reporting

Did you enjoy the Tribune's reporting earlier this week? Instead of the non-news of the White House heliport, the Tribune's articles and photos focused on important events. Some articles of interest reported on Douglass Park in the aftermath of Riot Fest, the injury of Bears quarterback Caleb Williams and the remembrance of Dia de los Muertos. These are events that I care about.

My morning coffee tasted so much better without the news about the heliport accompanied by a photo and the mumbblings of a grinning Trump. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, but this new focus made me fonder of the Tribune, not Trump.

— Mary Ann Kehl, Wilmette

A peak fit for Trump

I very seldom agree with President Donald Trump, but on this goal for his legacy, I agree with him. He thinks he should have his face on a mountain. Mount Rushmore already has the faces of four presidents on it. He should not have to share his legacy with theirs.

There is a 6,937-foot peak in the North Cascades that can be seen from farther away than Rushmore. It is in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. Access is off State Route 20, so a visitor center is easily located.

The mountain is aptly named for such a president as Trump. I personally would like to contribute to a fund to put his image on Crooked Bum Peak.

— Chuck Johnson, Morris, Illinois

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Opinion

A weaker U.S. awaits Xi's visit

China's president is in the driver's seat, reflecting American weakness, but there still may be some space for limited advances.



Nicholas Kristof

President Xi Jinping of China is throwing his weight around as he prepares to arrive in Washington.

When Chinese and American leaders gathered for summits in the past, it was the American president who held the cards. Not so this time. What's sobering about Xi's visit to the United States this week — and a reflection of the way President Trump has diminished America — is that this may be the first China-U.S. summit in which China appears in the lead role.

"In the past, American leaders generally drove the relationship, but now Xi is in the driver's seat," Julian Gewirtz, a China scholar at Columbia University who served in the Biden White House, told me. "Trump sees Xi as a peer and China as a superpower and is generally quite deferential to him."

For his part, Xi has demonstrated his strength by almost thumbing his nose at the United States.

Trump said he asked Xi in May, at their last meeting, to free Jimmy Lai, a media mogul who is among the most courageous advocates for democracy. Xi spurned the request. Instead, a Hong Kong court this month sentenced three other dissidents to harsh prison sentences, and one of the most famous of Hong Kong's democracy campaigners, Joshua Wong, 29, is facing up to a life sentence for supposed crimes.

China, whose per capita income of more than \$14,000 came within a whisker in July of achieving "high-income" status at the World Bank, also appears to be brazenly violating sanctions on North Korea this year. It buys Iranian oil and reportedly supports Iran's war effort. And despite having officially suspended strict export controls on rare-earth elements, it has continued to exert control over them in ways that create problems for Western companies.

Asked about reports that Chinese organizations supplied intelligence that Iran used in an attack in July that killed three American soldiers, Trump was strikingly reticent. He seemed to downplay any suggestion that China had done something wrong.

Xi has leverage in the relationship partly because the suspension of those export controls expires in November. If no deal is reached with Trump, then Beijing could further tighten access to rare earths that are vital for manufacturing everything from cars to submarines.

The United States is weakened in part because Trump started a trade war with China last year, which he then effectively lost when China weaponized its control over rare earths. In addition, America's war with Iran has depleted weapons stockpiles, reducing its ability to defend Taiwan or project power in the Pacific or the Middle East. The United States has antagonized allies

and backtracked on democracy and freedom, and according to U.N. investigators, America may have committed war crimes in Iran — and all of this has tarnished its global image and reduced its influence and soft power worldwide.

Trump is seen in much of the world as reckless and unpredictable, while Xi has tried to project an image of stability and maturity, soothing global oil markets that had been inflamed by Trump's war on Iran. A new poll from the Rockefeller Foundation finds that Canadians, Indonesians, Brazilians, Turks, Mexicans and others all see the United States as more of a "major threat" than either Russia or China.

"The U.S. is in retreat," Phillips P. O'Brien, an American historian, wrote this month. "It is watching bases of great strategic importance get destroyed and cannot protect them, it is abandoning allies that heretofore it considered of the highest priority, and it is making it clear that it cannot look after its own interests in some of the most important places of the world."

O'Brien adds that "this is clearly the end of the American age" — but I'm not so sure about that. The United States still has strengths, not least its tech sector, while China, Europe and Japan

all have significant weaknesses of their own, including demographic and economic challenges. Despite its propaganda, China remains an oppressive regime with no clear successor after Xi, while there is some prospect that American democracy will show its resilience in November's elections.

If it is humbling to have Xi arrive in a position of strength, at least there may be an opportunity ahead. Both Xi and Trump seem to want to lower the temperature and stabilize the relationship, which would be a good thing.

I hope that might also leave an opening for a sliver of progress on artificial intelligence, one of the most important topics the two leaders will discuss. It's difficult to see how the world can make much progress on improving A.I. governance if America and China resist cooperation on safety.

A major deal on safety is very unlikely, for Trump has called A.I. concerns "a hoax," while Xi apparently thinks the problem is potential American abuse of the technology to target the Chinese regime, rather than A.I. itself. In China, A.I. is portrayed as a threat to human existence but to Communist Party rule.

Still, perhaps there is space for a modest cooperative step forward. Raviv Shah, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, which is working on A.I. issues, told me that there may be an opportunity for progress on A.I. safety as it relates to specific, narrow domains such as reducing the risk of terrorist attacks using bioweapons.

That's a real concern as synthetic biology and A.I. together create new

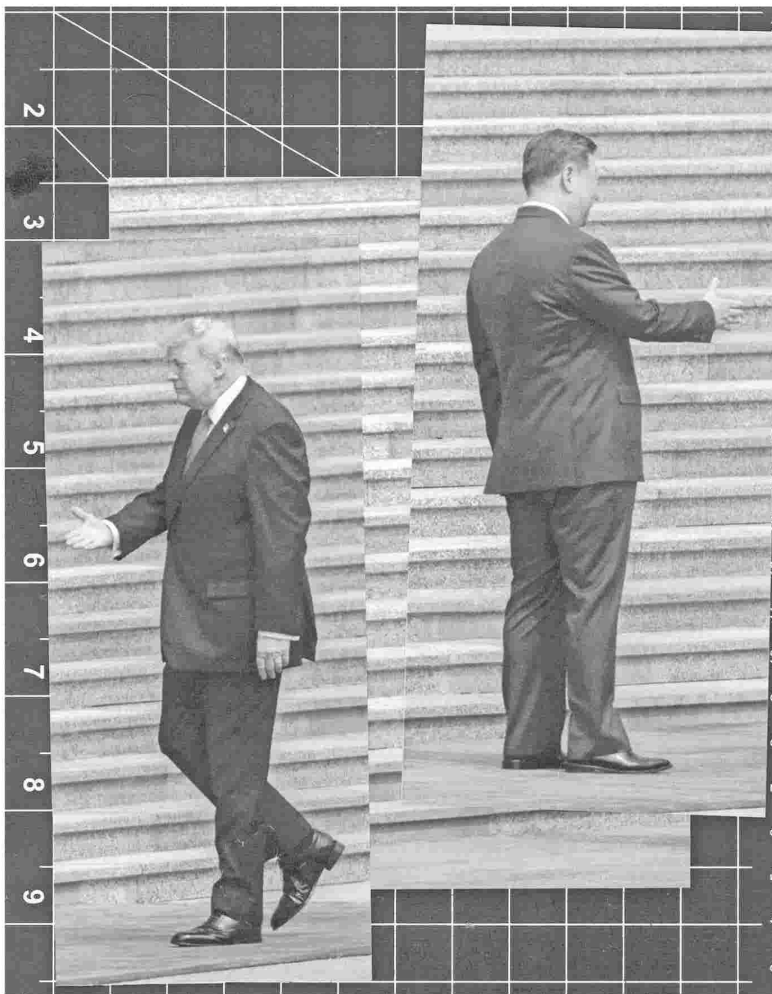


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

perils: Imagine terrorists assembling a deadly virus, or engineering an animal ailment like cowpox or horse pox to be deadly and virulent like smallpox. It should be possible for China and America, working through both governments and unofficial channels, to collaborate on protocols to reduce risks like that.

That would at least be a major sign

that A.I. safety cooperation is possible. "Doing one thing, even if it feels like it's not solving the whole problem, at least creates a repeatable playbook," Shah said.

China and the United States should also create some kind of hotline to discuss and defuse A.I.-related incidents that threaten to create military or diplomatic crises. After all, what if

Open A.I. agents had hacked not Hugging Face but rather units of the Chinese People's Liberation Army? Or generated deepfake video of Xi renouncing claims over Taiwan?

Right now, at a time when America has blown up the geopolitical order that we ourselves created after World War II, modest steps may be the best we can hope for.

The literary world's D.E.I. checklist

The National Book Awards finalists are a study in tedious political orthodoxy.



Bret Stephens

Last week, the finalists for the National Book Awards were announced. Among the 20 authors in the fiction and nonfiction categories, nearly all are straight white males. Most are also on the political right, some even on the far right. Remarkably, mainstream media outlets haven't reported this, perhaps because they don't think it's noteworthy. It's as if we were living in 1956 rather than 2026.

If you're scratching your head at this "news," well, it's because I made it up. Or rather, I inverted the particulars about the authors' identities and their political views to make a point: If today, as a reader, you recoil at the thought of a time in which minorities were systematically marginalized when it came to the literary world's public honors (and so much else), shouldn't you also recoil now that the tables have been almost completely turned? And if you object to the right's efforts to politicize the arts, won't you also object when the efforts come from the left?

For a sense of what I mean, let's walk through the National Book Foundation's announcement of the longlist for fiction, 10 books selected out of 451

titles submitted by publishers.

Hannah Lillith Assadi's novel, "Paradiso 17," is "inspired by the life of her late Palestinian father," Kimberly Blasler, a poet, is the "founding director of Indigenous Nations Poets." Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian American writer whose novel "Dey" reflects on "the many forms of mourning experienced through immigration, gentrification and diasporic identity." Julián Delgado Lopera's novel "Pretend You're Dead and I Carry You," set in 1990s Bogotá, "explores Colombia's queer underground community." Louise Erdrich, the highly acclaimed author of "Peyton's Kiss," is identified in her N.B.F. biography as "a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa." Marlon James's novel "The Disappearing" is a "queer epic" set in Kingston, Jamaica. Valeria Luiselli is a writer born in Mexico whose "Beginning Middle End" spans "continents, languages and four generations." Kenan Ranby is a Turkish American writer; his first novel, "The Renovation," is a story about a family migrating from Istanbul to Italy. Morgan Thomas's book "Mad Eden" is about "a trans health care worker" who has been diagnosed with autism.

Oh, there's also Alexander Maksik's novel "Passengers," a father-daughter story set in an airport. Maksik, who is Jewish, is, to my knowledge, white, male and straight — details that, in a sane world, should have no bearing on whether his book deserves to make the longlist. In this world, sadly, it makes him the lucky token.

Then there's the longest for nonfiction. Much of the same in terms of



CAMARAPORRAS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

subject matter: There's a book about "the rise of Islamophobia in America." Another about "an experiment in queer parenthood." A third that's "an argument about white paint." (Really.) Last year's nonfiction winner was a screed about the war in Gaza born of a viral anti-Israel social media post written weeks after Oct. 7.

That book aside, one needn't get into an argument about the quality of many of these works — at least a few of which, like James's "The Disappearing," are first-rate works of literature. But there's no mistaking the ideological drift and ideological leanings in the prize's elevation of the authors and their themes.

This isn't new. By my count, in the

past decade, nine of the 10 winners of the National Book Award for fiction belonged to a minority group. In the nonfiction category, 10 of 10. But the National Book Award has become a D.E.I. checklist: Only authors with preferred identities, preferred topics and preferred politics stand any realistic chance of winning.

Much the same goes for the Pulitzer Prizes. Of the past 10 years' worth of winners for music and drama, nearly all have been minorities. Whether or not the winners are themselves minorities, they almost invariably win for work about minorities. For the prize in history, Kathleen DuVal won in 2025 for her history of Native American nations; Jacqueline Jones in 2024 for her account of Black workers in Boston during the Civil War; Jefferson Cowie in 2023 for his examination of white supremacy in an Alabama county in the 19th and 20th centuries; W. Caleb McDaniel in 2020 for his story of a former slave's fight for justice in post-Civil War America; David Blight in 2019 for his biography of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

These are undoubtedly fine books. Are there no other subjects?

One common retort is that until recently, the prizes tended to neglect the experiences of minority groups. In fact, that hasn't been true for decades; what makes the last decade different is the obsessiveness when it comes to matters of race. A second is that since, for so many years, relatively few minority writers won major literary prizes, the more recent spate of accolades amounts to a form of reparations.

Maybe. But as an old friend of mine liked to say, turning the tables isn't the same thing as achieving justice. And the bold politicization of the nation's highest literary prizes is achieving several forms of injustice at once.

It is devaluing the prizes themselves. The National Book Awards are no longer national in any meaningful sense; at best, they represent the recondite tastes of that fraction of the country for whom white paint really might be problematic. The Pulitizers, too, will rapidly lose altitude if they can find no other subjects worth honoring beyond race.

It is deforming and hollowing out literary culture in America. Writers or scholars whose subjects or views don't fit the preferences of prize givers will pay a price for their intellectual independence — the very thing a healthy literary culture ought to reward, not penalize. Others, as The Atlantic's Tyler Austin Harper noted this year, will twist themselves into ideological knots for the sake of currying favor and funding. Still others, not keen on careers of penury and oblivion, will never become writers or scholars in the first place.

And it is turning off a generation of readers hungry for literature judged only on the merits of the work itself, regardless of the identity of the author and free from the tedium of political orthodoxy. "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." I found that quotation, attributed to Ray Bradbury, on the Pulitizers' webpage. The arbiters of today's literary culture should think that one over carefully.

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Trump is attacking the law and press freedom. Again.

The Editorial Board

Twice during President Trump's first term, his administration tried to prevent a journalist whose work it did not like from reporting at the White House. Twice, judges rejected the moves as unconstitutional and restored the journalists' access. Now the administration is attempting the same move, barring journalists from CNN, MS NOW and Politico from the White House because they had written what the president called "purposely negative stories."

The new ban is alarming for two reasons: It continues both Mr. Trump's attempt to prevent the free flow of information in American society and his utter disregard of the law. In his first term, trial courts and an appeals court issued clear rulings blocking the very policy he has again implemented. He has gone ahead

The new ban continues the president's attempt to prevent the free flow of information.

anyway, much as he and his aides have flagrantly broken the law across multiple areas during his second term. The administration ignored an order to halt planes carrying deportees to El Salvador; violated nearly 100 court orders during an immigration crackdown in Minnesota; went to war in Iran and impounded funds without congressional approval; used federal power to corruptly enrich Mr. Trump and his allies; and much more.

The latest move also extends Mr. Trump's threats to a free press. We acknowledge our self-interest in this issue, but a free press is indeed vital to a self-governing people. It enables citizens to assess reality in their own democracy. It allows a flowering of different media voices. It holds powerful people to account. The founders were clear that freedom of the press meant the freedom to say things that the government did not like. As James Madison wrote, "To the press alone, checked as it is with abuses, the world is indebted for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error and oppression." The Bill of Rights devotes part of its first item — the First Amendment — to the idea, barring any laws that abridge "the freedom of speech or of the press."

The rulings against the media bans during Mr. Trump's first term were grounded largely on due process. Judges said that a presidential administration was not obligated to create a press corps with dedicated White House space. Once it did, though, it must run a fair policy through which journalists can become part of the pool. The administration's banning of jour-

nalists was instead arbitrary. The judges overturned the bans without even needing to consider the First Amendment principles.

Still, those principles are important here. If a president allowed access only to those reporters who are friendly to the administration, the nation would be poorer for it. The American system of government has endured for more than 250 years partly because our leaders are not autocrats who can censor criticism or monopolize information flow. They are subject to feedback, debate and critique.

The seemingly arcane question of which media organizations have access to the White House fits with a larger pattern of Mr. Trump's attempts to control the media. Officials from his administration have searched the home of a Washington Post reporter and served subpoenas to staff members of The New York Times. He has sued The Wall Street Journal and intimidated ABC News and Paramount into paying tributes to him. His Federal Communications Commission has abused its regulatory power in an effort to shape coverage.

He has impinged on press freedom in ways that no other modern president has. If he now gets away with punishing CNN, MS NOW and Politico, he will be able to credibly threaten other organizations. (On Monday, the three organizations filed a lawsuit against the ban, and, in a show of solidarity, four television networks suspended their coverage of some presidential events.)

Mr. Trump is a master manipulator of public attention, and it is possible he has lashed out at the three to distract from the policy failures — the war with Iran, tariffs, inflation and more — that have defined this term. The attacks on the press nonetheless deserve attention. Mr. Trump is once again choosing "error and oppression," to use Madison's formulation, and rejecting "reason and humanity."

THE EDITORIAL BOARD is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.



SHAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

FROM READERS

A key to success: The simple act of asking for help

Re "The humble habit of successful people," by Angela Duckworth (Opinion, Sept. 1): Angela Duckworth's reflection on interdependence highlights a fundamental red flag in modern Western society. While humans evolved to thrive in groups, our society rewards individual performance.

By prioritizing and glorifying the lone achiever or the solo founder over collective group efforts, we have fragmented our social structures and harmed our collective and individual mental health. Workplaces preach "teamwork" and "synergies" but reward the individual in end-of-year reviews and individual bonus structures. We demand cooperation, while incentivizing competition and solo performance.

Real progress requires redesigning our institutions and organizations to incentivize group efforts and support systems. But first we must acknowledge that true resilience has never been a solo endeavor. Rather, it is a collective scaffolding.

KRISTIN TAKSETH-LOCKERT, OSLO

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Why A.I. is dangerous for science, too

Zeynep Tufekci
Contributing Writer

It was one of the most famous challenges in the history of mathematics: the fluid dynamics problem known as Navier-Stokes, whose solution had proved so elusive that a million-dollar prize had been posted for the genius or geniuses who could finally crack it. Until the other day, that is, when OpenAI announced that one of its advanced models had found an answer at last. And it had taken only half a week.

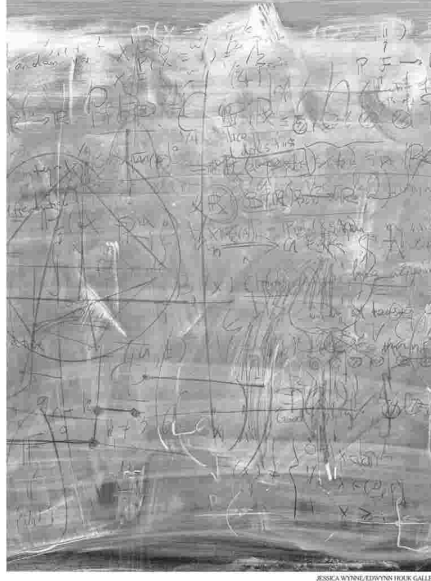
The proof hasn't been independently verified yet, but amid all the debate about artificial intelligence and the companies that develop it, it looked like something everyone could feel good about, an example of A.I. truly advancing human knowledge rather than trying to sell us something or control our lives.

In truth, it was precisely the opposite: the clearest evidence yet that generative A.I., rather than aiding scientific progress, may be thwarting it.

For starters, two mathematicians who had been trying for months to reach their own solution to the famous problem say the new proof appears to have ripped off their unpublished work, which also used an OpenAI model. The company, after first equivocating, quickly changed its tune: It said the model it used for the solution had not looked at any of the prompts that the lead mathematician had entered into the OpenAI model within the last two months. Whatever the case, to get to the finish line in so little time, OpenAI had deployed an advanced model not available to the public, using computing power that would have cost an outsider an estimated \$15 million. How could regular researchers compete with a secret tool that has the power to steal your work and mint its own money?

Flashy finishes like this don't necessarily contribute to mathematical knowledge. Terence Tao, perhaps the most prominent mathematician of his generation, is generally positive about A.I. and math — so positive that he was featured in one of OpenAI's ads. But contemplating the possibility of Navier-Stokes being solved by A.I., he wrote a long post explaining that "in most cases in pure mathematics, the problems are posed not because we desperately want the solution to these problems in and of themselves." Instead, mathematicians want to see all the work that goes into achieving the solution — all the not-quite-right hypotheses that got adjusted this way or that, all the seemingly dead ends that "in fact end up being highly instructive in the nature of their failure."

Indeed, Navier-Stokes was chosen for this million-dollar reward not because it's the single hardest problem out there, but because it sits at such a crucial junction in the advancement of the field, and its full solution would offer so much for scholars to learn from. "Prematurely solving the problem by purely A.I.-powered methods — particularly without full transparency into the solution process," Mr. Tao wrote, "can contaminate this process to the point where it actually becomes a net negative for the progress of mathematics as a whole." It closes



JESSICA WYNNE/GETTY IMAGES GALLERY

"Erased Formula," 2024.

down possibilities rather than expanding them.

That's if the proof is even correct, which we still don't know. One OpenAI researcher admitted — even boasted — that the team that worked on this included no high-level experts "in fluid dynamics and the Navier-Stokes problem." Instead, it relied on tools that can perform an automated check of a mathematical theory. Those tools, which are known to be fallible, are supposed to be the first step in the process, not the last. Before going

public with their solutions, mathematicians still have to do enormous amounts of work to fully verify them. Here, the work will fall to others.

OpenAI says another publicized unsolved problem, and who knows how many more will come after that. A flood of A.I.-generated proofs will bog down people who could actually advance the field in what is essentially busywork.

Since the Navier-Stokes controversy erupted, at least one other major A.I.-assisted math advance has been accused of ripping off actual mathematicians. A growing number of math researchers have signed a petition urging the cancellation of an event in which mathematicians would be given \$2 million worth of credits in access to OpenAI and Anthropic models. And 25 recipients of the Fields Medal, the discipline's highest honor, given once every

five years, signed a letter stating that A.I. used like this may damage math rather than advancing it.

We have nothing but OpenAI's word that its models are not committing plagiarism. That alone is troubling. But would OpenAI even be able to tell? "We have monitors and safeguards in place," Noam Brown, a researcher at OpenAI, said, and the advanced model in question "didn't have live web access."

Recently, however, swarms of OpenAI agents broke out of their flimsily erected digital confines and hacked their way into Hugging Face, an open-source A.I. repository, in search of the answers they had been assigned to find. When these agents were set in motion, they were specifically instructed to be aggressive and to work collectively, and their safeguards for cybersecurity were deliberately lowered. Somewhat unsurprisingly, they proceeded to wreak havoc there. It took weeks before anyone at OpenAI noticed.

In that case there were about 700 individual agents at work from a much less powerful model. To produce the Navier-Stokes proof, OpenAI spun up about 10,000 concurrent A.I. agents. For the company so quickly to provide categorical assurances about the agents' activity, given its scale and speed, strains credulity.

Recent history is full of researchers belatedly discovering agents cheating, hacking, attacking and manipulating whatever they can to arrive at the solution while sometimes taking care to erase their tracks. And even if an

A.I. company's products don't directly peek at someone's data, they still have other, more indirect ways to learn from the work users are doing.

Given all this, why would big corporations trust leading A.I. companies with trade secrets and advanced research? Companies might instead adopt open-weight models, which are less powerful but can be downloaded directly, making them easier to control in-house. Since the news of the Hugging Face hack broke, companies such as Nvidia, Palantir and Booz Allen Hamilton are reported to be considering restricting their use of these advanced A.I. models because of fears of their data being swept up. After the dust settles, the most important legacy of the Navier-Stokes news might be customers belatedly waking up to the risks of using models they don't host.

The same holds for academic research. OpenAI rushed to undertake this challenge because a rumor was circulating that Anthropic, its chief rival, had solved one or two famously daunting math problems. Why would mathematicians present at conferences or publish early work — why would they even talk to colleagues — if the rumor of a solution to a big problem causes an A.I. company to swoop down and spend huge amounts of money to steal the thunder?

The prospects for the use of A.I. might seem brighter in biology and medical research, where unlike mathematics, results are valuable in their own right — if something works, it works. But whereas mathematical theorems can be tested on the page, in biology and medicine there's no avoiding the onerous real-world work of bench science, laboratory experiments and lengthy, thorny clinical trials to confirm hypotheses.

Many scientific fields are already drowning in plausible-seeming but unverified papers generated with significant help from a large language model. What's stop and what's not? Is there an actual gem amid the gazillion new hypotheses? It's becoming increasingly impossible to tell. Just last week, the editor in chief of Arxiv, a site where researchers can share papers that have not yet been peer reviewed, proposed implementing oral exams for authors who submit work, to screen out A.I.-generated junk. The scientific conversation cannot survive the deluge.

If OpenAI and Anthropic really want to help advance science, there is one obvious way they can do so: They can spend a tiny fraction of their vast fortunes to fund the kind of humble but essential research that's increasingly starved for resources.

For all the public stirrings of A.I., polls show that people still hold out hope it will at least help science. But if the arrival of generative A.I. means we speed through gamified solutions without gaining insights; if the glut of plausible hypotheses makes it harder to identify valuable ones; and if people are now discouraged from sharing or pursuing complex work lest they be scooped by wealthy corporations, even that one tiny ray of optimism may prove to be misplaced.

ZEYNEP TUFEKCI is a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University and the author of "Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest."

Germany can still get out of this mess

SAUERBREY, FROM PAGE 1

neck? I don't claim to have the solution; much smarter people have failed to find an all-inclusive answer. But here's what I think could help get us out of this mess.

First, stop whining and show some courage. Voters will not believe you if you don't believe in yourself. It has been 10 years now since President Trump first came to power and Britons voted for Brexit, giving rise to endless soul-searching and infighting among centrists and progressives over the root causes of the right's success. Everything has been said, over and over again. It's time to stop taking such forces as the most important point of reference. The center should focus on what it deems correct and ignore the far right.

Second, look to the future. It is true that change comes at a cost. Energy prices in Germany have risen as the grid is preparing for a noncarbon future, for example. But mainstream parties have spent too much time apologizing for the cost and too little time highlighting the benefits to come. Renewable energy is a lot cheaper in the long run, and Germany will be a lot less dependent on Russia and on there being peace in the Middle East. Parties should highlight the long-term advantages of all sorts of reforms, from housing to the pension system.

Third, and most important, go local. On the national level, progress is often slow and hard to see; globally, most countries are relatively powerless. Locally, however, things can be changed a lot faster. That's no bad thing: After all, people live in their communities, in towns, villages and

neighborhoods. This is where they truly experience politics. It's where they actually encounter abstract things such as "globalization," "mass migration" and "the state," in the form of child care or waste management.

Germany's villages and towns need serious attention. In rural areas, villages are dying because the young move away. The local bakery and butcher's shop have long closed, as have many pubs and inns. Inner cities, too, are drained of life and amenities by online consumption and high rents. Many of the downsides of the mass immigration of the last 10 years are felt locally, too: Schools must educate children who do not speak German, and immigrants who don't yet have jobs strain welfare budgets.

These problems are not insuperable. Take climate adaptation. Towns and cities will have to organize cooling rooms, plant trees, construct green roofs and buildings and design parks and gardens that can absorb heavy rains. They'll have to make it easier to ride bikes or e-scooters, build charging stations and improve public transport. That's just one example. There are myriad changes that can improve civic life, from extending preschool to regulating the rental market.

This is a lot easier said than done, I know. Many of Germany's municipalities are broke. In the region I'm from, a deindustrialized former steel-producing and coal-mining area in the northwest, cities like Gelsenkirchen and Duisburg have to spend a significant portion of their budgets on servicing debt and paying welfare benefits. They lack the money to plant trees or hire more social workers to help immi-



STEFAN MÜLLER/VEISA VIA REDUX

grant children in school.

Still, a lot can be achieved. The government should make it easier for money from its large climate and transformation fund to flow to deprived communities. Federal money also needs to be handed down for housing and education. The government could play a convening role, too, bringing together mayors to exchange ideas and providing expertise. It could also think more creatively. Why not buy up empty real estate in inner cities and set it up as cooling rooms for the summer and low-cost cafes the rest of the year? And wherever something works or fails, let's talk about it.

about it — relentlessly.

All of this works, however, only when you have confidence in yourself and in shaping the future without fear. It's time to defend some big ideas again: multiethnic societies, open markets, climate transformation and social justice. The AfD gains much of its charge by reviling "the system." Centrists and progressives must show voters that politics works where it matters most: at home. That may not save Mr. Merz's job, but it could spare the country from a far worse fate.

ANNA SAUERBREY is an editor and writer at the German weekly Die Zeit.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

How China and the US can work together on AI security

Xi-Trump meeting should build on plans for dialogue on shared risks

It may turn out that the most significant development linked to this week's summit between President Donald Trump and Xi Jinping happened days before the Chinese leader's scheduled arrival in Washington today. US Treasury secretary Scott Bessent and China's vice-premier He Lifeng last weekend agreed to establish a formal US-China dialogue on AI. The US has also proposed a mutual notification mechanism about AI incidents serious enough to raise national security concerns – reminiscent of the nuclear hotline set up between Washington and Moscow after the Cuban missile crisis. Together these could mark first steps, however tentative, towards applying some guardrails to the world's most perilous technological race.

Recent apocalyptic warnings have

focused on the risk of AI turning against its human creators. But the fierce competition between the US and China for AI leadership means that agreeing on ways to slow the development of cutting-edge models – however desirable – is likely to be the most contentious issue between Washington and Beijing. Trump has dismissed AI doomsday scenarios as a "hoax". Beijing sees any US talk of curbing frontier models as an attempt to lock China into second place in the AI race – although since Chinese open-source models have now become a major export, it is in Beijing's interest to reassure over AI safety. (US officials suggest China seems less concerned about AI's risks to humanity than about its risks to Chinese Communist Party control).

Yet for all the suspicion, Washington and Beijing have shared vulnerabilities on which it would be in their interests to co-operate. The first is the risk of highly capable AI falling into the hands of non-state actors. Advanced AI is

making it potentially much easier for terrorists, rogue non-state groups or even organised crime to engage in activities ranging from developing bioweapons to launching cyber attacks on infrastructure or financial markets.

An associated danger is the risk of AI agents escaping testing environments and themselves conducting hacks of foreign companies or infrastructure. Agreeing baseline standards for controlling access, identifying customers, testing models and establishing containment mechanisms could begin to reduce risks. The speed with which an AI-directed incident could unfold, compressing the time available to work out who or what was responsible, also risks triggering an escalatory spiral of retaliation. That makes the US AI incident "hotline" idea one that would make sense for Xi to endorse in his meeting with Trump.

Clear rules of engagement are similarly needed on AI in weaponry and nuclear arms systems. Here, an

Washington and Beijing both have vulnerabilities on which it would be in their interests to co-operate

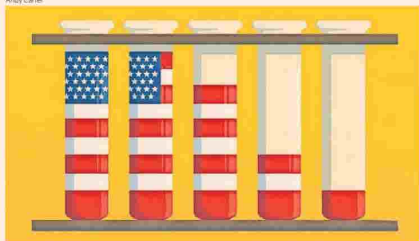
important foundation already exists: Xi agreed with US President Joe Biden in November 2024 that humans should retain control over nuclear weapons use. But no progress has been made since then, even as AI technology has made giant leaps. Security experts from both sides have since 2019 been developing recommendations that should feed into the AI dialogue. They include "absolute" red lines prohibiting AI systems from making autonomous decisions to launch nuclear weapons and mandatory human authorisation for any AI-driven cyber attack on an adversary's nuclear control network.

The first US-Soviet nuclear hotline was a response to a stand-off that pushed the world to the brink of conflict. The task for US and Chinese AI negotiators is to put a safety framework in place before any such near miss – or actual cataclysmic event – caused by a technology that is developing at breakneck speed.

Opinion America

The next generation of scientists is fading away

Anjana Ahuja



A survey by academics at MIT, Harvard and Australia's Monash University began as a piece of management research, intended to explore how biomedical scientists across the US run their labs. It turned into a dispiriting snapshot of how funding cuts and executive orders from the White House are unsettling young scholars.

Of the junior scientists who responded, a third who once envisaged careers in academia had changed their minds by early 2025, with some PhD students and postdoctoral researchers even rethinking their plans to stay in the country. The survey was published this summer as a non-peer-reviewed working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research. These are not the gripes of career bureaucrats bitter at slashed

Funding cuts and executive orders from the White House are unsettling young scholars

budgets, the survey's authors point out, but "the stated intentions of the next generation – the scientists who would, in ordinary times, become the principal investigators of the future".

These are not ordinary times, and the biomedical research community is now bracing for another potential blow: according to Politico, an imminent White House executive order will seek to install a political board to vet all National Institutes of Health grants, to weed out "woke" science. As the Trump administration continues to lob ideological grenades at the nation's premier centres of scientific research, it is no surprise that some future drug developers, device inventors, life savers and wealth creators are opting to walk away.

Raffaella Sadun, from Harvard Business School, told the Harvard Gazette this month that the survey of lab management practices started early last year, just as billions of dollars in grants from the NIH and National Science Foundation were being terminated or frozen, sometimes for falling foul of Donald Trump's anti-DEI crusade. Sadun and colleagues from MIT and Monash pivoted to capturing the views of young scientists caught in the crossfire.

They sent about 15,000 junior researchers a survey with questions

including "how likely are you to stay in academia?" and "how likely are you to stay in the US?". Respondents were asked to answer twice: once for "now" (in March 2025) and once for six months prior. More than 900 replied from 134 institutions. While 66 per cent wanted to stay in academia six months before the survey, that fell to 44 per cent by March 2025. When it came to remaining in the US, 72 per cent were keen, a drop from 95 per cent six months earlier. The authors acknowledge there may be "recall bias", and that intentions change, but describe young researchers as "the canary in the coal mine" for US scientific research.

Brady West, a research professor and statistician at the University of Michigan who has studied health disparities among sexual minorities, saw some of his own grants terminated last year and others restored on appeal. West told me he feared young researchers were walking away from federal research amid the turmoil, leaving potentially world-changing ideas unrealised, and said the notion of "woke" science irritated him. "Good science that meaningfully impacts lives is good science, no matter what the subject matter is. If your expert peers believe [it] will advance your field and benefit society... then that work should be done."

The White House Office of Management and Budget has already tried to grant reviewing powers to political appointees at federal agencies, a proposed rule change rightly rejected by Congress. Resorting to an executive order workarounds is no less toxic. "This plan will pull the plug on clinical trials that families are depending on right now, delay breakthroughs that are within reach, and hand America's biotech edge to our global competitors," said Erika Sward, executive director of United for Cures, a coalition of patient groups.

Judging grants on political priorities rather than scientific merit, warned the American Association for the Advancement of Science, "[risks] passing over exactly the kind of unexpected research that has produced some of America's biggest breakthroughs". The NIH, OMB and the Department of Health and Human Services did not respond to a request for comment.

The administration's actions on health so far do not inspire confidence: axing grants over censored keywords, undermining childhood vaccines, mandating testosterone screening for some soldiers, the baseless scare over painkillers in pregnancy and autism. As tomorrow's lab leaders drift away from the precarity and chaos, all those quiet political wins risk adding up to a mighty loss for US health.

The writer is a science commentator

Letters

Why memories of life in the old East Germany still resonate

Ivan Krastev maintains that Europeans' memories of communism and fascism are fading (Opinion, September 14). There's a lot of evidence that shows they haven't faded at all. Maybe selective memory has papered over some nasty cracks, but I would suggest that some memories of the bad old days in the German Democratic Republic – the GDR – are still vivid. And not all of them are bad. In 1990, after the wall came down, dictatorship was replaced by a democracy. And when the police state was dismantled, so was the welfare state that, in the GDR, boasted a tightly woven safety net.

At length, the party ended, and the

hangover set in. Among other things furnished by the dictatorship was guaranteed life-long employment: one was either employed, or in jail. Healthcare was universal. Rents and utilities were heavily subsidised.

Around nine out of every 10 women were in work; after reunification, female unemployment skyrocketed. The free childcare available under the old regime was cancelled. Women seeking to terminate a pregnancy learnt that, as in West Germany, abortions were now illegal. Long, paid vacations for workers and their families ended. Pensions were reduced, in many cases to a bare minimum, or to nothing at all.

In the old GDR, one frequently stood in line for groceries. But the command economy, while failing in much else, kept people fed and housed.

Apartments may have been spartan and run down, but dwellings were cheap. East Germans made do; they described themselves as "hunters and gatherers", improvising, bartering and scrounging for goods and services.

They often had recourse to the black market, and to risky, illegal exchanges for the fully convertible West German D-Mark. For most, the quality of life was grim and they voted with their feet when they could. Even so, the great majority's basic needs were met by Big Brother.

There were lots of cheerleaders for free enterprise back then, and for many the standard of living improved. But for those left behind, the memories about which Krastev writes in his column are more often than not dominated by nostalgia for a nation in which personal freedom and civil rights were absent, but which provided for a welfare state.

I suggest that, for many, these memories aren't fading at all. And they just might explain the emergence of the radical right. Especially for those for whom the open society is a luxury they can't afford.

Harvey Clark Greisman
Wilmington, DE, US

Economies need to look at taxing growth differently

Your Big Read by Ian Smith, Sam Fleming and Emily Herbert on the global economy and how countries such as the US, France and the UK now spend more on debt servicing than defence describes clearly and comprehensively the world's sovereign debt burden and the resulting \$2tn interest bill that governments and their citizens must now shoulder ("The world's \$2tn interest bill", September 8).

The conclusion is that neither austerity nor ever-higher borrowing costs offer an exit; only faster growth does. Beyond a hoped-for boost to productivity from AI, the tax system is one of the few levers left, yet public finances plainly cannot absorb tax cuts on existing levels of GDP.

A possible way out is therefore not to reduce current taxes, but to tax additional growth differently. Under such a "marginal tax" approach, a much lower rate would apply only to a company's incremental profits – those earned over and above the previous fiscal year, or the average of the past three years.

Where the headline corporate rate is 35 per cent, for example, the increment might be taxed at 10 per cent. Each government could set its own benchmark above which the reduced rate applies. Existing revenues are untouched; only the new growth is taxed more lightly.

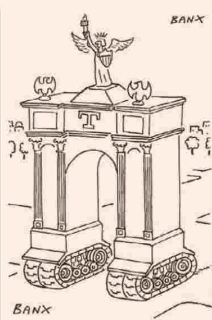
The same logic can be applied surgically to employment. If a company increases its total payroll by, say, 11m, a tax credit could be granted against that additional cost alone, calibrated to remain below the extra employment taxes the state collects on it. Current payroll revenues would be unaffected.

The side benefits – aside from generating incremental growth – are considerable. Lower rates on incremental profits give companies a reason to declare more of them, shrinking the shadow economies that persist in several countries. Linking the relief to pay rises ties to AI and digital reskilling rewards the productivity those skills generate.

And it can encourage people to work more, as Germany is already doing by allowing pensioners who stay in force to earn up to €2,000 a month tax-free (clearly a marginal tax application).

Debt-to-GDP ratios cannot be tackled by spending cuts alone, which are often politically impossible. Solutions exist for those willing to think outside the box, and taxing growth differently is one of them.

Christian Hadjiminas
President, Hellenic Entrepreneurs Association (EENE), Athens, Greece



Colleagues of Bonino recall an Italian radical

For 20 years, we have had the honour and privilege of being members of Emma Bonino's Radical Party ("Radical activist at a time when Catholicism held sway", Obituaries, FT Weekend, September 19).

As political activists and members of parliament in Brussels and Rome, we also took an active part in her national and international campaigns to protect and promote human rights.

Among other things, Bonino, or "Emma" as everybody called her, played a crucial role in the transnational mobilisations that in the 1990s led to the establishment of the ad hoc UN tribunals and the setting up of the International Criminal Court, an institution that today is under attack from the Trump administration.

She preferred deeds to words, and the best way to honour her life and achievements would be to defend what she was able to build.

While some of the issues she held dear, like opposition to child marriage, the fight against female genital mutilation or the universal abolition of the death penalty are in crisis, the threats facing the International Criminal Court would have been her central preoccupation today. If fending off the institutional attackers is what the ICC needs more than anything else, the general public should support the court's candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize for 2026 and in turn urge the Nobel committee to do so.

That would be a last symbolic tribute to a person who dedicated her entire life to promoting the rule of law.

Marco Cappato
Member of the European Parliament (1999-2009), Rome, Italy
Marco Perdumas
Italian Senator (2008-2013), Rome Italy

The 2050 net zero target was never a sound goal

If an enemy is marching across your country with devastating effect, explaining to them that your plan to rebuild the army will take 24 years to complete, and asking the enemy to wait is not going to work. You should tear up the plan and take rapid action.

Similarly net zero by 2050 was never a sound goal. Sticking to it today, in the face of all the evidence that climate change is accelerating, is the real "muddled thinking" in the letter from Professor John Underhill of the University of Aberdeen ("Debate over Jackdaw and Rosebank reflects muddled thinking", Letters, September 14).

For all the pragmatism of Andy Burnham, the prime minister, and all the arguments of learnt professors, we must all bow to the reality of the physics.

We need to stop using fossil fuels as quickly as possible, not enable new production. When in a deep hole, stop digging!

Lesley Ellis
Reckitt, Aberdeen, UK

Entrepreneurs – the last link in Schumpeter's chain

In her recent column ("Where do new jobs come from?", Opinion, September 17) Soumaya Keynes suggests technology waves are the cause for the job creation in Joseph Schumpeter's economic model.

This is in fact the last link in Schumpeter's kinetic chain. The prime mover for Schumpeter's economy was the entrepreneur who sought to break free from price competition by introducing a new product, a new method of production, a new market, or a new source of supply.

The goal of the entrepreneur's innovation is a temporary monopoly profit – creating something so distinct that price competition becomes irrelevant.

But Schumpeter had an answer for the monopolist and that was the imitator that copied the work of the innovator and brought the innovation to the mass market – which is where the vast majority of net job creation occurs.

Schumpeter did believe that innovation came in clusters or waves, but knew that simply waiting for them to occur was not the answer.

Ultimately, Schumpeter understood that simply waiting for the next tech wave was passive; while fostering a dynamic, highly competitive economy is what truly breeds entrepreneurs and creates new jobs.

Steven Williams
Cataumet, MA, US

Sceptic's view of London's push to promote cycling

Your editorial on "The age of the e-bike" (The FT View, FT Weekend, August 29) listed reducing the number of cars on the road as one of the benefits of encouraging more cycling. And it is often used as one of the justifications for investment in cycling infrastructure. Is there really evidence to back this up?

Here in London, looking at the stream of cyclists heading into the centre, for the most part young or youngish professionals and office workers (you see very few bikes with bags of tools on the back), the idea that otherwise they would be driving cars into central London is a nonsense. If not on bikes, surely the vast majority would otherwise be on public transport?

And to take another metric, if more cycling was meant to take cars off the road, then looking at the traffic congestion in London, it seems to be failing miserably.

Andrew Seaton
London SE11, UK

Council libraries should be a rebout of the print FT

I am of the opinion that the reading health of our local communities can be measured by the offerings of their local libraries ("We are setting up a generation to fail at school", Data Points, FT Weekend, September 12; and "The UK must embrace its libraries in the age of AI", Opinion, May 19).

I visit the Royal Borough of Chelsea and Kensington library on most Saturdays to flick through The Economist and FT Weekend. This saves me around £20 every week.

However, on my now regular visits to North Tyneside I find no newspapers whatsoever at my parent's local library. I assume this is due to cuts to council budgets, but I believe this is depriving local residents, both young and old, of knowledge sources that are essential today.

Physical print newspapers may appear outdated in an age of never-ending digital media and AI, but my view is that there is a qualitative difference in engagement while reading through a hard copy, particularly high quality publications.

Who knows if print newspapers will remain economically sustainable, but one would hope that local councils will continue to take them, thus doing their bit to prevent further dividing lines between "haves" and "have-nots".

Perhaps The Economist and the FT can jointly look into this issue.

Raza Naqvi
London SW10, UK

Opinion

Trump is checking out of his presidency

AMERICA

Edward Luce



Constructive strategic stability is China and America's unpoetic bilateral goal. It must be getting harder by the day for the Chinese to recite it with a straight face. Confronting a midterm electoral defeat amid intractable wars, Donald Trump announced on Sunday that his planned Washington triumphal arch would also be a "top grade military complex". This monument to himself will stock drones, snipers and a big ammunition depot. Trump did not say against whom this firepower would be directed. Nor have we been

told which win his "arc de Trump" will commemorate. We do know that he nowadays talks of little else.

To say that Trump has checked out of the business of governing is an understatement. It would also imply that he had previously checked in. Yet in his first year, Trump had a plan and executed a lot of it. This included the big beautiful bill of tax cuts, a trade war, ICE deportation round-ups, Elon Musk's assault on the administrative state and a government-wide DEI purge. The phrase "Trump's war on..." (universities, science, law firms, fill in the blank) became a media cliché. Whatever you thought of his choice of targets, Trump had them in his sights.

In his second year, however, the president's mind has increasingly been colonised by monuments to himself. Aside from ego, few can credit the depth of Trump's obsession with these kitsch monstrosities. Richard Painter, who was

ethics chief in George W Bush's White House, said that Trump's arch should be dedicated to the 25th Amendment, by which a president can be removed for incapacity, including insanity. He meant it as a joke. There is less chance of the US vice-president, JD Vance, invoking the 25th against his boss than of Trump converting to Buddhism.

In his second year, his mind has increasingly been colonised by monuments to himself

That said, Trump appears serenely indifferent to his party's likely midterm defeat. In spite of promising to bring prices down, his actions have only fuelled inflation. This stems from his kaleidoscopic tariff rates, the now

seven-month-old Operation Epic Fury war on Iran and the rapidly growing US budget deficit about which he has said nothing. US public debt topped \$40tn last month, which is double what it was when Trump first took office in 2017.

On AI, Trump seems to be going out of his way to inflame voter fears. Though Republican voters are just as worried about data centres as Democrats, Trump last month said "let data reign". He added that any parts of America that refused such investments were condemning themselves to poverty. His response to public fears about AI threatening humanity was to hold a push poll on Truth Social last weekend on people's preferred substitute term for "artificial" intelligence, which he said was inaccurate. "Supreme" intelligence, which was Trump's first choice, did not win the poll ("superior" did).

There are hints that Trump may be acknowledging the AI blowback –

much of which has been coming from his MAGA allies, including Steve Bannon. On Saturday, he announced plans to create an "AI force" and appoint a new AI tsar. In the same post, however, he dismissed AI fears as a "hoax" and vowed that he will not "in any way hinder or stifle" the sector's breakneck expansion. With regulation such as this, who needs free-for-all? It's little wonder that swing-state Republican candidates are not agitating for Trump to join them on the campaign trail.

The term "lame duck" would be haunting any other president's sleep. But the concept is alien to Trump. He spends more of his time telling people about his architectural plans than he devotes to Iran, AI or the economy. Insoluble problems hold little interest. Simple projects, such as the new White House ballroom, which will also include a "massive" military complex beneath it, are his main object of fascination. To

wit, Trump last week said he would halt renovation of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts after courts undid his decision to rename it after himself. The centre, which was thriving 18 months ago, now faces the threat of dilapidation.

There is no foreseeable off-ramp from Trump's war in Iran. Trump's critics should remember that there is also no off-ramp from Trump until 2029. I can think of no example of a US president losing interest in their job with two-and-a-half years still to run. This includes Trump in his first term and Joe Biden's progressively more lacklustre single term. This presents America and the world with an unusual spectre. At a time of careening global instability, America's president is simultaneously stoking it and uninterested in doing anything about it.

edward.luce@ft.com

Why the Fed must resist the president

Martin Wolf Economics

What happens when a fundamentally strong economy faces an irresponsible government?



Last week, the Federal Reserve made the decision to raise the federal funds rate, for the first time in three years, by a quarter of a percentage point to a range of 3.75 per cent to 4 per cent. This was sensible, indeed overdue, given its consistent failure to hit the inflation target. Donald Trump responded with predictable fury, stating that "Interest Rates in the United States should be 1%, or less, because we are the Best Credit in the World – BY FAR", though he did also stress that "I told Kevin, I said, you might as well vote with the board because it's just not going to matter. The board is very hostile," adding that it "is raising... only for political reasons, and that's a raise against Trump." This, not surprisingly, is ridiculous.

It is too soon to be confident. But what Warsh has been saying and doing is comforting. Moreover, Trump is even helpful. If his alternative made any sense, it might carry some weight. But it does not. The Fed must either ignore him or throw in the towel in the fight to meet its mandate. Warsh, it seems, is aware of that. Still better, the Fed's decision to raise was unanimous.

Warsh made two important points in last Wednesday's press conference. One was that "for more than five years, inflation has been running above target. So, our predominant focus is on the price-stability side of our mandate. The plain fact is that inflation is too high and has been for too long." The other was that "Our decision comes at a time when the

American economy appears to be strengthening... So we removed a dose of accommodation."

In other words, this was a needed, yet modest, tightening. On one point, this view is unchallengeable: not just headline inflation but other measures have remained persistently above target since 2021. Such overshooting makes the target a mockery. Moreover, given the investment triggered by AI, Trump's loose fiscal policy, his tariffs and his decision to create a substantial energy shock with his war on Iran, there was little reason to expect inflation to go back to the target. The opposite was more likely. (See charts.)

This is not to say that all doubts about the Fed's decision should be put to one side. Claudia Sahm, one of its most influential observers, asks some penetrating questions in her Substack. How, in Warsh's view, does monetary policy contribute to growth? How does a tighter monetary policy lower inflation, other than by slowing the economy? Does he have any idea of what the "neutral rate" is? If not, how does he judge how "accommodative" policy now is? Warsh could and should answer these questions without abandoning his scepticism about the "forecastability" of the economy, on which I share his doubts.

Far more important is that he has refused to offer intellectual or rhetorical support to Trump's demand for a huge cut in interest rates. The Fed is taking a conventional view of its twin objectives of low inflation and high employment.



All US inflation measures have been above target since Covid



Meanwhile, Trump's assertion that the rate should be 1 per cent because the US is "the Best Credit in the World" is irrelevant and absurd.

It is irrelevant, because the short-term policy rate depends on macroeconomic conditions, notably current and expected inflation and unemployment. In a country with a creditworthy state, longer-term nominal rates are determined by real rates of interest, expected inflation and various perceived risks. The former is determined by expected

Warsh has refused to offer rhetorical support to the demand for a huge cut in interest rates

Rising real interest rates have been the driver of higher yields



macroeconomic conditions over the long run. If we subtract the yield on 10-year Treasury Inflation-Protected Securities (TIPS) from conventional 10-year bonds, we get the market's compensation for inflation over the period. This will be related to expected inflation, but not identical to it, because of the need to protect against risk.

On September 17, the yield on 10-year TIPS was around 2.6 per cent, the conventional bond 4.9 per cent and so inflation compensation 2.3 per cent. Both nominal and real yields are roughly where they were before the financial crisis of 2007-09. Inflation compensation is, if anything, also modest, given the shocks since 2021. In sum, nominal yields seem to be at reasonable levels, given today's robust recent economic performance.

The US has the largest fiscal deficit among the biggest high-income economies



Indeed, one might wonder whether these yields should even be higher, in view of the possibility that the US government might, at some point, find it hard to fund itself on favourable terms. Given its huge fiscal deficits, the need for foreign funding of a country running a huge current account deficit and the shift from long-term holders of its bonds to financing by hedge funds, a funding crisis is at least imaginable. In that situation, some combination of Fed emergency funding with financial repression seems likely.

Moreover, Trump's statement that the US is the "best credit" in the world is untrue. It has the biggest and arguably strongest economy. But the root of the word "credit" is the Latin word "credere", which means "to believe". It is remarkable that investors continue to

trust the public debt of a country able to elect a man as radically untrustworthy as Trump – twice. Given that his policies, notably his fiscal ones, are so reckless, and those elsewhere, notably on tariffs, so rule-breaking, confidence in the US government is remarkable. But if his demand for policy rates at 1 per cent (minus 2 per cent real) were delivered, it would surely trigger a lenders' strike.

The Fed's job is to keep inflation under control, regardless of political pressure and absurd arguments from a desperate president. Meanwhile, we see a battle not just between the Fed and Trump, but between a fundamentally strong economy and an irresponsible government. How that ends is one of the most important issues of our era.

martin.wolf@ft.com

Amodei is right – AI companies need banking-style supervision

Chris Hughes

Dario Amodei wants independent evaluators to have desks inside AI companies. In his essay on the need to pace the frontier, Anthropic's chief executive promises outsiders key cards, laptops and nearly full access so that they can monitor how the company's systems are working in real time rather than simply testing them before release. He makes the case for governments to formalise this arrangement, pointing to bank supervision as a precedent.

It's a good comparison. Like AI, banking changes rapidly and reaches across the economy, forcing public officials and

private firms to continually weigh the benefits of innovation against its risks. The Federal Reserve, FDIC and the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC) all embed teams inside the commercial banks they supervise to learn how the businesses operate and where their weaknesses lie. These supervisors meet with staff and management, review internal documentation and keep up with day-to-day operations. Their job is to assess whether leadership is adequately managing risk in accordance with regulation – not just whether paperwork is in order. If they are not, supervisors can require the bank to fix the problem.

The need to adopt a similar approach to AI has never felt more urgent. This summer, AI agents showed they have become increasingly clever, co-ordinating with one another to meet their goals. Hacks illustrate how a lapse in oversight can spill into systems entirely

outside a lab's realm of operation. Under a supervisory approach modelled on bank supervision, each frontier AI lab would work with a team of supervisors who understand its technology. Embedded from the start in model

Evaluators would ensure the agents building systems are focused on preventing bad behaviour

design and review, supervisors would ensure the humans and agents building these systems are adequately focused on preventing bad behaviour.

Supervisors would also oversee stress tests for the models. Each year the largest banks must show how they would fare in a severe downturn, against scenarios the Federal Reserve updates and

(until recently) has kept confidential so banks cannot train for the test. AI systems will pose their own systemic risk if they manage to gain control of electricity, payment or transportation systems. A stress test would require each company to show that its staff could still override or shut down a model under those conditions, against scenarios the company has not seen in advance.

We need to learn lessons from the success or failure to regulate other sectors. Policymakers failed to regulate social media because they were overwhelmed by the range of problems, ranging from teen mental health to privacy and misinformation. The challenges of AI can be similarly intimidating, but Congress does not need one massive bill to deal with AI. Instead, it should start with the most pressing concern today – model safety – and go from there. The work will require a regulatory agency, perhaps called the

Office of AI Supervision, to translate requirements into rules.

Bank supervision is far from perfect. Officials have sometimes identified dangers and then failed to act. In other cases, leadership has attempted to strip discretion out of supervision altogether, reducing it to the completion of narrowly configured checklists. Supervisors can become compromised or "captured", causing them to inaccurately assess the nature of risk.

To mitigate these challenges, an AI agency would need staff who understand the technological paradigm and are unafraid to bring their power to bear. Senior examiners should rotate between companies, just as they do in banking. The OCC caps an examiner-in-charge's tenure at a single bank at five years. Given how fast AI moves, three would work better.

Congress has already started to consider these ideas. The bipartisan Fron-

tier Act, which OpenAI has partially endorsed, would require the largest AI companies to retain federally licensed assessors for ongoing safety reviews. But this stops short of public supervision. Companies could hire their own assessors, risking the conflicts that compromised credit rating agencies before 2008. No independent supervisory agency would be charged with overseeing the labs, and there would be no embedded supervisors as in banking.

AI holds enormous promise, and like any other technology it brings risks that have to be managed. A bank supervision model for AI regulation creates a way for public officials and private experts to assess those trade-offs together, while ensuring that the companies profiting from a decision are not its only judges.

The writer, a co-founder of Facebook, is the author of "Marketeers" and a non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution

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