



Root causes

India's youth crisis is about the absence of jobs, not just examination reform

It has been a few weeks since the youth agitation forced the resignation of then Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. The government conceded the students’ demands for examination reform, which found an echo in the Prime Minister’s Independence Day address, when he announced free online coaching for competitive examinations using India’s digital public infrastructure. MoSPI’s survey data bears out why this would be welcome to students – private coaching costs 16% of what an Indian family spends on a child’s education, against 12.5% in 2018, and nearly a quarter of that budget by the higher secondary years which is when the student prepares for competitive exams. Cheaper coaching is of limited value as quality professional education remains confined to a handful of institutions. For instance, over 22 lakh candidates appeared in this year’s medical entrance exam for about 1.4 lakh undergraduate seats with fewer than 10,000 of them at the top 50 colleges. The situation is similar to the Joint Entrance Examination for engineering colleges. That is perhaps why, for the first time since the All India Survey on Higher Education began in 2011, undergraduate enrolment fell by 93,322 in 2023-24, particularly among young men. The fall was the sharpest in Uttar Pradesh, where *The Hindu’s* analysis found undergraduate enrolment down 1.53 lakh even as diploma enrolment rose 1.38 lakh. An analysis of Periodic Labour Force Survey unit-level data found that of every 100 graduates aged 15 to 29 in 2025, only 26 were in regular salaried employment, and just four had a salaried job with a contract and social security. The youth employment crisis therefore has two ends – in the preparation for jobs, and in jobs themselves. Mere free coaching would address neither.

The structural problems in the Indian economy, despite the government’s touting of 6%-6.5% growth, are now too obvious to ignore. Manufacturing, the job sector best placed to absorb India’s college graduates, remains at around a sixth of gross value added, nowhere near the quarter of the economy the government has long promised. Meanwhile, the private sector has been retreating from its task as corporate investment has fallen from 17.3% of GDP in 2007-08 to 10.3% in 2024-25, unmoved by the cut in corporate tax from 30% to 22% in 2019. The steps required of the Union government are clear: public investment in industrial capacity, support for industry disciplined by export performance rather than domestic protection, and tempering a regulatory and enforcement zeal that seems to selectively target enterprises, affecting the jobs-catering medium-sized companies in particular. This route has a better chance of delivering jobs for the youth at the scale needed and as countries such as Vietnam have shown.

Escape velocity

India's space sector must focus on reliability and regular launches

For much of the 20th century, a rocket tearing a white seam through the sky did for India roughly what football did for Argentina and Brazil. Nations shut out of the councils where economic and strategic weight was measured found, in a game of European origin, an arena where their poverty did not disqualify them. Mastery was open to anyone with nerve and skill. Space was other things but also India’s football. A famished, newly independent republic that could barely feed itself nevertheless chose to gamble on rockets and atomic piles – an expensive bet on a future it could not yet see. In that era of a controlled economy and state broadcaster monopoly, a launcher rising was its own justification. The utility of its payload was secondary, in the eyes of the masses, to the veneer of technological competency. Today, rockets and satellites are no longer emblems; they are the plumbing of the information age, the unglamorous scaffolding beneath navigation, banking, weather and war. On the third National Space Day – the anniversary of Chandrayaan-3’s touchdown in the lunar south polar region – Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged 20 space-startup founders to build an “aura” that would draw the world’s talent to India. But that might be a wrong framing married to the old view of space. A private space sector cannot harvest success merely because its wares are called rockets and launch vehicles; the romance that carried the state programme will not carry a business.

A recent peer-reviewed analysis in *Economics Letters* by Alessio Terzi and Francesco Nicoli finds that it cost \$13,302 to loft a kilogram into low-earth orbit on an Indian rocket in 2025 – costlier than China (\$5,809), Japan, Russia, Europe and the United States (\$3,225), and well above the global average of \$3,868. That is because India launches too rarely and uneconomically to rapidly build the required reputation for reliability. There were only five launches in 2025, against the 30 that were projected. The consequence is visible. GSAT-N2, at 4,700 kg too heavy for ISRO’s LVM-3, went up on a Falcon 9; Pixxel and Digan-tara – two of the 20 at Mr. Modi’s meeting – rode SpaceX to orbit. SpaceX alone put three-quarters of the world’s payload into orbit in 2025, underlining its near monopolistic stranglehold but also pointing to opportunities. The value of India’s space sector can no longer rely on aura but in jobs, in long-term capital and the tax revenues that follow and, in heavy-lift launches that undercut SpaceX and China. Moon bases with NASA and interplanetary reveries belong to the new imagination of space, and they matter – but they are the ornament, not the engine.

The debate over transparency in judicial appointments has resurfaced after Justice Ujjal Bhuyan of the Supreme Court of India recently observed that greater openness in the collegium process would strengthen public confidence and help ensure that merit remains the governing principle. Reformers argue that insulation from political interference was never meant to become insulation from constitutional accountability itself – a question that has remained unresolved for three decades.

The collegium is a judicial creation, not a constitutional one. The First Judges Case (1981) gave the executive primacy in appointments; the Second Judges Case (1993 4 SCC 441) shifted primacy to the collectively formed opinion of the Chief Justice of India and senior judges; the Third Judges Case (1998 7 SCC 739) expanded this into today’s five-member collegium. The reasoning was sound, but close to three decades later, the process remains among the least transparent in any major constitutional democracy: no notification of vacancies, no eligibility matrix, no known methodology for assessing candidates. Even Fali Nariman, credited as an architect of the collegium, later turned critic, recalling that it was ‘not receptive at all’ to the Bar. When the system’s own architects concede that it answers to no one, reform can hardly be called irrelevant.

Resolutions without reasons

One has the example of the collegium’s own record on disclosure, which has moved backwards, not forwards – perhaps the clearest evidence of an institution retreating deeper into opacity. In October 2017, it began publishing resolutions with brief reasons for elevation, a step then hailed as a foundation for transparency.

That practice thinned steadily, and since November 28, 2024, resolutions have stopped naming which members took part in a decision or disclosing any reasoning at all. In November 2025, (then) Chief Justice of India (CJI) B.R. Gavai confirmed that the collegium had resolved to stop publishing detailed reasons altogether, citing concern that disclosure could harm the career prospects of candidates – a rationale that would equally justify withholding reasons from every rejected litigant.

This cannot be seen in isolation: the Court, in the MediaOne judgment (2023), held that sealed-cover secrecy is ‘antithetical to a transparent and accountable system’. If that principle governs the court’s own cases, why should a lesser standard govern its own?

This absence of due process has fuelled a recurring allegation: that opacity has allowed



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The judiciary that demands transparency from every institution of governance cannot ask citizens to trust it on faith alone

relatives of sitting and retired judges – the so-called ‘Uncle Judges’ – an easier passage to the Bench than first-generation lawyers with no lineage to lean on. It is important to remember this is not a complaint from critics from outside alone: former CJI R.M. Lodha himself remarked that nearly one in three High Court judges could be an ‘uncle’.

The allegation is not anecdotal: in 2018, the Union government flagged 11 of the 33 names recommended by the Allahabad High Court collegium, noting that they were relatives of sitting or retired judges. A broader assessment in 2025 found that nearly 30% of the Supreme Court judges – roughly 10 of 33 – had familial links to former judges. In January 2025, this issue pushed the collegium to consider barring judges’ kith and kin from consideration altogether (the proposal was discussed and in principle it was agreed to have higher scrutiny if candidates are relatives, but legally a bar was not created). That, in itself, is an admission that without a publicly defined selection matrix, there is no objective way to distinguish a meritorious relative from a beneficiary of judicial lineage.

This is where the judiciary’s own jurisprudence turns inward. Articles 14 and 16 guarantee equality and equal opportunity in public employment. In *Secretary, State of Karnataka and Others vs Umadevi* (2006 4 SCC 1), the Court held that appointments to public office cannot be made through backdoor methods and must ordinarily follow a transparent procedure open to eligible candidates. If constitutional equality demands openness in the recruitment of a clerk or an engineer, why should the highest constitutional offices remain exempt from comparable standards? To be sure, judicial appointments cannot be reduced to a competitive examination; qualities such as independence and temperament resist quantification. But, qualitative judgment does not require the total absence of procedure. It is prudent to note the irony: the Court itself held, in *CPIO vs Subhash Chandra Agarwal* (2019 3 SCC 1), that the CJI’s office falls within the Right to Information Act – a logic never extended to how judges are appointed.

What other democracies do

Other constitutional democracies show that transparency and judicial independence can coexist. In the United Kingdom, the Judicial Appointments Commission publicly advertises vacancies and conducts structured interviews; in South Africa, the Judicial Service Commission invites nominations publicly and conducts televised interviews. None of these systems is

The limits of air power, implications for theatre-isation

The wars in Ukraine and Iran delivered the same verdict to every air force. Ukraine kept the larger air force at bay, while in Iran, the skies were dominated by the opposing side, yet air superiority still failed to end the war. Both point to the same limitation of air power: it has not grown weaker, but it is no longer sufficient to win a war on its own.

That is the real stake in India’s own debate: its Air Force has long favoured operational flexibility over fixed commands – an approach proven against Pakistan but untested against China.

Air power’s limits exposed

Two wars and one wider pattern illustrate three ways in which air power falls short.

The first is the denial of airspace. What determined control of Ukraine’s skies was not Russia’s aircraft numbers, but Ukraine’s networked air defence. This is what the United States Air Force’s 2025 guidance concedes: contested low-level airspace is a problem that air superiority alone cannot solve. For India, this cuts both ways – integrated air defence could deny China control of the skies, or leave India exposed to the same risk in reverse.

The second is dominance of the air space. The allied air campaign against Iran is the clearest case of dominance without a decisive outcome. The allies had complete control of the skies, yet Tehran held firm. What they could see, they hit; what Iran hid, it survived. That should concern India, because what has worked against Pakistan may not hold against China. Pakistan lacks strategic depth and can be stressed quickly; China, given its military capacity, can absorb losses and continue fighting.

The third is the cost-arithmetic. This structurally favours the weaker force. A Shahed-type drone (Iran) costs roughly \$20,000 to \$50,000, while the interceptors can cost millions. India saw a version of this during Operation Sindoor (May 2025), when Pakistan’s cheaper drones forced the use of costlier



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India’s flexible air strategy faces an uncertain test against China

interceptors. Against China, that arithmetic operates on a much larger scale, and India is not yet prepared for it.

These limits are already forcing a doctrinal rethink across most modern air forces. For India, the challenge is structural: the centralised model of the Indian Air Force (IAF), proven against Pakistan, remains untested against China, where the terrain could compound these limitations.

The IAF’s case against theatre-isation

The IAF favours flexibility over fixed commands. Four tests decide whether that position holds against China too.

The first is the flexibility principle. The IAF’s claim is that what has worked before will work again. Against Pakistan, it did – Balakot (2019) and Sindoor demonstrated that. Against China, however, the numbers are tighter: 460-520 combat aircraft against the People’s Liberation Army Air Force’s roughly 65 squadrons. The mountains make the challenge even greater, with fewer airbases and less room to redeploy. So the flexibility that defines the IAF’s approach may not hold where it matters most.

The second is the integration deficit. If flexibility cannot close the gap, then joint-ness might. Two parts can help bridge this deficit. The first is joint-force generation, which has never been built sufficiently for the China front. The second is peacetime jointness, which requires no new hardware, only training and shared planning. Kargil exposed this gap in 1999; the Ladakh crisis in 2020 showed that it still persisted.

The third is more institutional, than operational. Two aspects matter. The resistance is more about career progression than doctrine. Also, ranks do not map evenly across the three services, leaving joint chains of command unsettled. Neither factor determines whether flexibility or jointness will actually work, although both matter. The United States made joint postings mandatory; not a career risk.

flawless, but each rests on a premise that India has yet to accept: independence is strengthened, not weakened, when citizens understand how judges are chosen.

India’s collegium continues to operate as though it belongs to an earlier era of institutional deference. Political theorist Jürgen Habermas argued that democratic legitimacy ultimately rests on the public sphere – an arena where institutions must justify themselves before informed citizens.

This is not abstract: every judicial appointment is now dissected on social media within minutes. The scrutiny of a CJI’s own remark comparing youngsters to ‘cockroaches’ travelled from placards at Jantar Mantar to trending hashtags within hours; it will not take long for such movements to arrive at the doorstep of the higher judiciary itself. Contempt jurisdiction, built for the newsroom and the courtroom gallery, cannot be used to trifle the scrutiny of this scale and anonymity – it is an alarm bell for a system that still keeps its own appointments behind closed doors and resists constructive criticism. Institutions that embrace reform voluntarily emerge stronger; those that resist witness a slow erosion of the legitimacy they seek to protect.

Reform, not retreat

None of this requires dismantling the collegium; it only requires modernising it. A transparent framework could publish anticipated vacancies in advance, invite applications from eligible advocates, disclose objective eligibility criteria, and record reasoned recommendations explaining why one candidate was preferred over another. Confidential inputs on integrity can remain protected – transparency does not demand disclosure of every file, only openness about the process, the criteria and the reasoning behind constitutional appointments.

This is ultimately not a contest between the judiciary and the executive, nor an attempt to weaken judicial independence. It is a question of whether one constitutional value is allowed to eclipse another. The Constitution promises an independent judiciary, but, equally, promises equality, fairness and reasoned decision-making; values that are complementary, not adversarial. The debate of the 1990s was executive versus judiciary. The debate of this decade is opacity versus transparency. Therefore, unless the collegium accepts that independence without accountability breeds the very distrust it was designed to prevent, this asymmetry between what the judiciary demands of every other institution and what it permits of itself will continue to exist.

The fourth is consultative authority. The IAF’s own proposal – a Joint Coordination Centre – depends on everyone agreeing, and a crisis leaves no time for that. A theatre command puts one person in charge, with the power to act. The U.S., China and Israel have each already made that choice – not proof that it guarantees success, but evidence that a consultative process has its limits.

Of the four questions here, only one concerns how the IAF fights. The rest concern how India organises itself for the next war. That decision lies beyond the IAF; it belongs to India’s political leadership, which has a larger stake in the outcome.

The cost of delay

The IAF’s position is defensible where it has been tested – in Balakot and Sindoor. What it does not tell us is how quickly the force could mobilise or how effectively it could conduct joint operations against China.

The cost of leaving this debate unresolved is real. If, for instance, China moves into Ladakh the same week that Siachen Glacier flares up, someone will have to decide, in real time, which front gets the limited pool of Rafales and S-400 systems.

A jointness gap left unaddressed for another decade could mean that an Integrated Battle Group (IBG) commander along the Line of Actual Control is still planning around air support that may not reliably arrive when needed to defend India’s territorial integrity. And if that were to happen, people would not remember the missing theatre command, but a military that was simply not ready for war.

None of this is a case against the IAF. It is a case against testing the IAF’s convictions in a crisis, when there may be no second chance. Therefore, one could argue that theatre-isation does not dilute the IAF’s flexibility; rather, it is the missing structure that could allow that flexibility to survive contact with the one border crisis India has not faced in many decades.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

New airport, save wetlands

The decision of the Tamil Nadu government, under the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam, to look for a new airport site for Chennai, instead of Parandur, to protect agricultural lands and local livelihoods is a laudable attempt. In general, the State government should give priority to enacting a law for the protection of all identified wetlands, along with an effective policy for

their conservation. Urban land use, including railways, has increased considerably, encroaching mainly on agricultural lands, forests and grasslands. Many wetlands have been lost or impaired through draining, dredging, filling, excavation, construction and pollution. The protection of wetlands by discouraging urban development activities is therefore necessary. We consider everything to be

pervaded by a subtle divine presence, be it water bodies, birds and animals, flora, or the stars and planets. But very little attention is paid to protecting them. Utilising nature’s gifts to mankind without causing harm is the only sensible approach. The conversion of agricultural lands and water bodies has caused considerable suffering.

A.J. Rangarajan,
Chennai

Use of term

It is right for women MLAs in Tamil Nadu to demand that the term ‘*Kanni Pechu*’ be dropped, but not

because it is a ‘gendered term that perpetuates patriarchal notions’. Rather, it is an inane Artificial Intelligence translation into

Tamil of the English term ‘maiden speech’. I am sure Tamil experts can vouch that there has never been any patriarchal conspiracy in our history to invoke references to *kannis* or maidens either to belittle women or to demean our representatives in people’s assemblies.

Anandhi Narayanaswamy,
Chennai

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

T.N. can lead India on revenue reform

Tamil Nadu’s decision to establish a high-level Revenue Augmentation Committee could prove more important than simply finding additional resources for the State Budget. It offers Tamil Nadu an opportunity to do something no Indian State has yet systematically attempted: modernise the way revenue itself is defined and managed.

The committee, chaired by Montek Singh Ahluwalia, has been asked to recommend measures to strengthen own-tax and non-tax revenues, improve buoyancy, plug leakages, and increase fiscal self-reliance. Tamil Nadu has been one of India’s stronger performers in economic growth and social development. Sustaining these achievements – and the public services and investment that underpin them – will require a sustainable revenue base.

Tamil Nadu used to be one of India’s fiscally better-managed States. Its own-tax revenue reached 9.3% of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) in 2002-03, after exceeding 10% in the early 1990s. Yet non-tax revenue has remained a weakness: only 7% of total revenue came from non-tax sources.

The 15th Finance Commission’s work explained how the earlier advantage for own-tax revenue eroded. A study prepared for the Commission found own-tax revenue falling from close to 9% of GSDP in 2006-07 to 6.4% in 2016-17, with tax buoyancy below one in eight of the 14 years examined. More recently, Tamil Nadu’s own-tax revenue was budgeted at around 6.2% of GSDP in 2024-25, compared with 6.9% in Karnataka and 8.2% in Telangana.

The committee will therefore address a structural problem. But before asking how Tamil Nadu can raise more revenue, it should ask a more fundamental question: what counts as government revenue?

Defining revenue

This distinction has become blurred in Indian public finance.



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“Resource mobilisation” often encompasses taxes and user charges alongside borrowing, official loans, green and municipal bonds, blended finance, and asset monetisation. These may all provide resources, but they are economically very different.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s Government Finance Statistics Manual (GFSM 2014) provides a clear framework. Government revenue consists of taxes, social contributions, grants and other revenue, including fees and charges, dividends, interest, royalties, and rents. Borrowing is different. A market loan or bond provides cash today while creating a financial liability. It is financing, but not revenue. Nor does selling an existing asset generally create revenue. It exchanges one asset for another. While recurring lease payments, royalties, concession fees, rents, and dividends may constitute as genuine non-tax revenue, proceeds from outright asset sales generally do not.

This matters because a government can appear to have mobilised substantial “resources” without improving its underlying capacity to finance public services. Borrowing and asset sales can finance investment or ease temporary financing constraints but they cannot permanently finance a structural gap between recurrent expenditure and revenue.

Tamil Nadu should therefore use this committee to become the first Indian State to explicitly adopt international standards for defining and presenting government revenue. This would complete an unfinished reform agenda. Fiscal deficit and financing measures need to be consistent with international practice, accompanied by fuller reporting of arrears, guarantees, off-budget borrowing, and public-enterprise finances. Otherwise, conventional cash accounts can give an incomplete picture of fiscal trends.

India’s public financial management weaknesses are

concerned with not simply how much governments raise or spend, but how comprehensively fiscal transactions are defined, classified and reported. Indian States conventionally divide revenue into own-tax revenue, own non-tax revenue, shares in central taxes, and grants from the Centre. These accounts should increasingly be reconcilable with internationally accepted classifications.

Tamil Nadu need not abandon its existing system. It could publish a supplementary GFSM along with its Budget, separating revenue and transactions in assets and financing.

Sustainable revenue

Having defined revenue correctly, the committee should concentrate on raising it sustainably. The first priority should be better tax administration rather than simply higher rates. Linking GST information with registration, vehicle, property, and other administrative databases can reduce evasion and improve buoyancy without increasing the burden on compliant taxpayers.

Second, non-tax revenue deserves greater attention. User charges should be periodically reviewed against costs. Royalties, licence and concession fees, and rents and returns from public assets should similarly be reviewed. State-owned enterprises should generate predictable returns through better governance and transparent dividend policies – not exceptional dividends to fill annual budget gaps.

The inherited lesson is clear: borrowing to finance recurrent expenditure raises debt, interest burdens, and reduces fiscal space for development. Revenue reform cannot therefore be separated from expenditure efficiency, liabilities and fiscal risks.

Thus, Tamil Nadu, by becoming the first Indian State to adopt international standards for defining and presenting government revenue, could establish a benchmark for other States and the Union government.

The recruitment controversy in Andhra

The competitive accounting of examination scandals may not appeal to Gen Z

STATE OF PLAY

P. Sujatha Varma

The success of the student-led protest at Jantar Mantar has altered the political vocabulary of the moment. Examinations, paper leaks, recruitment, and the anxieties of an entire generation have suddenly moved from the margins of public discourse to its centre. Andhra Pradesh too is now witnessing its own version of this churn.

Two recruitment controversies, the ‘Mega’ District Selection Committee (DSC)-2025 teacher recruitment and the Andhra Pradesh Public Service Commission (APPSC) Group-I 2018 examination, have become competing political narratives. However, the candidates themselves are less interested in which party gains political mileage and more concerned about knowing if the system is/was fair. That question is bigger than both the ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the main Opposition party, the YSR Congress (YSRCP).

Through the Mega DSC-2025, the government notified 16,347 teacher posts, attracting more than 5.7 lakh applications. The exams were conducted between June 6 and July 2, 2025. Eventually, 15,941 candidates received appointment orders, leaving 406 posts vacant for want of eligible candidates in respective categories. The government has maintained that the recruitment followed the notified rules, reservation rosters and government orders. Senior education department officials also pointed out that despite hundreds of legal challenges, no court stayed the examination or held that the recruitment process as a whole



violated prescribed norms.

Tit-for-tat exam scandals

However, the controversy has not emerged from thin air. The High Court has been repeatedly approached over various aspects of the recruitment. As of August 2026, the court was told that 335 petitions had been filed, with 69 related to the sports quota.

The YSRCP has sought to turn the DSC controversy into a broader youth mobilisation campaign, trying to appeal to the anxieties of the Gen Z youth. It has alleged irregularities in the recruitment process and has demanded accountability from Education Minister Nara Lokesh.

Among the issues raised by the Opposition is the decision to entrust a single institutional set-up with both question-bank preparation and the conduct of the DSC examinations. The case of P. Naveen, an outsourced employee of the State Council of Educational Research and Training, whose name figured in the first merit list before disappearing from the revised list, also become a political flashpoint. His initial inclusion in the merit list led to allegations that persons associated with the examination system could have had access to question banks.

The sports-quota controversy has added another layer. The coalition government had issued orders enhancing reservation for meritorious sportspersons to 3%, providing horizontal reservation in

direct recruitment without a competitive examination. The subsequent restoration of the mandatory exam, after the recruitment process had progressed, drew sharp criticism. The Opposition has also alleged inaction against those involved in attempts to trade teacher posts.

Meanwhile, the TDP and its allies have responded by bringing up the Group-I 2018 recruitment controversy. A notification, issued in 2018, to fill 169 Group-I posts, became embroiled in litigation over the evaluation of the mains examination. A single judge in March 2024, when the YSR Congress was in power, held that the second and third valuations of the Group-I mains papers were illegal and directed the mains examination be conducted afresh.

But governance cannot be reduced to competitive accounting. If DSC candidates have legitimate grievances, they deserve answers, irrespective of which government conducted the recruitment. Similarly, if Group-I candidates were subjected to an unfair evaluation process, they too deserve justice.

Attempts to politically link the two controversies may prove counterproductive. The youth may be angry, but they are also watching whether political parties are genuinely standing with their concerns or merely attempting to appropriate their anger.

The political class may continue to fight the DSC and Group-I battles in courtrooms and Assembly debates. But the more consequential battle is taking place in the minds of thousands of young people deciding whether the next government recruitment notification is worth believing in.

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Karnataka’s draft SIR rolls reveal alarming levels of deletion

Not only is the State witnessing high levels of deletions in urban constituencies, the website of the CEO has made searching deletions list tedious

DATA POINT

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Rishita Khanna
Nitika Francis

The draft electoral rolls released after the completion of the enumeration phase of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has revealed alarming levels of deletions, unprecedented when compared with other major States that saw high deletions during the enumeration phase.

With the deletion of 1.08 crore names from the rolls, the State, with 224 Assembly Constituencies (ACs), saw its electoral rolls shrinking by 19.5% from 5.13 crore to 4.46 crore – which is the removal of roughly one in every five voters who were there on the rolls before the SIR. Though this was the second-highest rate of deletions among major States, with Telangana witnessing the highest at 21.7% deletions, constituency-wise analysis shows more worrying patterns in Karnataka.

The Election Commission of India (EC) has not released the electors to population in the 18+ age group (EP) ratio for any States during the SIR, which is mandatory during every electoral roll revision. The EP ratio gives an indication of under-enrolment or over-enrolment. While the EC has cited absence of Census data as the reason for not releasing EP ratio, many have raised concerns that the SIR is being undertaken with no estimation of the number of voters who should be there on the rolls.

Table 1 compares the population eligible to vote, taken from the report of the Union government’s Technical Group on Population Projections, with electors before and after the SIR in major States. Karnataka’s draft SIR roll is at least 67 lakh short of the estimated population eligible to vote. It is uncertain if this gap could be bridged to at least a reasonable extent, considering that roughly 44 lakh voters

in the draft rolls are likely to be served notices for discrepancies.

The map shows where the deletions are concentrated. Five constituencies – Bommanahalli (54.8%), Dasarahalli (52.1%), B.T.M Layout (51.6%), Vijayanagar (51.1%), and C.V. Raman Nagar (51.1%) – saw more than half of their electoral rolls getting culled. This is perhaps the first time in any of the major States where ACs have seen more than 50% deletions during the enumeration phase of the SIR. All five were in the core Bengaluru area. Fifty per cent of the 1.08 crore deletions came from just 36 of the 224 ACs, of which 28 were in the core Bengaluru area.

Deletions were highly concentrated in most urban constituencies, in line with the pattern seen in other States. Twenty nine highly urbanised districts saw 41.5% deletions (**Table 2**). However, what stands out in Karnataka, was the high share of voters getting deleted under the ‘Shifted’ category, even in highly rural areas.

Despite such high deletions, Karnataka, worryingly, appears to be the least transparent. The website of the Chief Electoral Officer has not hosted the list of deleted voters in a searchable format as done in all other States. Instead, the lists were hosted in different Google drive links with the booth-wise documents available only in English. The documents do not carry old booth numbers, which make it difficult for voters to search them.

Karnataka CEO V. Anbu Kumar told *The Hindu* that the office is in the process of adding the old booth numbers. When asked about the poor maintenance of the website, the CEO’s office said it would look into the issue. Meanwhile, unlike in other States where gender-wise details were made available, Karnataka has not released gender-wise data on deletions from the draft rolls, leaving it unclear how many women or men have been left out. The CEO said the office did not have the data.

Sledgehammer approach?

The urban-rural break-up of the SIR deletions was made possible thanks to night-light data in the SHRUG database provided by Development Data Lab. Further classification of the values was done by The Hindu Data team



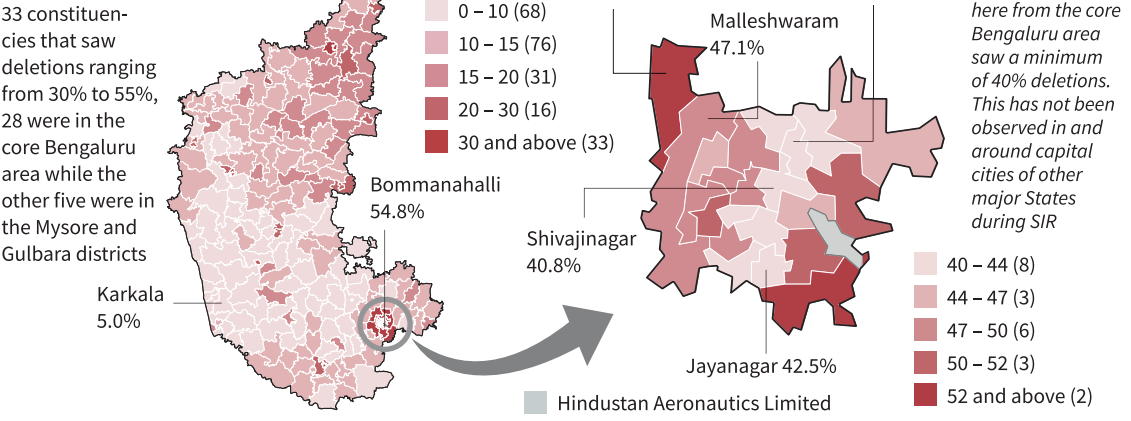
TABLE 1: Electors in every major State fell short of the estimated population eligible to vote. *Telangana and Karnataka’s differences are as per draft SIR rolls

State	Projected 18+ population in 2026 (A)	Electors in draft SIR roll (B)	Electors in final SIR roll (C)	Difference (C)-(A)
Telangana	2.89 cr	2.65 cr	-	24 lakh*
Uttar Pradesh	15.73 cr	12.56 cr	13.4 cr	2.33 cr
Tamil Nadu	5.93 cr	5.44 cr	5.67 cr	26 lakh
Gujarat	5.22 cr	4.35 cr	4.4 cr	82 lakh
Chhattisgarh	2.09 cr	1.85 cr	1.87 cr	22 lakh
Keralam	2.73 cr	2.54 cr	2.7 cr	3 lakh
Bihar	8.01 cr	7.24 cr	7.42 cr	59 lakh
Rajasthan	5.51 cr	5.05 cr	5.15 cr	36 lakh
West Bengal	7.58 cr	7.08 cr	7.05 cr	53 lakh
Madhya Pradesh	5.84 cr	5.31 cr	5.4 cr	44 lakh
Karnataka	5.13 cr	4.46 cr	-	67 lakh*

TABLE 2: Even rural constituencies in Karnataka saw high share of voters deleted with reason marked as ‘Shifted’ or ‘Absent’

Measure	Highly Rural	Moderately Rural	Moderately Urban	Highly Urban	Karnataka
No of ACs	43	124	28	29	224
Pre-SIR share in electorate (%)	17.3	50.5	14.0	18.1	100
Share in electorate, draft SIR (%)	19.1	55.1	13.3	12.5	100
Deletions	10,86,245	34,05,944	18,23,144	44,81,082	1,07,96,415
Share in total deletions (%)	10.1	31.5	16.9	41.5	100
% of electors deleted	11.3	12.2	23.5	44.6	19.5
- shifted (%)	55.7	54.9	58.2	67.2	60.6
- absent (%)	6.8	9.2	19.6	17.2	14.1
- death (%)	26	23.3	13	7.3	15.2
- duplicate and others (%)	11.5	12.6	9.2	8.3	10.2

MAP 1: Of the 33 constituencies that saw deletions ranging from 30% to 55%, 28 were in the core Bengaluru area while the other five were in the Mysore and Gulbarga districts



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 26, 1976

WHO to collaborate in Ayurvedic project

New Delhi, August 23: The growing interest of World Health Organisation in traditional medicines has taken a concrete shape in a collaborative research project on Ayurvedic treatment for rheumatism proposed to be carried out in Coimbatore.

The WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia, Dr. V.T.H. Gunaratne, had stated at the meeting of the WHO Regional Advisory Committee on Medical Research here recently that the wealth of traditional medicine in the countries of the region should not be neglected. He wanted research into this indigenous source to be stimulated to improve the health of the people and disclosed that a joint team of WHO and Indian Council of Medical Research had recently visited the Ayurvedic Trust at Coimbatore to explore the feasibility of conducting joint research on rheumatism.

Enquiries show that Dr. P. Diesh of WHO and Dr. V. N. Rao of ICMR who had visited Coimbatore in this context are now drawing up the details of the proposed project in which ICMR, WHO and the Ayurvedic Trust will collaborate.

The main object of the project is to evaluate scientifically the claims made in favour of Ayurvedic cure for different kinds of rheumatic diseases and follow it up with studies to find out the basic principles on which the curative drugs act.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 26, 1926

World’s altitude record

Paris, August 25: The world’s altitude record has been beaten by a French Airman Callize, who ascended a height of over seven and three-quarter miles. Callize had been training for many weeks accustoming his body to rapid rarefaction of air in diving bell, but, largely owing to fatigue, he descended too quickly and was immediately seized with terrible pains and removed to the hospital. Altogether, he was in the air for two and three-quarter hours. The difficulty of the flight is shown by the fact that he took over twenty minutes to ascend the last three hundred yards. The thermometer in the aeroplane at the extreme point of the flight registered ninety degrees of frost (Fahrenheit). The Airman was equipped with oxygen.

CACHE



A costly shortcut: In destructive scanning, a book's binding is cut off and its pages are rapidly scanned. These books cannot be easily rebound and are usually sent for disposal. GETTY IMAGES

How AI firms are destroying physical books to train their models

Amazon and Anthropic are facing the ire of booksellers and book lovers over reports that they destroyed books in order to scan them for AI development. The actions have sparked outrage and criticism, prompting a look into their legality

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far

An investigation published this week by the tech outlet *404 Media* tracked a shipment of rare books to an Amazon facility in Las Vegas. Instead of packing and mailing them out to eager readers, Amazon employees destroyed the books by cutting off their bindings to scan them. Numerous other books have met the same fate, according to the report that ignited global outrage and criticism.

Why are AI companies sourcing physical books?
AI companies are trying to access more works of writing in order to further develop their AI models and train them on high-quality datasets rich with original material. As more of the internet grows saturated with AI-generated patterns of language, rare and/or out-of-print books are becoming an attractive option for tech companies looking to scrape data.

According to *404 Media*, Amazon did not directly address its destructive scanning practices but confirmed that it bought books to improve its “products and services”.

But the e-commerce giant is not the only company accused of destroying books.

Anthropic, the Google and Amazon-backed maker of the Claude

family of models, had its own secret ‘Project Panama,’ which it described as “our effort to destructively scan all the books in the world.”
What’s more, a focus on rare books also means that the company that sources the content first can destroy the original and ensure that an AI rival cannot easily train its models on the same text.

Is it necessary for AI companies to destroy books?
If you have ever tried to photocopy a thick or old book, you know that getting a high-quality print is often complicated by the book’s spine. You can press down hard to flatten the book, but this is not safe for rare or delicate volumes.

Archivists, librarians, and researchers use a range of advanced scanners that are designed to digitise physical books without damaging them. Some robotic devices can even lift or flip the pages without human help. Naturally, these solutions are expensive and can be hard to scale.

In destructive scanning, however, the book’s binding is cut off and the pages are rapidly scanned. These books cannot be easily rebound and are usually sent for disposal.

Destroying the print book can also work in a company’s favour. This way, it is harder for authors to accuse the company of promoting piracy. After all, a buyer is

legally allowed to destroy the rare book they have bought, even if others would consider this a cultural crime.
By contrast, an AI company can be sued if authors find evidence of it downloading pirated e-books without paying for them. This July, Anthropic received approval to pay \$1.5 billion to settle a class action lawsuit where authors claimed that the Claude-maker illegally used their copyrighted works for its AI products.

In a court order from last June, U.S. district judge William Alsup had noted that Anthropic bought millions of print copies, and “destroyed” each print copy while replacing it with a digital one that it did not share outside the company.

This print-to-digital format change was ruled as fair use.

What has been the reaction to destructive scanning?
Numerous booksellers, authors, creatives, collectors, readers, and academics have naturally reacted with anger and disgust to news reports of AI companies destroying books.
At the same time, there are some who are not overly concerned by destructive scanning, but oppose companies being allowed to destroy rare books to create a digital copy that the public cannot access.
For context, consider that media preservation platforms (such as the

Internet Archive) as well as shadow libraries/piracy platforms (like Anna’s Archive) have been sued for doing the exact opposite: making digital versions of rare print books available to the public at no cost.
Meanwhile, global booksellers face a dilemma. They stand to profit (at least temporarily) by supplying rare or out-of-print books for destruction. *The Guardian* reported that sellers in Australia, for example, are more carefully scrutinising bulk orders from buyers or reviewing unusual requests for rarer books, in case they are being bought for destructive scanning.
Elon Musk, whose AI company is developing the Grok family of models and tools, was quick to refute potential accusations of his company destroying rare books.

“I’ve asked the SpaceXAI team to preserve any rare books in a library and scan them the hard way vs. just cutting off the spine and scanning,” he posted in July on his social media platform X, in response to a user expressing distress over the destructive scanning process.
Even so, the process of building AI models lacks transparency – by design. As AI firms transition from downloading popular books to shredding rare ones, readers and booksellers now fear the world is rapidly losing undiscovered works of literature.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of “neck to neck”? (Mukul K. Ranjan, New Delhi)
First of all, it’s not “neck to neck”, but “neck and neck”. Although there is a tendency to say “neck to neck” within India, it is wrong to do so.
When you say that a particular race or contest between two participants was neck and neck, what you are implying is that it was very even or very close; either of the two participants could have won it.
The survey shows that the two political parties are running neck and neck.
At the two-mile mark, Mohan and Shyam were running neck and neck.
“Neck and neck” comes from the world of horse racing.

What is the meaning of “You scared the daylight out of me”? (Siva Prasad Viswanatha, Hyderabad)
This is an expression which is mostly used in informal contexts. When you “scare the daylight out of someone”, you succeed in frightening the person quite badly.
Remember the James Bond movie, *Living Daylights*? Well, it is also possible to say, “scare the living daylight out of someone”. Here are a few examples.
The little boy scared the daylight out of his mother.
The bombing of the World Trade Center has scared the living daylight out of most Americans.

Vijay’s Halloween mask scared the daylight out of Sadhana.
Other expressions which mean more or less the same thing are “frighten the daylight out of someone”, “scare the wits out of someone”, and “scare someone out of his wits”.

Which sentence is correct? “The driver of the bus was expired in the accident” or “The driver of the bus expired in the accident”? (V. Murali Krishna Rao, Bhimavaram)
It is grammatically incorrect to say, “was expired”. The first sentence is therefore definitely wrong. As far as the second sentence is concerned, well, usually in an accident, people “die”; they do not “expire”. Therefore, it’s better to say, “The driver died in the accident”.
The word “expire” carries with it the sense that things came to an end gradually along expected lines. In an accident, things do not happen gradually; they happen suddenly, unexpectedly.

Is it wrong to say, “Protest against something”? (Smita Chandra, Lucknow)
No, it isn’t. It is possible for one to “protest against” or “protest about” something. Here are a few examples.
We protested against the increase in student fees.
Prabhakar is always protesting about something.
The workers decided not to protest against the downsizing of the company.
Most of us were planning to protest about the increased workload.
In American English it is possible to “protest” something. For example:
We protested the increase in working hours.
The students protested the indiscriminate firing by the police.
The unions were protesting the war.
Published in The Hindu on October 2, 2001

THE DAILY QUIZ

The U.S. Open begins on the Sunday immediately preceding the last Monday of August. Here is a quiz on the tournament

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1
In which year was it held for the first time?

QUESTION 2
Out of the four, how many grand slam tournaments were not affected by cancellation due to World War I and World War II, nor interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020?

QUESTION 3
The U.S. Open became the first Grand Slam tournament to award equal prize money to men and

women, with that year’s singles champions. In which year did this happen?

QUESTION 4
In 2006, the U.S. Open introduced instant replay reviews of line calls, using the Hawk-Eye computer system. It was the first Grand Slam tournament to use the system. The Open felt the need to implement the system because of the controversial quarterfinal match at the 2004 U.S. Open between which players?

QUESTION 5
Who are the current men’s singles and women’s singles champions?



Visual question: Identify this U.S. Open record holder. What record has she held? WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Questions and answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. Before acting, a young Sean Connery had represented Scotland in a bodybuilding contest. Name the contest. **Ans: Mr. Universe**
2. This 1962 film introduced Sean Connery as James Bond to the world. **Ans: Dr. No**
3. Connery won his only competitive Oscar for playing a tough Chicago cop in this 1987 film. **Ans: The Untouchables**
4. Which cause did Connery campaign for consistently, from the 1990s devolution vote through the 2014 referendum? **Ans: Scottish independence**
5. The Man Who Would Be King (1975), starring Connery and Michael Caine, opens in British India and features an Indian actor in its cast. Name the Indian actor featured in the film. **Ans: Saeed Jaffrey**
Visual: A still from Connery’s final live-action outing. Name the 2003 film and identify the acclaimed Indian actor on the left. **Ans: The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen; Naseeruddin Shah**
Early birds: Erfanally Oosmany| Haridas Pal| Dodo Jayaditya| Arun Kumar Singh| A.C. Vineeth Kumar

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

Word of the day

Mollify:
cause to be more favourably inclined
Synonyms: assuage, appease, placate
Usage: *The leader met the protesters in an attempt to mollify them.*
Pronunciation: newsth.live/mollify
International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈmɒlɪfaɪ/

CORRECTION: In the article: ‘Did Press Note 3 relaxations help attract more FDI?’ published in these columns on August 25, the FDI received by India over the last few months should read as ₹4,895 crore and not ₹4,895. The error is regretted.

In Pune, a stage and a space, new and old

SPeAKING TO an audience of young women from a Pune stage, Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi said women should not be defined by their relationships with men because they belong to themselves. He spoke of routinised violence, including the “violence of denied opportunities”, and the “various forms of control” women are subjected to daily. The formulations were not new — what was new and found resonance in the auditorium was that they were being articulated from a mainstream political stage, and Gandhi made room, on that stage, for women to tell their own stories. Of course, the Congress leader was not just tweaking the woman-unfriendly script in a male-dominated politics. He also used the post-Jantar Mantar occasion to make a jab at a political opponent pushed on the defensive. His mention of the Manusmriti, and UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath’s almost immediate counter-strike, showed that the mark had not been missed. But overall, the Pune performance opened up a space that, ironically, had once been made visible by Narendra Modi. In his very first I-day address as Prime Minister in 2014, he asked why parents who impose restrictions on their daughters use a different yardstick for their sons: Have they ever asked their sons what they are doing, where they are going?

But if Rahul Gandhi struck a different note in Pune, his party, in its CWC resolution, harked back to an older format of politics. The party will not sing all six stanzas of ‘Vande Mataram’, the resolution said, only two verses, as it had decided to do in 1937. The old-ness of Congress’s new position comes not just from its attempt to turn back the clock. It comes, also, from the fact that it follows a stale Congress pattern — of scoring a secular point without really working for it. After all, what stopped the party from opposing the amendment that gives ‘Vande Mataram’ the same statutory protections as the national anthem, in Parliament? In the Lok Sabha, the law was cleared by voice vote in only about 15 minutes, after only two members spoke on it, and DMK was the only party that registered its criticism. Now, why does Congress not challenge the law in court, instead of sullenly refusing to sing? And what’s the playbook for its three CMs for official functions?

Congress’s new and old politics comes at a time when the success of the students’ agitation is still rippling across parties. The crowds at Jantar Mantar have left behind a sense of new possibilities — and a dare for mainstream parties. The young have asserted their presence, they want to be heard, all parties must find new ways of seeing, new ways of listening, new ways of speaking.

Warmer oceans are sounding a warning

THE WORLD’S oceans are usually at their warmest in March and April. In March 2024, global sea-surface temperature simmered to a record 21.09 degrees Celsius. That high was surpassed last week. On August 22, a rapidly intensifying El Niño and global warming combined to spike marine temperature to 21.1 degrees Celsius. The new record, along with the upending of the ocean calendar, is a warning: Global heating is moving climate into unfamiliar territory. The last two months’ data indicates that what happened on August 22 was not an anomaly. June’s average sea surface temperature across the extra-polar oceans was the highest ever recorded for that month. The July record was also surpassed. By July 31, the oceans had heated to 0.04 degrees below the previous all-time high.

The oceans are among the greatest buffers against climate change. According to the IPCC and NASA, oceans absorbed more than 90 per cent of the excess heat generated by global warming and helped to delay its most catastrophic consequences. But this sequestering influence has come at a cost. Warming places stress on marine ecosystems, disrupts food webs. It also affects the oceans’ capacity to regulate weather. A heatwave has overwhelmed Europe this summer, several parts of India experienced floods even though the monsoon was erratic, and unseasonal snowfall disrupted life in South America. Ocean warming also contributes to sea-level rise. By the end of 2025, global average sea level was about 11 centimetres higher than in January 1993.

Every climate record strengthens the case for mitigation — cutting fossil-fuel consumption, accelerating the transition to clean energy and reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. That imperative remains important. However, even as emission reduction plans become more ambitious, adaptation to weather vagaries — which has historically played second fiddle to mitigation in climate policy — needs to be on a stronger footing. Even if emissions were brought down sharply, the consequences of past warming will take years to disappear. India, with a coastline of more than 10,000 km, needs to invest in protecting people who live along the shores, restoring natural barriers against raging waters, improving drainage in urban centres and developing climate-informed agriculture and water management systems. The message from the warming oceans is clear: Improving climate resilience cannot be postponed.

The ginger CFO of Gundavali Metro station

THE MOST recent entrant to the global ranks of cats with jobs is a ginger tabby usually found lounging at Mumbai’s Gundavali Metro station. After a commuter posted its photo on social media, tagging the Maha Mumbai Metro Operation Corporation, the organisation confirmed its appointment as Chief Feline Officer (CFO), responsible for “station inspections, commuter observation and sitting exactly where everyone can admire them”. Going by the surge in the CFO’s photographs online, on that last count at least, it’s a job well done.

The unnamed ginger of Gundavali will not be the only cat to take its KRAs seriously. There’s Larry, the Chief Mouser of Number 10 Downing Street who, having suffered a prolonged whisper campaign about his laziness, set the record straight by killing and eating a mouse right in front of the reporters stationed outside his office for former PM Keir Starmer’s press conference. Palmerston, the late “diplomat” stationed in the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office, developed a fearsome reputation as an efficient mouse catcher.

Mumbai Metro’s CFO can draw inspiration more directly from the assiduousness of another station cat, a calico stray who took up residence at a Japanese railway station in 2007 and stayed until the end of her ninth life in 2015. Tama, who was given the position of “honorary permanent station master”, attracted so many visitors that she was credited with boosting the revenues of the railway company — which had been in the red until then — by 10 per cent and putting it back on track. For the ginger cat of Gundavali, those are some big paw prints to fill.

Before rebuilding Delhi, a warning from Gurugram

THE MASTER Plan for Delhi 2047 (MPD-2047) sets out a new approach to how the city should grow over the next two decades. It seeks to accommodate 3.2 crore people and provide 40 lakh additional homes, much of this through redevelopment of existing areas and higher-density construction around public transport. Notably, it reduces the minimum area needed to redevelop housing complexes from 40,000 sq m to 3,000 sq m. This reduces the redevelopment threshold from about 10 acres to less than one acre, enabling regeneration at a much smaller and more manageable scale — from the size of a large housing colony to that of a small apartment complex. I support it.

Regeneration schemes in unauthorised colonies may receive a floor area ratio (FAR) of 350, while the High-Density Corridor along Urban Extension Road-II (UER-II) allows a FAR of 400. Both changes are necessary because Delhi has limited land and a growing population. Redevelopment cannot be based indefinitely on outward expansion. The proposals for affordable and rental housing, a Unified Metropolitan Transport Authority, unified parking management, and designated areas for 24-hour activity are also forward-looking.

Compact and mixed-use development along UER-II — a 75-km western arc from Alipur on National Highway 44 (NH-44) to Mahipalpur on National Highway 48 (NH-48), passing through Bawana, Rohini, Mundka, Bakkarwala (near Nangloi), Najafgarh and Dwarka — could expand housing and bring people closer to employment. But more floor space means more residents, vehicles, sewage, waste, and greater demand for water and electricity. Unless this is accounted for, new people will move to the al-

ready congested parts of Delhi in search of jobs, worsening the congestion. Planning must consider not just plot capacity but also the hinterland’s ability to support more livelihoods and visitors.

Years in administration taught me that constructing buildings is the easier part, particularly when private developers are involved. The harder task is expanding trunk water mains, arterial sewers, pumping stations, stormwater drains, substations, cables and public roads outside the colony gates. Gurugram provides an apt warning. Golf Course Road, lined by some of India’s most expensive gated communities, has repeatedly suffered waterlogging, showing that excellent private construction cannot compensate for inadequate public infrastructure.

MPD-2047 describes its approach as “infrastructure-led”, but its own water projections reveal considerable uncertainty. It estimates potable-water demand of 1,600 million gallons a day (MGD) by 2047, against the present availability of about 1,000 MGD. The proposed augmentation of 401 MGD would still leave a gap of about 199 MGD. More importantly, 275 MGD is expected from the Renukaji, Lakhwar and Kishau projects, which the Plan itself calls “highly tentative” and dependent on interstate cooperation.

On drainage, too, the Plan isn’t clear. At one place, it says the Delhi Drainage Master Plan is under preparation; elsewhere, it calls for implementation of the Irrigation and Flood Control Department’s Drainage Master Plan. Before large-scale densification begins, Delhi needs to know which plan applies and whether it reflects the new density projections.

While the new Master Plan



SHAILAJA CHANDRA

refers to upgrading physical and social infrastructure, it does not specify that essential infrastructure must precede development. Accepted planning practice requires the opposite: Before additional FAR is sanctioned, the capacity and land requirements for water, sewerage, drainage, power, roads, transport and public facilities should be assessed for the entire area under development. MPD-2047 should have made higher density conditional on these requirements being secured in advance.

More than 20 years ago, as Delhi’s chief secretary, I attended Raj Niwas meetings where DDA officers discussed issues related to the previous Master Plan. The departments handling water, sewerage, drainage and roads ran in their own worlds, oblivious to the DDA’s Master Plan. MPD-2047 has involved wider consultation, including with the principal implementing agencies. But consultation is not coordination. These bodies must agree on capacity additions, budgets, sequencing and timelines with one authority answerable for ensuring that the works are completed before high-density development begins.

The plan prioritises the regeneration of unauthorised colonies. That is a necessary, and humane, approach: Residents cannot indefinitely be denied safe buildings, sewers, drains and public facilities. But many existing structures predate effective structural, fire and seismic safeguards. Higher FAR must, therefore, be accompanied by credible safety audits, emergency access, open spaces and upgraded networks.

Preventing new unauthorised colonies is another urgent need. The plan proposes GIS mapping, remote sensing and drone surveys

to detect illegal development, and suggests disincentives against it. But detection is not enforcement. The Plan does not clearly identify which authority must act on the first alert, within what period, or what consequences follow when an illegal subdivision grows because of collusion or negligence. Unauthorised colonisation has proliferated over the last 60 years. Without a clear chain of responsibility, prevention in name could again lead to recurring amnesty when pressures mount.

MPD-2047 recognises the unequal distribution of Delhi’s green spaces and refers to green-blue infrastructure, parks, walking and cycling. Yet, as density rises, it sets no clear standard for access to usable neighbourhood green space. Parking reforms will achieve little if road parking remains free and pavements remain clogged. The Plan specifies how much more can be built, but is less precise about the public infrastructure and spaces that must accompany that growth.

How, then, should MPD-2047 be rated? It is strong in recognising Delhi’s need for redevelopment, additional housing, public-transport-led growth and new economic activity. It is promising on rental housing, integrated mobility and regeneration. It is aspirational on parks, walking, cycling and public spaces, tentative on water and drainage, and incomplete on sequencing, enforcement and direct accountability.

This is not an argument against builders, migrants, high-rise housing or the improvement of unauthorised colonies. It is an argument for implementing the Plan in the right order. Before building higher, Delhi must first strengthen the city beneath its buildings.

The writer is former chief secretary, Delhi and former secretary, Ministry of Health

Simpler mining tax model can mean more revenue for states



S MAHENDRA DEV

IN SEPTEMBER 1974, at the Two Continents restaurant in Washington, economist Arthur Laffer drew a hump-shaped graph on a napkin to argue that tax rates and government revenue have an inverted-U relationship. His argument was simple: When governments cut high tax rates they have the potential to increase total revenue, while an increase of tax rates beyond a particular level would inversely reduce collections. Since then, the world has seen the Laffer Curve play out on multiple occasions.

In India, the most recent example of this was in the case of GST 2.0 where the rationalisation in tax rates further boosted demand, thereby increasing revenue collections. The recent passage of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2026, in Parliament is another attempt at focusing on maximising revenue to states rather than increasing taxes, and adds to the mining reform journey that began 12 years ago.

India had the talent, enterprise and mineral wealth to grow. A missing element was a system that could unlock value. Before 2014, mineral blocks were allotted at discretion, approvals took years, and investors stayed away. India’s mining sector was a closed system, marked by opacity, inefficiency and corruption, with the burden ultimately falling on state finances. Today, every block is allocated through transparent, competitive e-auctions. Once allocated, progress is monitored end-to-end. There is a plan for the welfare of mining communities, for scientific closure of mines and a vision for sustainability. This shift from discretion to certainty is the same principle this Act now extends to taxation.

At the heart of this amendment is an effort for the establishment of a simple uniform and predictable tax system so that misaligned fiscal choices do not fracture the national market for minerals. Mining is a long-term, capital-intensive, and labour-intensive activity. For such an industry, certainty in the fiscal environment is a vital prerequisite.

Minerals are the building blocks of the wider economy. Critical minerals will increasingly determine our technological, Real Creator IAS Edition <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RGJOKH6oBd0F>

energy and strategic capabilities. The Act enables the creation of an integrated national market for minerals. A strong cooperative federalism framework enables states to grow stronger as part of one national economy. A predictable fiscal framework will allow mineral-producing states to attract investment, expand production, and develop downstream industries, while giving businesses across the country greater certainty and competitiveness. Greater investment means more exploration, increased production, and expanded downstream industrial capacity.

Today, however, mineral producers face a complex fiscal landscape, with up to 14 types of taxes, charges, fees, and levies across different states. The recent legislation addresses this fragmentation. It will keep India’s mineral market integrated, protect essential sectors from uncompetitive taxation, and help mineral-rich states realise the full value of their resources. All this is being done by retaining the state’s own revenue pool from mineral production.

Mining reforms over the past 12 years have boosted the state’s mineral revenues. Since the auction regime began in 2015, states have received more than Rs 7 lakh crore, which is almost 90 per cent of total revenue, from both coal and non-coal sector, through royalty, auction premium, DMF and GST. The recent amendments retain this revenue-sharing formula with 90 paise of every rupee earned from mineral production continuing to be retained by states.

Even with rich domestic resources, an uncompetitive mineral market can make India import-dependent. Therefore, rational taxation is vital for conserving foreign exchange, strengthening our supply chains, and reducing dependence on imports, important in a world of geopolitical uncertainties.

India’s mining sector has moved decisively from a system of untapped potential to one of transparency, competition, investment, and national purpose. The task ahead is to build higher, to explore, produce, process more and add greater value within India.

The writer is chairperson, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister

Fair pricing could help sustain UPI network



ABHINAV MOTHERAM

UPI’S SCALE has made the question of who pays for it more important. Its success rests on a simple bargain: Consumers pay at no visible cost, merchants accept payments without card machines or a merchant discount rate (MDR), and banks and payment companies absorb much of the expense, offset only partly by public subsidy. That arrangement is being reconsidered. A report tabled this month by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance cited an industry estimate of about Rs 20,700 crore in annual operating costs, against a Rs 2,000 crore allocation under the zero-MDR regime. The Department of Financial Services said it was examining two options: Restoring MDR for certain high-threshold transactions or merchants, and phasing out government support through a tiered incentive structure.

India must decide how to share the network’s costs according to capacity to pay. It must also decide how aggregated, privacy-safe payment signals can be put to public use under clear standards. Start with what drove adoption. My research with Sharon Buteau finds that more formalised merchant ecosystems are associated with higher UPI use. Once basic connectivity is in place, business ecosystem development matters more. That should guide how any MDR is designed. A fraction of a percentage point may be manageable for a supermarket chain, but consequential for a street vendor. It may barely register in districts where UPI acceptance is entrenched, but could slow merchant onboarding where the network is still forming. A uniform rate would misread both merchant and geographic asymmetries.

A workable principle follows: Keep UPI free for consumers and small merchants, while allowing a capped MDR for larger commercial users and higher-value transactions. Incentive should remain available where acceptance networks are still developing. The thresholds should be based on merchant margins, administrative feasibility and likely effects on local adoption. MDR need not be the only source of revenue. Firms can build commercial services around UPI while the underlying payment remains free. Payment data also has public value. At UPT’s scale, anonymised and aggregated transaction signals can indicate where spending is growing, adoption remains thin and formalisation may be taking root. PhonePe’s PulsePro is an example of how commercial payment intelligence can support public planning. A recent MoU with MeitY will integrate its metrics into PM GatiShakti for infrastructure planning, economic analysis and urban and rural development. Payment intelligence can identify where connectivity has outpaced merchant development, digital commerce has outpaced formalisation and infrastructure has not translated into women’s digital participation.

This is a start, but policymakers need an ecosystem-wide view. UPI data and official statistics can provide a clearer view of local commerce, including informal activity. India built UPI by combining public infrastructure with private innovation. The same principle should guide its data: Private firms can develop services, while public institutions set standards for privacy, access and public use. Fair pricing can help sustain the network; responsible data use can improve how India understands its local economies. Real Creator IAS Edition https://t.me/+2RvD_RGf9mljMzg1

Motheram is consultant, NITI Aayog. Views are personal

40 YEARS AGO

August 26, 1986



Volcanic gas kills 2,000

GAS SPEWING from a volcanic lake in north-western Cameroon killed at least 2,000 people and sent thousands of others fleeing for their lives, officials said. Soldiers in masks established the preliminary death toll as they made their way into the stricken region, the information minister, Georges Ngango, said.

Curfew in Giddarbaha

TERRORISTS SHOT dead one person, while indefinite curfew was clamped in Giddarbaha town of Faridkot district and the police

arrested two suspected terrorists in Amritsar. Curfew was clamped in Giddarbaha town as mobs turned violent after the cremation of two of the three victims of another terrorist shoot-out near Mosa.

Civil disobedience in Pakistan

OPPOSITION PARTIES said they would launch a nationwide civil disobedience campaign to oust President Zia-ul-Haq as the police continued to hunt and arrest opposition leaders. The Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) said in a statement that it would start a civil disobedience campaign in Sep-

tember to remove Gen Zia from power and force elections. Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo ruled out early elections before the scheduled 1990 polls and said the government would not deal with the Opposition.

Vaidya case suspects arrested

TWO YOUTHS, suspected of involvement in the Vaidya assassination, were arrested by the Goa and Maharashtra police respectively. A 27-year-old whose description, as per the police, closely matches Sukhi, a member of the notorious Jinda gang, is in the custody of the Margao police awaiting identification.



Our Central Asia strategy needs less romance, more realism



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

WHEN THE Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and five new republics emerged in Central Asia, there was extraordinary enthusiasm in Delhi about reconnecting with a region that had deep historical ties with India. But India's lack of direct access, limited national capabilities, and persistent geopolitical headwinds have complicated that engagement.

India was not alone in imagining a grand reconnection between Central and South Asia. After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration bet that Afghanistan's long-term stability could be secured by reconnecting the two regions. In 2006, Washington reorganised the State Department to bring the Central Asian states together with Afghanistan and the Subcontinent in a new South and Central Asian bureau. The hope was that Afghanistan could become a natural bridge between the two regions. That vision proved difficult to realise amid Afghanistan's internal and external conflicts and the enduring tensions between India and Pakistan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who travels to Central Asia this week for a bilateral visit to Uzbekistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Kyrgyzstan, will find a region very different from the one he toured in 2015. Four broad trends stand out.

The first is the growing geopolitical agency of Central Asia. Long viewed as five vulnerable landlocked states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan — on the periphery of Russia and China, they are acquiring greater internal coherence. Since 2018, the five have met regularly at the summit level in the consultative meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia. They have now signed a friendship treaty among themselves and plan to give it some Real Creator IAS Edition <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029V/an2VRb6RG/OKH6oBd0F>



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

organisational substance and turn the region into a genuine Central Asian community. The Central Asian Five invited Azerbaijan to form the C-6 that links Central Asia more closely to the Caucasus and Türkiye.

Equally important has been the settlement of the long-running border disputes in the Fergana Valley among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Growing intra-regional trade has reinforced the new political cooperation. Central Asia is becoming more of a region in its own right rather than merely the sum of five post-Soviet republics.

Second is the diversification of great-power relations. The traditional "Great Game" framework — external powers competing for control over a passive Central Asia — is utterly inadequate. In 2025, Central Asia leaders held summits with the EU, China, Russia, the United States and Japan. Central Asia has never been more courted — and perhaps never less amenable to exclusive relationships.

Russia remains an important partner in security, but the Ukraine war and China's rising economic influence have weakened Moscow's former dominance. Washington has returned with a new emphasis on commerce, critical minerals and energy corridors. Europe, Japan and others are also expanding their engagement. Central Asia's answer to exclusive relationships.

India cannot match China's infrastructure spending, Russia's geographic advantages or Türkiye's direct access across the Caspian. Nor does it need to. Sustained political attention should be matched by a practical economic agenda

is the familiar "multi-vector" strategy — not unlike India's own multi-alignment. It engages all and commits exclusively to none.

The third trend is Central Asia's growing entanglement with the Greater Middle East. Although predominantly Muslim, the region's political and cultural orientation was long shaped by its Russian and Soviet past. That balance is changing. At the Central Asian summit with the US in Washington last November, Kazakhstan announced its accession to the Abraham Accords. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed the charter of Trump's Board of Peace at Davos in January. Gulf capital has become increasingly important across Central Asia. Türkiye has transformed the Organisation of Turkic States from a largely cultural forum into an instrument for wider political, economic and defence cooperation.

The Iran war has complicated Central Asia's traditional southern access to the open seas and increased the importance of alternative routes westward across the Caspian towards Azerbaijan, Türkiye and the Mediterranean. The region's geopolitical horizons are widening well beyond the old Russian-Chinese framework.

Fourth is the diminution of the Afghan question. The much-feared export of revolution after the Tali-

ban's return to power five years ago has not materialised. Central Asian states including Tajikistan, which was most fearful of the Taliban, have moved towards pragmatic engagement with Kabul. Meanwhile, they have cracked down hard on the radical forces at home. But new problems are arising, for example on the management of the shared waters of Amu Darya.

Where does all this leave India? Delhi enjoys considerable goodwill in Central Asia, but geography continues to constrain its ambitions. India has no direct land access. Pakistan blocks the obvious overland route, while Afghanistan remains unstable. Chabahar and the International North-South Transport Corridor offered an alternative, but the growing conflict between Iran and the US has complicated their prospects. India's one hard-built connectivity node in the region now sits idle.

The changing regional dynamic therefore calls for a less romantic and more modest Indian approach.

India cannot match China's infrastructure spending, Russia's geographic advantages, Europe's financial resources or Türkiye's direct access across the Caspian. Nor does it need to. Sustained political attention should be matched by a practical economic agenda focused on areas where India can contribute. Delhi must also consider whether greater diplomatic flexibility towards Pakistan, Türkiye and Azerbaijan can improve its room for manoeuvre in the region.

Above all, India must recognise the political character of the new Central Asia. Its states do not want another patron; they want multiple partnerships that expand their room for manoeuvre. Modi's visit should be less about grand schemes and more about ensuring a modest, sustained and steadily expanding Indian presence in a Central Asia that is increasingly confident of playing its own game.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express. He is a distinguished professor at the Motwani Jadeja Institute of American Studies, Jindal Global University, and holds the Korea Foundation Chair on Asian Geopolitics at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research, Delhi

Repairing ties with Nepal: A strategy of two hands, 10 fingers



SAFI AHSAN RIZVI

NEPAL IS scheduled to lose its Least Developed Country (LDC) status on November 24, but has sought a three-year deferral from the UN, citing delays in transition. While it is likely to receive the deferral, given Nepal's high credibility in the comity of nations, the deadline will come again. In 2024, it adopted the Smooth Transition Strategy (STS) to ensure sustainable graduation from LDC status by 2030, while recognising that remittances currently support consumption, reserves and imports, but have not yet engendered domestic investment or a surge in exports.

The appropriate move to further the STS could be a Nepal-India two-hand strategy: Economics and technology. Recent bilateral engagements appear to have eased aberrations in relations. Now is the most opportune time to jointly strive to move Nepal out of its low-investment, remittance-led growth, onto a higher, sustainable economic paradigm.

LDC status brought preferential tariffs, market access and concessional financing. Withdrawal would affect labour-intensive, high-growth export sectors such as garments, synthetic textiles and carpets. The WTO expects a -9 per cent increase in tariffs, while the UN's International Trade Centre estimates a loss of -4 per cent in exports. Nepal possesses two key safety valves to mitigate the impact. One, macroeconomic buffers stronger than many comparable economies, and two, bilateral tariff agreements with India, including the foundational agreement on a fixed NPR-INR rate of 1:6 since the 1990s. These factors have contributed to Nepal's monetary stability, especially during the Global Financial Crisis (2008), Taper Tantrum (2013), and the Covid pandemic (2020-21). Nepal has grown at about 4 per cent annually for three decades, supported by low debt, 18 months' worth of FX reserves and \$15bn in annual remittances. However, the most prominent risk to a promising economy remains its low-investment trap.

To diversify, Nepal opened up to the BRI in 2017, perhaps worried about over-dependence on its southern partner. It now conducts one-sixth of its trade, mostly imports, with and through China. However, Himalayan heights make northern connectivity expensive and prone to weather-related disruptions. Many Chinese-backed projects are delayed, in contestation over the grants-versus-debt question.

India and Nepal have one of South Asia's most unusual relationships: Exceptionally intimate in geography and society, with an open border. The challenge is to embed arrangements that expand Nepal's choices while assuring India that intense economic and technology integration will not create new security vulnerabilities. The relationship should be

seen through shared river basins, power grids and data flows. Indian policymakers must address Nepal's concern of economic dependence on a "Big Brother" with care, humility and large-heartedness. The scars of the last decade have receded, given the political change in Nepal and multiple exchanges since May. The older ambition of progressing from free trade towards a customs union and eventually a common market is an unfinished strategic idea and must be the guiding ambition. India must be Nepal's most reliable partner, replacing perceptions of unfair dominance with the joint two-hand, 10-finger strategy. The economic hand: Stable rules for commerce; secure and smooth supply chains; single windows for PE/VC funds; public and private JVs with balanced equity share; and a deeper Nepalese capital market. The technology hand: Optical fibre connectivity; interoperable digital public infrastructure; power transmission; space-tech; joint disaster risk reduction.

Three risks must be resolved simultaneously. First, over-securitising the border causes unnecessary impediments to legitimate access and trade and creates a rentier class and illegal trade. An open border need not be an insecure one: Technology and intelligence-led enforcement are the way. Second, reverse adverse perceptions that India turns economic dependence into a vulnerability through freer travel, tourism, television, movies and music. Finally, "death by process" should be put to death: A problem that is as old as the relationship itself.

Many fingers of the above formulation are already in effect. While high-level exchanges are limited, several important technical meetings on river waters, railway connectivity, customs, energy, borders, UPI-NPI payment mechanisms and technologies have been held. Momentum has been built and trust re-established. Speed is of the essence, with stability and continuity. India and Nepal will remain where they are, whether every argument is forgotten or amplified. What gets built in the meantime is the only variable. So let's put the two hands and 10 fingers to work.

The writer is a former IPS officer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Petty politics

DENYING CLEARANCE to Revanth Reddy after London and forcing him to skip Boston may be within MEA's remit, but weaponising small print looks petty ('It is wrong to cancel Telangana CM's US visit', *IE*, August 25). His itinerary, which included meetings with New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani and US Vice President JD Vance, was flagged as going beyond investment and education outreach. Yet a state that is attempting to build Hyderabad as a global hub needs wider doors. Curtailing an opposition chief minister makes the Centre look heavy-handed and sends a dispiriting signal at home and abroad.

— *K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru*

Carney vs Trump

THE CONCLUDING part of the editorial — "a middle power is saying no to a superpower a rare phenomenon in the Trump era" — says it all without mincing words ('In saying no to Trump, Carney does right thing', *IE*, August 25). Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has daringly called US President Donald Trump's bluff (read: Weaponisation of tariffs) by asking his negotiators to walk away from the ongoing trade talks. But the fact also remains that it may not turn out to be a cakewalk for Carney either. But then, for him, salvaging Canadian prestige and honour seems to outweigh even the impending costs of confrontation with Trump, the most unpredictable head of state the world over.

— *Kumar Gupta, via email*

CANADIAN PM Mark Carney said his country could not accept US terms for a trade deal, and would slap retaliatory tariffs on steel and dairy products in response to heavy duties imposed by Washington ('In saying no to Trump, Carney is doing the right thing', *IE*, August 25). Canada's response shows how countries navigate a world in which long-standing alliances offer less protection and economic ties themselves become sources of leverage.

— *SS Paul, Nadia*



SADAF HUSSAIN

IN 2014, I happened to be in Kerala for work during Onam. I did not know much about the festival then, and certainly did not know what awaited me when friends took me to a home in the neighbourhood for lunch. A banana leaf was laid before me, glossy green and still wet from a rinse. Then came the food, ladled and spooned onto the leaf: Avial, olan, thoran, pachadi, pickles and curries sat next to warm rice. My friends guided me through what remains one of my most memorable meals.

And now, come Onam, the banana leaf becomes a familiar sight across Delhi. Restaurants prepare for packed sittings, home chefs open their kitchens, and WhatsApp groups begin exchanging recommendations on where to find the best sadhya. Malayalis celebrating the festival are naturally at the heart of it, but around the tables are also north Indian families, young diners who discovered the feast on Instagram, and food enthusiasts who have learnt to book well in advance. And then there is the trusted route into any regional cuisine, those incredible friends who know exactly where to eat a good sadhya.

The scale is no longer anecdotal. In 2025, Kerala House in New Delhi planned to serve sadhya to approximately 3,000 people over three days, or 800 to 900 people a day. Across Delhi-NCR in 2026, food guides listed at least 20 restaurants offering special Onam sadhyas,

Delhi already understands this way of entering another community's celebration. Durga Puja draws people who plan their pandal visits around Bengali food. Ramzan evenings send diners towards the old city

with spreads running to 20 or 30 preparations. A few years ago, Thomas Fenn, the co-founder of Mahabally in Saket, told *The Indian Express* ('Onam approaching, Delhi's restaurants and home chefs prepare to roll out sadhya spread', August 29, 2022) that it was serving 350 to 400 festive meals a day.

Sadhya's popularity also tells a longer story about Delhi's relationship with food from southern India. That relationship did not begin with the current crop of restaurants. Andhra Bhavan's canteen has been serving diners since 1991. The snaking lines outside it have been a familiar Delhi sight for years. Karnataka Food Centre in RK Puram has long had its weekend queues, while Kerala House's Samridhi canteen, operating since 2013, was serving 200 to 250 lunches on an ordinary day by 2019.

The change is also visible in how Delhi talks about food from the south. For years, idli, dosa, vada and sambar dominated the menu and the popular imagination. Now the city's appetite has widened. Appam, puttlu, kothu parotta, gongura, pesarattu, bisi bele bath or Mangalorean ghee roast are increasingly familiar. Even idli and dosa are no longer seen as one standard dish, with diners recognising different styles and regional variations.

Sadhya is particularly good at opening that door because it refuses easy abbreviation. A single banana leaf can hold 20 to 30 prepa-

arations, bringing together different vegetables, grains, curries and payasams.

Sadhya also brings people closer to the festival. Chef Marina Balakrishnan has described it as being "beyond food", referring to the families and communities that come together around the meal. In Delhi, this extends beyond the Malayali community. For many diners, sadhya becomes their introduction to Onam, the story of Mahabali, the pookkalam, the banana leaf and the tradition of eating together.

Delhi already understands this way of entering another community's celebration. Durga Puja draws people who plan their pandal visits around Bengali food. Ramzan evenings send diners towards the old city's kebabs, breads and sweets. Onam is finding its own place in this shared festive calendar.

Food historian K T Achaya traced how what Indians eat carries histories of travel, trade and cultural exchange. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss saw food as a language through which societies express themselves. As a city discovers new food, it also begins to understand where it comes from, the traditions around it and the people who have carried it with them. I arrived at my first sadhya in Kerala without knowing what would land on the banana leaf. Today, thousands in Delhi seek out that leaf every Onam. In learning another region's food, a city also learns about the people who call it home.

Hussain is a chef and author

How to make a solar-heavy grid stable & affordable

power generation because the grid cannot absorb it. India reportedly curtailed over 8,000 million units of solar generation in the first half of 2026. Transmission bottlenecks contribute, but part of the problem is simpler: There is not enough demand when solar generation is at its highest. And unlike traditional thermal generators, solar and wind plants are inverter-based. As their share rises, grid operators must manage weaker grid conditions, reduced system inertia, and a need for flexible resources that can rapidly respond to changes in renewable generation.

The instinctive response is more battery storage, but the economics are still challenging. A recent Uttar Pradesh tender for four-hour battery storage came in at Rs 6.45 per unit, even with subsidy support. That compares with about Rs 4.67/kWh for coal power and Rs 3.65/kWh for solar alone. India needs

to broaden the conversation. The most effective battery may not always be a battery, but flexible demand and smarter electricity markets. The priority should be increasing electricity consumption when renewable generation is abundant. If surplus solar cannot be stored economically, it should be used productively. Industrial electrification offers an opportunity by creating large, predictable, daytime demand. Many industries want to procure renewable power but face a fragmented landscape of technology providers,

Solar output peaks around midday, often when electricity consumption is low. This mismatch is driving renewable energy curtailment

Real Creator IAS Edition https://t.me/+2RvD_RG9mjMzg1 financiers, and regulators. Specialised energy transition service providers can act as single-window facilitators, helping industries electrify processes, improve efficiency, and procure renewable energy at scale. Most vehicles remain parked during daytime. Time-of-use tariffs can encourage charging when renewable power is plentiful, while workplace charging can turn office campuses into flexible demand centres.

India's rooftop solar programme has reached millions of households. The next phase should pair rooftop systems with small-scale storage and smart controls, enabling households to consume more of their solar generation and respond to grid conditions. Distributed flexibility can deliver system benefits at a lower cost than concentrating storage in a few utility-scale projects. Rather than treating curtailment as a pol-

icy failure, India should develop market mechanisms that fairly compensate generators when they are required to reduce output to maintain system stability. Congestion management and balancing markets can improve predictability, reduce disputes, and offer flexibility. Success will depend on creating demand that follows renewable generation, mobilising distributed flexibility, and building markets that reward balancing. Getting it right would let India's renewable achievement double as a template for grid integration elsewhere, while embedding electrification as the default choice across industry, transport, and homes.

Saraswat is associate director, Clean Power, Electric Mobility and Emerging Technologies, and Gupta is associate director, Energy Transition at Vasudha Foundation

RBI BULLETIN'S MONTHLY STATE OF THE ECONOMY ARTICLE

Indian economy resilient amid global uncertainties: RBI paper

George Mathew
Mumbai, August 25

THE INDIAN economy is showing resilience amid a fragile global environment marked by geopolitical tensions, renewed US tariffs and persistent trade uncertainties, according to the Reserve Bank of India's 'State of the Economy' article. While these external headwinds continue to pose risks to global trade and the growth-inflation outlook, buoyant domestic demand, a recovery in manufacturing and services activity, improving monsoon conditions and a rebound in capital inflows are providing support to India's growth momentum, the RBI article said.

The RBI's Monetary Policy Committee kept the key Repo rate unchanged at 5.25% in its meeting on August 5. The panel marginally raised its growth forecast for FY27 to 6.7% from 6.6% and lowered its inflation projection to 5% from 5.1%.

However, members of the

MPC indicated that as headline inflation is projected to peak to a level as high as 5.9% in Q3 2026-27, a "case for a hike may emerge" during the course of the year, according to the minutes of the MPC meeting released last week.

"The global economy is confronting a fragile geopolitical environment and continuing trade-related uncertainties. Nevertheless, the domestic economy has demonstrated notable resilience to the ongoing global headwinds, characterised by buoyant domestic demand, and rising manufacturing and services activity," the article authored by RBI researchers and economists said.

"The south-west monsoon picked up in July after recording a deficit in June. While headline CPI inflation rose fractionally, reflecting food inflation; core inflation remained stable. Liquidity conditions eased, supporting credit growth and ongoing investment activity. Foreign capital inflows rebounded, reinforcing the RBI article said.



India's robust macroeconomic fundamentals continue to provide cushion to the domestic economy, the RBI said. REUTERS

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"The momentum of Q1:2026-27 continued in July with most of the high-frequency indicators reflecting sustained manufacturing and services activity, and double-digit expansion in merchandise exports and imports," the RBI article said. The recovery in southwest monsoon in July helped in kharif sowing reaching closer to normal acreage, partly mitigating some of the risks to the agricultural sector, it said.

ture sector, it said.

While headline CPI inflation edged up above the target, it was primarily on account of supply side pressures. "Stable core inflation reaffirmed the lower pass-through of cost pressures. Financial conditions are characterised by high credit growth, comfortable liquidity, and softening G-sec yields supported by rebound in capital inflows," it said.

"The economy continued to display strength notwithstanding these headwinds. Domestic demand remained buoyant, as reflected by several indicators, including vehicle and tractor sales," the RBI report said. Petroleum product consumption growth returned to positive territory, after three straight months of contraction. Industrial production strengthened sharply in June, recording its strongest growth in nearly two years, supported by a broad-based acceleration in manufacturing.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

'India, Japan eye joint investments in Africa for critical minerals'

Sandeep Singh
Tokyo, August 25

AS INDIA and Japan recognise the world's growing dependency on China for critical minerals, business leaders across the two countries are deliberating on the possibility of investing jointly in Africa to secure their supply and expand mining capabilities, said Anant Goenka, FICCI President and Vice Chairman of RPG Group.

"I think we can work jointly, whether it is negotiating together, sharing an opportunity with each other of whatever supplies that each have. Critical minerals are going to be short, and it is a challenge in the world and has been very critical. My experience is that either they are physically located in a few countries, or they have been blocked by a few countries. So, it's going to be an important area that we have to focus on, whether it is mining capabilities or securing them for supplies," said Goenka.

Over 200 business leaders from India are currently travelling to Japan along with the Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, to explore avenues for investment and partnership.

Speaking to the media, Goenka said that the business-to-business meetings in Tokyo have been looking to explore joint venture partnerships and investment opportunities in India. He said there is both opportunity and excitement, and while investments in the recent past have come within the targeted time, they are now looking at the next phase of investment.

"Few sectors that we are focusing on are AI, data centres, shipbuilding, critical minerals, steel, and semiconductors," he said, adding that the other area they have discussed is how to evolve and focus on MSMEs, and how Indian MSMEs can learn from Japan's high-quality MSME industry and build capacity. Goenka expressed concern while speaking on the issue of the widening trade deficit with Japan since the signing of the economic partnership agreement in 2011.

The correspondent is in Tokyo at the invitation of FICCI.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

BIS CERTIFICATION RELIEF FOR HIGH-TECH IMPORTS ASSURED

Goyal woos Japanese firms for India's semiconductor push

Sandeep Singh
Tokyo, August 25

SEEKING to deepen Japan's role in India's semiconductor and electronics manufacturing ambitions, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal assured Japanese companies of easing regulatory hurdles, certification requirements and building a Japan-friendly social infrastructure at key hubs including Dholera.

Speaking at the roundtable of semiconductor and AI where representatives of around 25 leading Japanese companies were present, Goyal said that the concerns raised around BIS certification has already been taken up by him.

"We have already instructed BIS and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to work on a framework to support high-tech industries coming in to promote the Make in India program. Create a framework of exemption from BIS certification required for all the equipment and components that they need to bring to India," he said.

While such a framework would provide a company level



Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal with his Japanese counterpart Akazawa Ryosei, in Tokyo, Japan. X/PIYUSHGOYAL

or industry level exemption, Goyal added that the government will also find a solution for bulk exemption, or product or project-based exemption.

Addressing the concerns around regulatory complexity raised by some companies, Goyal said that while the support will be there at central level, he said that even at the state or local level, "we will stand very willing to support you fully."

On the issue of SEZ notifications, Goyal said that the government will take timely action so that the companies can take

the benefits of the incentives offered through the SEZ framework, or EOU framework (Export oriented units) or the MOOWR (Manufacture and Other Operations in Warehouse) framework.

On the matter of social infrastructure for Japanese expats and their families, Goyal said that the government is working to create the same around Dholera.

The correspondent is in Tokyo at the invitation of FICCI.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

DGCA considers annual drug testing of all pilots after Air India incident

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, August 25

AMID DGCA-LED stakeholder consultations over strengthening drug testing of pilots, the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) has suggested that all pilots should undergo a dope test once a year, against the current regulation that requires 10% of the pilots to undergo random testing annually. Civil Aviation Minister K Ram Mohan Naidu said Tuesday.

Naidu's comments follow the positive drug test result of the captain of an Air India Phuket-Delhi flight involved in a sudden altitude-drop incident on August 4. The pilot tested positive for marijuana, it is learnt. Following the pilot's positive dope test, the Air India group has initiated a mandatory one-time testing of all of its 5,000-odd pilots.

According to sources, while the DGCA was already in the process of revising the regulations pertaining to testing of aviation personnel for psychoactive substances, the incident has led to calls for more stringent drug testing protocol and stricter disciplinary action in proven instances of drug abuse. Earlier this month, pilot grouping Federation of Indian Pilots (FIP) urged the DGCA to expand the annual mandatory testing to 25% of the pilots from the current 10%.

"So right now, the rule says 10% (of pilots are to be tested) across the overall pilot network but just like I said, DGCA is engaging (with stakeholders) and one of the opinions from our

● FLIGHT SAFETY

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THE AIR India incident has led to calls for more stringent drug testing protocol and stricter disciplinary action in proven instances of drug abuse

EARLIER THIS month, pilot grouping Federation of Indian Pilots (FIP) urged the DGCA to expand the annual mandatory testing to 25% of the pilots from the current 10%

side is that everyone has to go through it in the year at a random time," Naidu told reporters on the sidelines of an industry event.

"We have to see how all the stakeholders are going to respond to this because one is the safety aspect of it...and the second thing is the operational impact. That also has to be taken into consideration. So we are going to balance both," the minister added.

As per the DGCA Civil Aviation Requirements (CAR) on testing for psychoactive substances, random dope tests on 10% of the flight crew, other pilots, and air traffic controllers are mandatory each year. Apart from the routine random testing, these tests are also usually done after a safety-related incident, as is the case with the recent one involving

an Air India plane.

The Air India Airbus A320 aircraft — VT-EXO — operating a flight from Phuket to Delhi on August 4 encountered a sudden altitude drop of about 300 feet and caused injuries to 20 passengers and four cabin crew members, and two pilots on board. The incident was classified as a serious incident and is under investigation by the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB). The preliminary investigation report is expected soon, according to Naidu.

The government and the airline had initially attributed the incident to severe turbulence. Conduct of the pilots is also under scanner, particularly in view of the pilot-in-command testing for marijuana, as per sources. Moreover, the Airbus A320 jet is also learnt to have faced multiple snags with the aircraft's hydraulic and control systems in quick succession at the time of the incident, which is being investigated by the AAIB as a possible cause.

In the current DGCA CAR on testing for psychoactive substances, pilots and air traffic controllers are seen as the primary focus segments. But the rules also extend to the broader range of aviation personnel engaged in safety-sensitive functions, like aircraft maintenance engineers and certifying staff, trainee pilots, and instructors and examiners.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Bombay HC bench releases Volkswagen tax case

Omkar Gokhale
Mumbai, August 25

THE BOMBAY High Court bench led by Justice Burgess P Colabawalla on Tuesday released itself from the plea by Skoda Auto Volkswagen India challenging a \$1.4 billion tax demand, after noting that it could not adhere to the Supreme Court-prescribed timeline for pronouncing its judgment reserved in April 2025.

The bench also directed that status quo be maintained for four weeks to facilitate the petitioner in moving the matter before the regular bench.

This comes months after the Supreme Court in May this year directed High Courts to pronounce verdicts within three months of closing the hearing, with an additional extension in certain circumstances.

The dispute pertained to the show cause notice issued by the Indian customs authorities to Skoda Auto Volkswagen India citing nearly 33,000 transactions, alleging that it deliberately misclassified its imports for Skoda, Volkswagen and Audi vehicles as individual units instead of "Completely Knocked Down (CKD) units", which attract higher customs duties.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Air India seeks \$1.5 bn from owners Tata, Singapore Air

New Delhi: Air India is seeking about \$1.5 billion in fresh equity from its owners Tata Sons and Singapore Airlines, months after the second-largest Indian airline posted a record annual loss, two people familiar with the matter told Reuters.

It would be one of Air India's largest publicly reported requests for shareholder funding since Tata took control of the former state-owned carrier in 2022. It highlights the challenges facing the airline as it undergoes a multi-billion-dollar revamp, including the refurbishment of its existing fleet.

The carrier and its budget unit Air India Express posted combined losses of \$2.33 billion in the fiscal year ended March, more than double the prior year's losses. The losses have also weighed on Singapore Airlines' profits. REUTERS

● BRIEFLY

SEBI drops case against Max Fin, Axis entities

New Delhi: The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has disposed of proceedings against Max Financial Services, Max Life, and Axis Group entities over an alleged Rs 3,911 crore shareholder loss, finding that disclosure lapses and a fraudulent scheme were not established. Max Life Insurance Company is now known as Axis Max Life Insurance. The SEBI, in a final order on Monday, dropped proceedings against seven individuals, including Max Group founder and Chairman Aniljit Singh. PTI

India to stop grid-control imports by 2030

New Delhi: India plans to stop importing a key technology used to monitor and control the country's electricity grid after 2030, as the government looks to reduce its dependence on foreign suppliers for critical power infrastructure. The technology, called Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition, allows operators to monitor power plants and substations from control centres and remotely operate equipment such as circuit breakers and transformers. The CEA calls it the "central nervous system of the National Power Grid" because it helps manage electricity flows in real time. FE

● MARKETS

Sensex	NIFTY	Gold ▼	US Dollar ▼
77,656.09	24,334.55	₹1,62,041	₹95.41
286.98	115.50		
0.37%	0.48%	Silver ▼	Oil ▲
		₹2,41,848	\$93.93

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BULLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION DATA
GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1 KG; CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF AUGUST 24, 2026

LRS remittances rise 6.5% in June on travel, investments

George Mathew
Mumbai, August 25

OUTWARD REMITTANCES by resident Indians under the Liberalised Remittance Scheme (LRS) rose in June 2026, with total transfers increasing 6.46% month-on-month to \$2.55 billion, according to data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

Resident individuals remitted \$2,551.34 million in June, up from \$2,396.42 million in May as overseas investments in equity and debt and travel outflows rose during the

month. The May figure was at \$2,127.39 million, indicating a steady acceleration in outward remittances during the first quarter of 2026-27. The LRS allows resident individuals to remit up to \$250,000 in a financial year for permitted current or capital account transactions.

Travel remained by far the largest component of LRS outflows. Remittances for travel rose 6.6% to \$1,366.81 million in June from \$1,282.63 million in May. Travel-related transfers accounted for more than half of total LRS remittances during the month, according to RBI data.

Education travel up, business travel down

Within travel, education-related travel saw the strongest increase, rising to \$488.32 million in June from \$422.97 million in May, an increase of 15.4%. Other travel, which includes holiday trips and payments towards settling international credit card transactions, increased 2.6% to \$853.11 million, data shows.

Business travel, however, declined marginally to \$13.68 million from \$13.95 million. Remittances for pilgrimage fell 35.1% to \$6.58 million, while

transfers for medical treatment involving travel abroad increased 24% to \$5.12 million.

RBI said the second-biggest increase came from investments in equity and debt. Outward remittances for this purpose jumped 25.6% month-on-month to \$456.69 million in June, from \$363.64 million in May. The rise suggests a stronger flow of resident funds into overseas financial assets.

Outward remittances rise for property, gifts

Remittances for purchasing immovable property abroad

also increased substantially, rising 38.9% to \$49.65 million from \$35.76 million.

Though relatively small in absolute terms, the category recorded one of the sharpest month-on-month increases among the major uses of LRS.

Gifts, another significant component of outward remittances, rose 5% to \$211.49 million in June from \$201.50 million in May.

Donations remained broadly stable, edging up to \$0.75 million from \$0.69 million.

FULL REPORT ON
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● A STELLAR SEVEN-MEMBER JURY LED BY KUMAR MANGALAM BIRLA MEETS TODAY TO CHOOSE THE INAUGURAL FE LEADERSHIP AWARDS WINNERS

FE Leadership Awards 2026: Jury to pick India Inc's best

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, August 25

THE SEARCH for the best of India Inc begins in Mumbai on Wednesday, when a high-powered jury led by Aditya Birla Group Chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla sits down to pick the winners of the inaugural FE Leadership Awards 2026.

Joining Birla at the jury table is a formidable line-up drawn from banking, law, private

equity and professional services: Arundhati Bhattacharya, former chairman of State Bank of India and now President & CEO, Salesforce, South Asia; Cyril Shroff, managing partner, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas; Sanjay Nayar, former CEO of Citigroup India and South Asia and former CEO of KKR India; Amit Chandra, chairman, Bain Capital; Rajiv Memani, chairman & CEO, EY India; and Manish Kejriwal, founder and managing partner, Kedaara Capital.

Their task: to identify the leaders, companies and ideas that stood out in a year when disruption was relentless, markets were being reshaped and the demands on corporate



Left to Right: Kumar Mangalam Birla, Rajiv Memani, Amit Chandra

leadership became tougher.

The FE Leadership Awards will celebrate business leaders who are helping drive India's growth story, companies that have successfully reinvented themselves, ideas that have disrupted established markets and innovations that could

change the way business is done. They will also recognise the financial stewards who have protected corporate balance sheets in a challenging environment and smaller enterprises that have punched well above their weight.

There is room, too, for the

new generation of business builders. The awards will recognise young founders whose platforms have challenged legacy models, entrepreneurs who have created new markets and businesses, and companies and leaders making sustainability central to the way they operate.

In its inaugural edition, the FE Leadership Awards will also single out a CEO whose performance in 2025-26 put him or her ahead of the pack. At the other end of the leadership journey, the Lifetime Achievement award will salute a business leader who has built an enduring institution — brick by brick, over decades.

The jury's deliberations will

be backed by data collated by EY from company annual reports and authoritative sources including the Registrar of Companies and ratings agencies. But numbers will only take the process so far. The jury will bring its collective experience to bear in assessing performance, leadership, innovation and impact before arriving at the winners.

The awards span 11 categories: CEO of the Year, Company of the Year, Start-up of the Year, Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year, Young Turks, CFO of the Year, MNC of the Year, Innovation of the Year, Sustainability Leader/Company, Lifetime Achievement and MSME of the Year. FE

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

• **CORPORATE**

What the \$1.5-bn TCS-Porsche deal says about Indian IT sector’s health

George Mathew
Mumbai, August 25

AS THE Artificial Intelligence (AI) boom sends tech stock valuations soaring, most leading brokerages have taken a contrary view of India’s IT sector and its readiness to tap into the AI opportunity window. Over the past months though, IT companies based in India, home to the world’s largest pool of software engineers, have mounted a small fightback, largely through the inorganic acquisition or foreign partnership route. Does it mean Indian IT companies have suddenly returned to a boom cycle?

What is the latest such deal?

A move by India’s largest IT company, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), to strike a strategic partnership with German sports car maker Porsche AG to offer AI services across its mobility value chain is the latest such deal. TCS will establish a dedicated AI Mobility Centre of Excellence for Porsche to drive innovation across manufacturing, engineering, operations and customer experience. The idea that TCS will “industrialise AI at scale” for Porsche is a reputational boost for the software maker.

Over the last 24 months, other major Indian IT firms, including Wipro, HCL Tech and Infosys, have also signed high-profile deals in the West.

THE DEALS

- Over the past 24 months, major Indian IT companies have signed high-profile deals in the West.

- While TCS’s deal with Porsche AG is worth €1.25 billion (around \$1.5 bn); Infosys has a £1.2-bn (around \$1.1 bn) deal with NHS Business Services.

- Wipro has a deal with the Olam Group worth around \$1 bn, while HCL Tech has signed a \$1.14-bn contract with an unnamed European company.

What do these deals indicate?

The deals by the four leading tech companies are important, but the headline numbers need to be read carefully. They do not mean Indian IT companies have suddenly returned to a boom cycle. They indicate that even while discretionary technology spending is weak and AI is disrupting traditional outsourcing, large global companies are still willing to make big, long-duration bets on Indian IT providers.

Indian IT companies have been dealing with cautious client spending, delayed discretionary projects, high interest rates and, increasingly, uncertainty over what generative AI means for traditional application-development and outsourcing work, according to analysts.

The bottom line is that clients are cutting or scrutinising ordinary IT spending, but they are still funding large projects that promise cost reduction, automation, AI adoption and business transformation.

Will this boost revenue, profits?

The enormous contract values can be misleading. A \$1.2 billion contract doesn’t mean the IT company gets \$1 billion of revenue immediately. For example, Infosys’s £1.2-billion NHS contract is spread over 15 years. That’s roughly £80 million a year on a simple average basis, before considering the actual revenue-recognition structure.

“Indian IT companies can win spectacular contracts and still report mediocre growth for several quarters. This is because after contract signing, transition, implementation, revenue recognition and margin contribution take time. And large deals often involve substantial upfront investment in hiring, training, transition, platforms and acquisitions,” said an analyst.

The real question for investors is not whether Indian IT companies are winning billion-dollar contracts, but whether those wins are translating into a genuine and sustained recovery.

“For a genuine IT-sector recovery, I would want to see three things: deal wins translating into sustained revenue growth, margins improving despite AI-related pricing pressure and clients increasing discretionary technology spending rather than merely spending on cost-cutting or mandatory transformation,” an analyst said.

Until those trends become visible, these billion-dollar contracts are best viewed as green shoots rather than proof that the Indian IT boom has returned.

• **GOVERNANCE**

Why govt jobs are few: The narrow selection pipeline



SHYAMLAL YADAV

THE DREAM of a *sarkari naukri* (government job) holds a powerful draw in India. Every year, crores of people apply for a far fewer number of job vacancies in the central and state governments.

Behind this appeal — among youth, technocrats, and even those in professions such as medical and engineering — are economic realities such as the lack of private jobs, social psychology and career benefits that private-sector employment can rarely match. The lack of systemic support for entrepreneurship also makes government jobs a secure haven. The recent protests over paper leaks and government exams, especially in Jharkhand, are a reflection of this appeal.

Size of government workforce

Besides technocrats and government staff such as doctors, the government workforce is primarily divided into three groups (Group A, B and C). There was earlier a Group D category (peons) as well, but it has been merged with Group C.

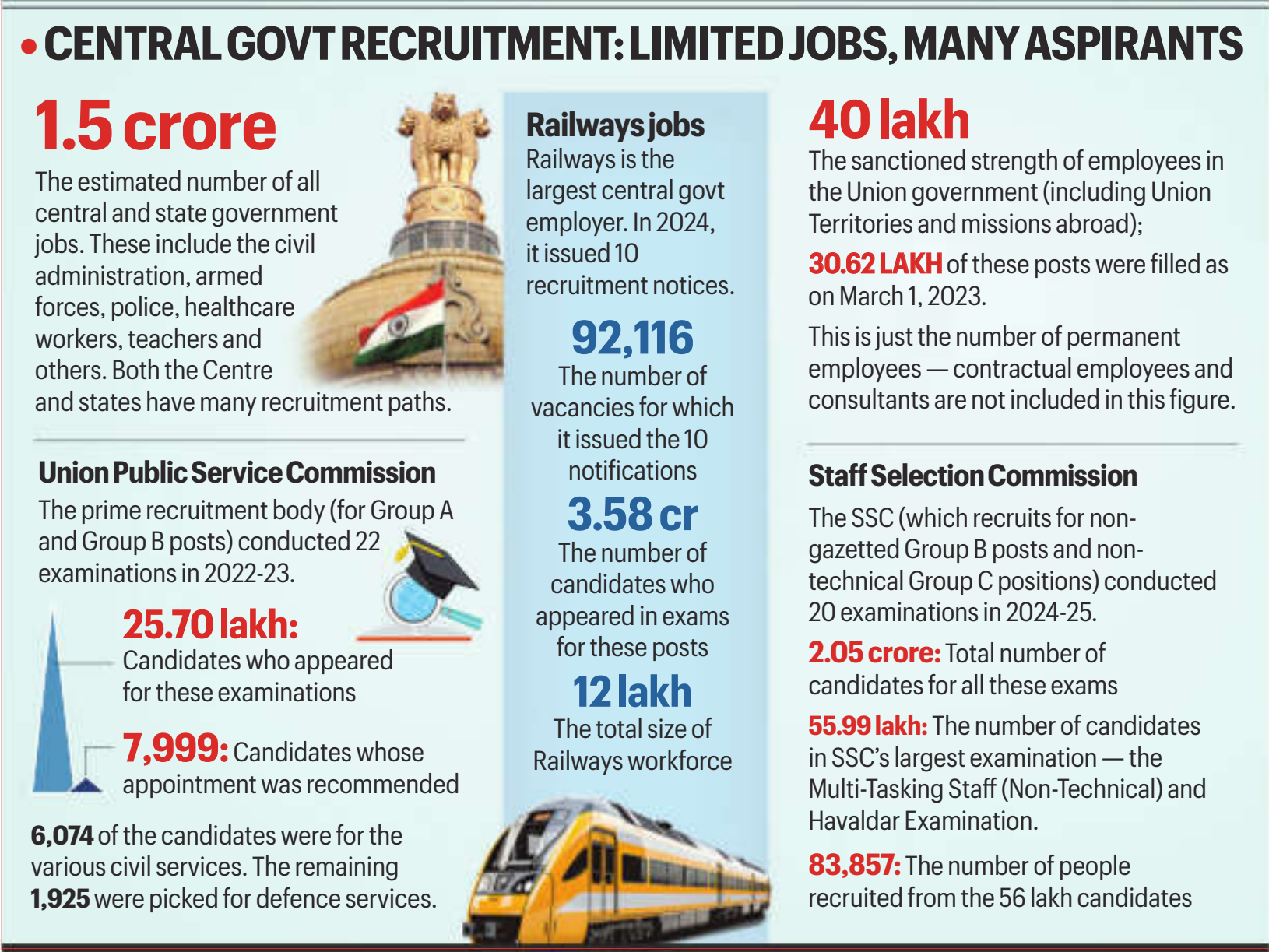
According to data from the Department of Expenditure’s website, the total number of employees in the Union government — including Union Territories and missions abroad — as on March 1, 2023 was 30.62 lakh, against a sanctioned strength of more than 40 lakh. This is just the number of permanent employees, not including contractual employees and consultants.

The Union government spent Rs 2.95 lakh crore on the salary of these employees in 2023-24. More than 80% of this figure went towards defence, railways, postal services and home affairs.

While there is no accurate figure of all government employees of the Centre and states, it is estimated that this number is more than 1.5 crore — including the civil administration, armed forces, police, healthcare workers, teachers and others.

Central recruitment

Central government recruitments are carried out by agencies such as the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), Staff Selection Commission (SSC), the Ministry of Defence (including the Army, Navy and Air Force), the Ministry of Railways, public sector undertakings and universities,



SOURCES: DOPT REPORTS, PARLIAMENT QUESTIONS, SSC AND UPSC ANNUAL REPORTS, RAILWAYS ANNUAL REPORT

among others. Every year, several crore people attempt to enter the central government service through one of these routes. Only around 1.20 lakh make it each year.

UNION PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

The UPSC, the prime recruitment body, primarily selects Group A and Group B civil servants — high- and mid-level officers. Its most prominent exam is the Civil Services Exam, which is aimed at recruiting officials for 19 civil services including the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Indian Police Service (IPS).

In 2023-23, 25.70 lakh candidates appeared for the 22 examinations conducted by the UPSC. The body recommended the appointment of only 7,999 candidates — 6,074 candidates for civil services and 1,925 candidates for defence services. Most UPSC examinations have three tiers — prelims, mains and personality tests.

STAFF SELECTION COMMISSION

The SSC carries out recruitments for most non-gazetted Group B jobs (mid-level supervisory and administrative posts) and non-technical Group-C positions (clerical, technical and support posts) in various ministries and departments of the central

State govt jobs

States have their own recruitment system. State Public Service Commissions select Group A and Group B officials (high and mid level officials).

- States’ Staff Selection and Subordinate Selection Commissions select Group C staffers (clerical and support posts).

government, as well as their attached and subordinate offices. The SSC also recruits assistants and lower divisional clerks for various ministries and attached offices based on their requirement.

Group C jobs make up the bulk of central as well as state government jobs.

In 2024-25, the SSC conducted 20 examinations in which a total of 2.05 crore candidates appeared. Its largest examination was the Multi-Tasking Staff (Non-Technical) and Havaladar Examination which saw 55.99 lakh candidates appearing at 279 venues in 130 cities. Of that 56 lakh, only 83,857 people were recruited.

RAILWAYS: LARGEST EMPLOYER

The Railways is the largest central government employer, with a workforce of more than 12 lakh. It maintains an annual recruitment calendar and conducts all-India examinations (since it’s a central entity).

According to a July 22 Lok Sabha answer, 5.56 lakh people were recruited through these exams between 2014-15 to 2026-27 (up to June 30, 2026).

During 2024, the Railways issued 10 recruitment notices for 92,116 vacancies. The number of candidates appearing in tests to fill these? 3.58 crore.

• **HISTORY**

The century-long evolution of the demand for a Gorkha state

Sweetie Kumari

Kolkata, August 25

THE UNION Ministry of Home Affairs on Saturday constituted a high-level committee to prepare a framework for a “permanent political solution” to the Gorkha issue. This came after a meeting of Gorkha leaders, Home Minister Amit Shah and West Bengal government representatives in Siliguri.

Roots in differential treatment

The Gorkhas’ movement for a separate administrative identity is among the oldest of its kind in India, going back over 100 years.

Darjeeling and its adjacent areas — including Kalimpong, Kurseong, the Terai, and the Dooras — are culturally, ethnically, and linguistically distinct from the rest of West Bengal. Its residents speak Nepali and have faced racial profiling. This persistent alienation has fueled a deep-seated identity crisis, driving the demand for a separate state to affirm their identity as Indian citizens.

But its origins go further back. The movement began in 1907, when the Dar-

jeeling Hillmen’s Association, led by Sonam Wangel Laden La, submitted a petition to the Minto-Morley Reforms Committee seeking to separate Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri from Bengal.

It highlighted the differences between the populations of Darjeeling and the plains, and argued that a legislative body composed mostly of representatives from the plains could not be expected to understand or appreciate the needs and aspirations of the hill people.

Joined by other groups, members of the movement later presented a case to the Simon Commission (1929) and British officials Sir Samuel Hoare and Lord Pethick-Lawrence for an alternative governance system, like a Chief Commissioner’s Province, for direct rule. By 1947, the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) formally submitted a memorandum for “Gorkhas- than” to interim leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan.

The Gorkhaland movement

In the 1980s, the demand for a separate

New panel’s mandate

- The new committee is tasked with examining all dimensions of the Gorkha issue within the framework of the Constitution.

- Alongside evaluating structural governance, the panel will examine financial assistance for the region and review a roadmap to grant ST status to 11 key Gorkha communities.

state took on a violent, high-profile dimension under Subhas Ghising, founder of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), who coined the term “Gorkhaland”. The resulting unrest led to the creation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988, a semi-autonomous body that governed the hills for 23 years.

In 2007, politician Bimal Gurung formed the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), reigniting the statehood demand and leading to the establishment of the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011 to replace the DGHC.

The hills experienced their longest and most intense period of unrest in 2017, after the West Bengal government announced Bengali as a mandatory language in state-run schools across the region. As the state cabinet held a historic meeting in Darjeeling, GJM supporters clashed with security forces, burning outposts and prompting military intervention. The violent agitation lasted 104 days, resulting in 11 protest deaths, bomb blasts that claimed the life of a civic volunteer, and a complete shutdown

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State recruitment

While recruitments for Union Territories are made by central government agencies itself, the recruitment for three all-India services (IAS, IPS, Indian Forest Service or IFoS) have a centre-state nature — the UPSC allots recruits state cadres and they work under state governments. A limited percentage of officers are always on central deputation to serve under the Union government.

State governments also have their own recruitment system — the State Public Service Commissions to select Group A and Group B officials for services such as the Provincial Civil Service (PCS), Provincial Police (PPS), and State Forest Service, among others. The nature of the all-India services is such that officials from state services, after a particular year in service, are elevated to positions in IAS, IPS or IFoS. A mix of IAS, IPS and PCS and PPS of respective states run the government administration on the ground.

Like the UPSC, these state commissions have similar three-tier systems of recruitment. In several states, however, recruitment controversies have erupted from time to time — Jharkhand is just the latest case. According to a rough estimate, all state public service commissions recommend nearly 25,000 to 30,000 candidates every year based on vacancies.

There is no compiled data available for the total number of state employees. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, there are nearly 16.35 lakh government employees, including nearly the police force of around 4 lakh.

Tamil Nadu has an estimated 12 lakh state government employees. The figure is nearly 5.50 lakh in Kerala, around 4 lakh in Odisha, and nearly 4.5 lakh in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

The West Bengal government recently promised to recruit 1 lakh employees to fill its vacancies.

SUBORDINATE SELECTION COMMISSIONS

As most government employees are in Group C, many such posts — including police constables and sub-inspectors — are filled through separate recruitment bodies such as state Staff Selection Commissions, Subordinate Selection Commissions and Police Recruitment Boards.

Holding these exams is a challenge as paper leaks have become a phenomenon. But for several youth, faced with a lack of private sector jobs, it is also the only option. A few years ago, over 48 lakh candidates applied for 60,244 police constable positions in Uttar Pradesh — which means 80 candidates for each post.

of the region’s tourist economy.

Changed political landscape

The fallout from the 2017 protests permanently altered hill politics.

State action forced Bimal Gurung underground, creating a rift that led party leaders Anit Thapa and Binay Tamang to form a breakaway faction aligned with the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC).

This development permanently split the Gorkha votes between TMC-backed local administration and BJP-aligned national candidates. In the June 2022 GTA elections, held after 10 years, Thapa’s newly formed Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGP) won 27 of 45 seats to take control of local governance, while the BJP and Gurung’s GJM boycotted the process.

However, the BJP has maintained a strong grip on parliamentary and state contests, winning the Darjeeling Lok Sabha seat in 2019 and 2024, as well as securing victory across all three assembly seats (Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong) in the 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections.

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• **LEGAL**

‘Essential practice’ test: Why Allahabad HC rejected schoolgirl’s hijab plea

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, August 25

THE ALLAHABAD High Court last week rejected a Muslim student’s challenge to a school dress code, holding that years of attending class in a headscarf did not entitle her to continue doing so and that her claim of religious necessity rested on a “bare assertion” unsupported by evidence.

The order is the latest in a line of judgments that have turned on the “essential religious practice” test under Article 25 of the Constitution. The question of whether wearing a headscarf is religiously obligatory has travelled through multiple HCs and remains pending before a larger bench of the Supreme Court.

Background of the case

The petitioner, a minor student at a school in Prayagraj, had studied there from Class VI to Class X wearing a headscarf, with photographs and ID cards on record

showing her in uniform, scarf included, through those years. She argued that she had worn a headscarf throughout her years at the school without objection and sought permission to continue doing so.

The school said that the scarf violated the dress code and that other students from her own religious community followed the code without it. Admitting her with the scarf would affect “the administration of the School”.

The Assistant District Inspector of Schools, in a report to the District Magistrate, noted that the school is self-financed and has autonomy over its internal discipline and dress code.

The student, who belongs to the Muslim Shia community, told the court the scarf is part of her faith. She pointed out that the school allows students to wear “formal and decent” attire and argued that singling out the scarf effectively treated it as improper. She said that such refusal violates her right to free expression under Article 19(1)(a) and

argued that being denied the scarf affected her dignity and bodily integrity.

What the court held

The court rejected each of those arguments. On the years she wore the headscarf without objection, the bench held that this created no enforceable right going forward. The school’s silence back then, it said, could just as easily be attributed to “lethargy, inaction, lack of will, non-enforcement of the uniform policy, even courtesy or hesitation”, none of which prevented it from enforcing the dress code later.

The court also said that this was not a case where the school had changed its uniform policy, it said, but rather a case where the school was insisting that the student give up an addition she had made to the prescribed uniform while studying in the lower classes.

The bench held that as long as a dress code is “uniform, bona fide, non-discriminatory and intended to maintain discipline

and institutional identity”, the choice of uniform lies primarily with the school.

On the religious claim, the court described the petitioner’s case as a “bare assertion”. It noted that no authoritative religious text, expert material or other evidence had been placed on record to establish that wearing a headscarf inside the classroom was obligatory upon her or that not doing so would alter the fundamental character of her faith.

The petition, the court observed, relied largely on the fact that she had worn the headscarf since childhood and throughout her years at the school.

The court also noted that in the photographs placed on record, no other girl student was wearing a headscarf, including students whom the school said belonged to the same religious community as the petitioner.

It held that permitting students to depart from a prescribed uniform, “even a little bit...would militate against the idea of a uniform. It would transfer the authority

Real Creator IAS Edition https://t.me/+2RvD_RGf9mljMzg1 to determine School discipline from the institution to individual students.”

Why the ruling is familiar

The Allahabad HC located its decision within a line of judgments that have generally treated school uniforms as matters for educational institutions and required students claiming religious protection to demonstrate that the practice in question is obligatory to their faith.

Among them, it most heavily relied on the Karnataka High Court’s 2022 Full Bench judgment in the hijab case, which held that “wearing of hijab by Muslim women does not form a part of essential religious practice in Islamic faith”.

The court in that case also held that a uniform requirement did not violate students’ rights under Articles 14 (right to equality before law), 15 (prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth), 19 (protection of certain rights regarding freedom of

speech, expression, profession, etc.), or 21 (protection of life and personal liberty).

After the case reached the SC, a two-judge bench in October 2022 delivered a split verdict. Justice Hemant Gupta held that “a student... cannot claim the right to wear a headscarf to a secular school as a matter of right”, saying that students are required to follow a prescribed uniform in state-run educational institutions.

Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia dissented, saying that “a girl child has the right to wear hijab in her house or outside her house, and that right does not stop at her school gate... To say that these rights become derivative rights inside a classroom, is wholly incorrect.”

The matter was referred to the Chief Justice of India to constitute a larger bench. Since there is still no authoritative SC ruling on the issue, the Allahabad HC treated the Karnataka judgment, along with similar HC decisions, as “persuasive authority of great value”.

Limits of ‘Economic D-Day’

Latest US sanctions may provoke Beijing

The Donald Trump administration’s announcement of an “Economic D-Day” against Iran may increase hostilities in ways Washington may not have bargained for. On Monday, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, who described the project as “Operation Economic Outcast”, announced new secondary sanctions against countries that do business with Iran. Five specific sectors of the Iranian economy have been identified for sanction targets: Digital assets, technology, gold, aviation, and shipping. The United States (US) has sanctioned about 60 entities in multiple jurisdictions, including four from India. It will have to carefully assess the situation. So far, apart from a slide in US market indices and a rise in oil prices, the impact of this fighting talk is unclear. This campaign comes after nearly six months of joint US-Israeli strikes against Iran failing to dislodge Tehran’s ruling regime or prompt it to relinquish its nuclear ambitions and ease the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. The United Arab Emirates, a US ally, announced an indefinite halt to business and shipping with Iran after two ballistic-missile launches from Iran on shipping in the Gulf, but this preceded Mr Bessent’s announcement by a week. No other major Iranian energy partner — such as Turkey, Iraq or China — has announced suspensions yet. The bigger concern, however, is whether this latest round of secondary sanctions will achieve its aims or provoke a direct confrontation with China.

Beijing is the customer of almost 90 per cent of Iran’s exports of crude oil and it supplies Tehran much-needed infrastructure support and dual-use technologies. Moreover, Iran and China settle their oil trade in yuan and leverage the financial architecture Beijing has built around its currency called the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, which enables it to circumvent the dollar system. Beijing also employs a shadow fleet of old tankers, which turn off their transponders to evade maritime patrols and operate through a network of “independent” buyers — standalone “teapot refineries” (named for their squat shape), which account for about a quarter of China’s refinery capacity — that rebrand oil as coming from Malaysia or Indonesia to mask its origins.

One index of Beijing’s potential response to “Economic D-Day” can be seen from an imposition by the US Treasury Department in April this year on five teapot refineries. These sanctions initially squeezed supplies, forcing Iran to draw down floating stocks of crude oil and prompting these refineries to explore alternative sources from Brazil and Iraq. A week later, Beijing deployed its law on anti-foreign sanctions, stating that the sanctions would not be “recognised, enforced, and complied with”, and described the move as safeguarding its sovereignty. In the long run, the US ruse did not work anyway — Iran continues to sell its crude oil to China. But that prohibition order marked a significant shift in geoeconomic nuance on China’s part, from what analysts described as “hidden workarounds” to overt state-backed resistance.

In that context, the Trump administration’s “Economic D-Day” project could directly provoke Beijing. How this gambit will play out ahead of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Washington visit on September 23 is an open question. Mr Trump hopes to extend deals on rare-earth supplies for US manufacturers and discuss tariff caps on Chinese goods. Unlike the storied D-Day landings of World War II, the US may find itself on the back foot in this instance.

Mask up

Swine-flu precautions should be mandatory

The spread of H1N1, or swine-flu infections, in Delhi and Karnataka reflects India’s suboptimal hygiene standards, which enable zoonotic diseases to recur with seasonal regularity. So far, 2,300 cases have been confirmed in Delhi and over 4,000 in Karnataka, with Bengaluru emerging as a hotspot. Fortunately, the Indian Council of Medical Research has confirmed that this is not a new strain and that the annual flu shot will protect those who have taken it. Though H1N1 is not fatal except in extreme cases for those with co-morbidities, the disease debilitates a patient for quite some time with a disruptive, lingering dry cough and fatigue. But the unexpected upsurge of the disease this monsoon season points to a hitherto unanticipated cause: The impact of climate change.

Like other kinds of seasonal flu, H1N1 flourishes in humid weather. This year, the long-delayed and stop-start nature of the monsoon rains as a result of the El Nino effect has subjected the country to rising heat stress, with weak winds and wet grounds from early rainfall resulting in a spike in relative humidity. Weather analysts have pointed out that indices such as “wet bulb temperature”, which tracks both heat and humidity, have been dangerously close to critical levels. These are conditions in which flu viruses thrive. With climate researchers predicting increasing heat in India, flu outbreaks, including the debilitating zoonotic varieties, are likely to emerge as a regular public-health challenge. Indeed, India’s crowded and insanitary cities can be considered suitable petri dishes for the rapid transmission of such viral infections, as this year’s swine-flu outbreak has demonstrated. The opportunities for strains to mutate into more virulent versions and multiply are concomitantly high.

These circumstances call for a planned programmatic response from the health authorities to prevent the infection’s spread. Though flu shots for the entire population may be difficult to administer, one standard practice could be to mandate that institutions administer the annual flu shot to all workers in hospitals, clinics and related institutions. While flu shots that cost between ₹600 and ₹2,500 may be expensive for the general population, the experience with Covid-19 has shown that the simple and cost-effective solution of masking up in public places works as well in preventing the transmission of the virus, as does regular hand-washing. Indeed, these are the two basic precautions that health experts recommend for the current outbreak.

Although Delhi and Karnataka are the known epicentres of the current outbreak, a growing number of cases has been recorded in parts of Maharashtra (including Mumbai), Tamil Nadu and Kerala. India’s constant migratory labour movement and the growing number of Indians travelling regularly by train or aircraft can have a multiplier effect on the transmission risks. Air-conditioned malls and movie theatres, the other magnets for people during the hot weather are another source of viral diffusion. A compulsory mask mandate imposed by state and urban administrations on all public places — malls, movie halls, markets, airports, railway stations, even parks — should become a norm that is imposed without exception. People are likely to resist, but the government must convey the message through mass-awareness campaigns to help contain the spread.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Focus on regulation

Caps on contracts are only a partial solution for dealing with oligopoly in India’s airports

Winds of change seem to be blowing from the Union finance ministry. These wafts are apparently aimed at enforcing the much-needed corrective measures to ensure competition and fair play in India’s civil aviation sector. According to a report in this newspaper, the finance ministry representative, present at an inter-ministerial meeting deliberating on the award of contracts to private sector players for developing as many as 11 airports, raised concerns over the “oligopolistic nature of the aviation sector”. The representative specifically asked what steps were being taken by the Ministry of Civil Aviation to prevent the possibility of a handful of players cornering the airports being auctioned and minimise the risks of concentration and over-leveraging.

These were legitimate concerns. It is also reassuring to learn that issues arising out of the oligopolistic nature of the country’s civil aviation sector would get discussed and debated at an inter-ministerial meeting of the Public Private Partnership Appraisal Committee (PPPAC). Indeed, the representative of the ministry of civil aviation at the meeting outlined an action plan to address such concerns. The number of airports that may be awarded to a single bidder would be capped in accordance with the norms to be finalised, even though it was immediately unclear at what level the cap would be enforced.

Of course, the bigger concern here is how the aviation sector has been allowed to become a playground for a couple of private-sector entities in the country’s airports business. But the fact is that those legitimate concerns expressed by the finance ministry representative would not be addressed just by imposing a cap on the new successful bidders for airports. There is a more fundamental problem that afflicts the regulatory structure of the civil aviation sector that has over the last few decades given rise to the prevailing oligopolistic structure.

In the airports sector, there are three large players — the state-owned Airports Authority of India (AAI), which manages 129 airports handling less than half of the country’s total air passengers; Adani Airport Holdings, led by Gautam Adani, which operates eight airports (including two in Mumbai) handling about 25 per cent of India’s air passengers; and G M Rao-led GMR

Airports of the GMR Group, which operates Delhi, Hyderabad and Goa airports, among a few others, handling 27 per cent of passengers.

Anticipating that the entry of private-sector airport operators will require independent regulation, the government in 2008 got Parliament to pass a new law — the Airports Economic Regulatory Authority of India (AERAI) Act. Its brief was quite large. All airports whose annual passenger traffic was more than 1.5 million came under the regulation of the newly created body. In about a decade after this legislation, AERAI was regulating as many as 33 out of the 102 airports that were operating at that time. These 33 airports included all the major airports in the country including those in the major metropolitan cities.

Two developments took place in 2019. In February that year, the government decided to privatise six major airports: Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Mangaluru, Thiruvananthapuram and Guwahati. There was a competitive bidding process, but the outcome caused concern among experts, and many political leaders questioned the wisdom of the decision from regulatory and competition perspectives. That was because the bids for all the airports were won by the Adani Group, which meant it would run them for 50 years. AERAI kept quiet and allowed the process to be completed. Between October 2020 and November 2021, the Adani Group took over these six airports.

The second development was a legislative change in the AERAI Act of 2008, which effectively reduced the regulator’s role and power. On an apparently specious ground — that AERAI’s burden of regulation should be reduced — Parliament approved an amendment to the AERAI Act to mandate that it would regulate only those airports whose annual passenger traffic was over 3.5 million and which were acquired by operators on the basis of tariff-based bidding or pre-determined tariffs.

This was problematic. In one stroke, the scope of AERAI’s regulation fell from regulating 33 airports to just 16 airports. In the process, a couple of the airports, which had just been privatised, went out of the purview of AERAI. The government, however, defended its move in Parliament. It argued that the annual passen-



RAISINA HILL

A K BHATTACHARYA

The missing link to net zero

More than 140 countries, covering 90 per cent of global carbon emissions, have announced net-zero targets for 2050 to 2070. That was the easy part. The hard part is turning economy-wide pledges into sector- and company-level plans, especially for decarbonising eight hard-to-abate sectors — steel, cement, aluminium, chemicals, aviation, shipping, trucking, and oil & gas. Yet discussion on this remains rare.

Carbon mitigation so far shows two clear patterns. First, policy and capital have focused heavily on the energy transition, while adoption in other areas, such as electric vehicles, remains limited and concentrated largely in China. Second, there has been little discussion of the eight hard-to-abate sectors, yet they need far more financing than the power sector, where technologies are now mature and costs have fallen sharply. Our recent study found that climate finance needs for the steel and cement sectors in nine G20 emerging market economies through 2030 are 10 times higher than those for the power sector. The need would be greater still if the other six hard-to-abate sectors are included.

Globally, the eight high-emission sectors are estimated to need roughly \$30 trillion of additional investment to reach net zero by 2050. Together they account for around 40 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Steel and cement are especially carbon-intensive because they are both energy-intensive and release CO2 from chemical processes. A majority of deep emissions cuts in steel and cement would need to rely on carbon capture and storage (CCS) and hydrogen-based processes — both still expensive, and not yet proven at scale, with transport and storage infrastructure also lacking. Cement poses a unique challenge because about 60 per cent of its CO2 comes from calcination of limestone, not from fuel combustion. Cheaper gas or more renewables cannot fix that.

A bridge from ambition to action

Sector transition plans, or STPs, bridge national cli-

mate goals and the concrete actions companies must take in their own transition plans. A credible STP is a forward-looking road map for shifting a sector to a low-carbon economy. It sets interim and long-term targets, identifies technology and process levers, maps financing needs, and spells out the policy support required. In practice, it translates a country’s net-zero target into clear sectoral milestones, giving industry and investors certainty to act.

Without them, net-zero targets cannot be met. Hardly any country has published detailed, investment-ready road maps for steel, cement and other sectors that specify the technologies, infrastructure, and financing needed. The NITI Aayog’s STP for India outlines decarbonisation direction and sectoral pathways but it is not legally binding. It lacks plant-level timelines and enforcement mechanisms needed to unlock transition finance.



JANAK RAJ

From road map to capex

Transition plans are company-level road maps that set out how a business will shift its strategy, operations, and capex to align with net zero. They cover targets, technology choices, governance, and financing needs. The NITI Aayog’s STP for India outlines decarbonisation direction and sectoral pathways but it is not legally binding. It lacks plant-level timelines and enforcement mechanisms needed to unlock transition finance.

However, adoption is uneven. In the United Kingdom and the European Union, 66 per cent and 59 per cent of large companies, respectively, now disclose transition plans, driven by regulation and disclosure rules. By contrast, India, China, Indonesia, and Brazil together produce over 60 per cent of global steel and about 70 per cent of cement, yet none has a binding, investment-grade sectoral plan.

Corporate surveys show the gap. Most firms have not identified decarbonisation levers, let alone budgeted for them. A 2024 EY survey found that only 41 per cent of companies had a climate transition plan,

ger traffic in most Indian airports had increased significantly in the previous decade since AERAI became a statutory regulator for airports. At the time of enacting the law in 2008, the criterion of 1.5 million annual passengers was set to ensure that AERAI regulated all but 1.3 per cent of total air passengers in the country. With the rapid growth in passengers, the enhanced criterion of 3.5 million passengers implied that only about 1.3 per cent of the total passengers fell outside AERAI’s regulation. Hence, there was no dilution in the power of the regulator, the government argued.

However, the giveaway came from the amendment’s Statement of Objects and Reasons, which showed how the government was treating its statutorily created regulator. It stated: “Exponential growth of the Section has added tremendous pressure to the Authority on the one hand and various private operators are entering the Sector in the form of Public Private Partnership on the other hand, which requires regulatory certainty keeping in view long gestation of the Sector. To overcome this complexity, it is felt that if too many airports come under the purview of the Authority, it will be difficult on the part of the Authority to efficiently determine the tariffs and monitor the service standards of major airports with the limited resources available with the authority.”

In other words, the government did not believe that it was necessary to strengthen the manpower and regulatory capacity of AERAI to help it to undertake its increased responsibilities and supervise the airports sector. Instead, it was comfortable with the Airports Authority of India, a state-owned enterprise, exercising control over those airports. An arm of the government, a state-owned enterprise, was given more responsibilities and power, while a statutory body created to regulate a sector was left to deal with fewer airports.

Even regarding the amendment excluding airports that had been won on tariff-based bidding from AERAI’s supervision, the government’s flawed approach to regulation was evident. Of course, AERAI was assured of consultation by the government in advance before such tariffs were to be fixed, but this essentially meant that the regulator had little say in the determination of such tariffs. Even if one takes cognisance of the government’s argument that these tariffs should ideally be market-determined, the role of the regulator in ensuring independent monitoring and periodic reviews cannot be underestimated.

It is reasonable to argue that it was this disempowerment of AERAI through a legislative amendment seven years ago that is largely responsible for the creation of an oligopolistic structure in India’s civil aviation sector today. If the regulator had been sufficiently empowered and the government had not diluted its scope and powers to operate through various legal means, the Union finance ministry representative perhaps would not have had to make those disturbing statements on potential risks of concentration and over-leveraging.

More importantly, it is still not too late to review the legislative framework for AERAI, give it more power and responsibilities, strengthen its manpower and allow it to operate as a truly independent regulator. A cap on the number of contracts to be awarded to a single bidder will only be a partial solution, addressing only the symptom. The real cause is regulatory weakness and that should be addressed as well.

and just 17 per cent said how much they will spend to make it happen.

From capex to decarbonisation

Transition finance backs emissions-intensive firms and sectors that must invest heavily to become low-carbon over time. This is distinct from green finance, which fund assets that are already low-carbon, such as solar parks, wind farms and EVs. So far, the focus has been on green finance, not transition finance, with hardly any money flowing into hard-to-abate sectors. Investors in various surveys say the top barrier is the absence of feasible, bankable company transition plans, which themselves depend on credible sectoral plans. Without them, net-zero goals cannot be realised because transition finance cannot flow to the industries that need it most.

What makes plans investment-grade

To attract transition finance, two things matter. First, credible and detailed road maps for the eight hard-to-abate sectors, with plant-level timelines, enabling infrastructure, supportive policy and incentives, and the technologies to be used. Today, sector plans in most countries are only guidance, not binding commitments, which means investors lack the certainty needed to finance projects. Second, clear rules, including a recognised label for projects needing transition finance, standard definitions of what qualifies, risk-sharing by development banks to crowd in commercial lenders, and corporate transition plans that disclose capex.

To sum up, most countries have articulated net-zero targets, but detailed sector plans are missing. Without binding, investment-grade road maps and clear transition finance rules, transition finance will not flow to these sectors. A net-zero target without an STP is a destination with no map. The countries that first link credible sectoral plans with bankable transition finance will lead the next wave of decarbonisation in the eight hard-to-abate sectors.

The writer is senior fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi. The views are personal

Software, made in India



AMBI PARAMESWARAN

What does it take to create a software product and get it accepted by Indian consumers or small businesses? As someone who has worked on two accounting products, EX Next Generation from Tata Consultancy Services and Wings from Wings Infonet Pvt Ltd, I am full of admiration for Tally, the made-in-India accounting and finance software package. Not only did Tally face the Indian competition with elan, it also withstood attack from the global major Intuit’s QuickBooks.

So it was with great expectations that I

picked up the book *The Product Code* by Shoaib Ahmed. Mr Ahmed is not the founder of Tally but of the point-of-sales software product Shoper. The first part of the book, “What it takes to build a product” takes us through the trials that Mr Ahmed and his partner Ravindran went through before they got the market to accept Shoper. Though they had an advantage since Mr Ahmed’s family had a garment retail business and that became the testing ground, selling was not easy. The author presents interesting examples of clients with whom he had to deal; the challenges he had to face; trips to Hong Kong to get the bar code reader and so on.

His perseverance paid off when he landed Madura Coats as his first big corporate account. Madura with its spread of shops across the country gave team Shoper an opportunity to pressure test its product. And they came through with flying colours. Vedha Automation,

the parent company of Shoper, was incorporated in the 1987-88 period. The breakthrough with Madura took six years to fructify and was finally implemented in the 1993-96 period. This gave Shoper market credentials and more shop chains, including global majors such as Adidas started adopting Shoper. While the company faced several threats, it did manage to ward off the competition to become a dominant player in the retail point-of-sale system in several market segments — among them apparel, fashion, footwear.

The second part of the book, “What is a beautiful product: Tally” is about Mr Ahmed’s adventures after Shoper was acquired by Tally in 2005. Tally was originally launched in 1986 as an MS-DOS-based financial accounting program named Peutronics Financial Accountant by Bharat Goenka and his father Shyam Sunder Goenka. In 1988, the software was

officially rebranded under the name Tally. The company was built through internal funds or, to use the Venture Capital term, boot-strapped. The book explains in lucid terms the way Tally was built and the issues it faced. One surprise was that unlike Microsoft, which took a draconian view of pirated MS Office software, BG (Bharat Goenka) seems to have seen the pirated Tally as the proverbial camel entering the tent. His guiding principle was that if small businesses use a pirated version of Tally, they will come to the official version when they want better features.

It was not as if Tally had a smooth ride. Mr Ahmed points out periods when the company was bloated with numerous senior managers, multiple tiers and delayed decision-making. But through all that fog, the company emerged stronger thanks to



The Product Code: Shoper, Tally and the Making of an Entrepreneur by Shoaib Ahmed Published by Westland 288 pages ₹699

some wise calls taken by BG and Mr Ahmed. I was happy to note that the author gives a lot of credit to the various training and learning interventions that Tally used to bring about an attitudinal shift in the team running the product. The book also presents BG’s guiding principle when he built Tally: Simplicity. The package had to be simple to install and simple to use. The book also points to the unique way the product was sold through a tiered system of distributors. I had known that Tally was the go-to software for chartered accountants as a client once told me, but the book confirms that belief. Wings, the

brand I had worked on in the early 1990s, was promoted by a chartered accountant, Ajay Gandhi, from Hyderabad.

The third part of the book, “How to develop entrepreneurs for a product nation” is a clarion call for more product

companies to emerge in India. Mr Ahmed exited tally in 2016 and got actively involved in iSPRIT. This organisation was created by a group that included BG and others who felt that in addition to Nasscom there was a need to drive product development in India. Mr Ahmed held the position of founder-director at iSPRIT. This part of the book looks at why software product projects fail and presents some plausible solutions. Under Sharad Sharma’s leadership, iSPRIT seems to have had a useful role in working with the government in the spread of digital products, especially the India Stack consisting of UPI.

The book is an engaging read and can be a useful guide to entrepreneurs who are looking to enter the exciting software product space. In short, the book says it is not easy, but the journey is exciting and the results can be bountiful.

The reviewer is a best-selling author of 12 books. His latest is the special tenth anniversary edition of *Nawabs, Nudes, Noodles*

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Starlink's Satcom Needs Earthly Fixes

Clear regulatory runway before 2nd-gen launch

Starlink has begun launching its constellation of satellites for 2nd-gen services that permit direct-to-mobile-handset communication through cell towers. It has approval for Satcom 2.0 from the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Still, it needs to secure permission from individual countries for landing rights, spectrum assignment and access to cellular networks. The company has reapplied in India for clearance. Commercial Satcom 2.0 requires global harmonisation of approvals, as SpaceX, Starlink's parent company, uses its reusable rocket launch capability to build the higher-capacity satellite network.

India has allowed Starlink's current satellite broadband services, but is yet to approve its Satcom 2.0 proposal. The company is also awaiting a full operating licence, and New Delhi has warned states against initiating projects until it is granted. A key issue is assignment of spectrum for satcom services. Trai accepts that radio frequencies for satcom are a globally harmonised shared spectrum not suitable for traditional spectrum auctions, but GoI is yet to decide on assigning them. There's another regulatory grey area over direct-to-device (D2D) satcom services, with the country's terrestrial networks seeking a level playing field. Besides, a specialised framework will have to be created for satcom to be able to interface with existing grids.

The regulatory scaffolding must be in place before satcom can deliver its anticipated benefits to telecom coverage in India. Satcom has significant potential to bridge the digital divide as rocket-launch and D2D technologies mature. But it comes with a big bill. Satellites and landing infrastructure cost a lot. Clearances for swarms of low-Earth-orbit satellites are an administrative nightmare. Governments worry about the national security risks satcom poses. Yet, the idea of a connected planet, including its most inaccessible regions, is economically irresistible. India will have to find its way around its concerns over satcom.

Enough of Gurugram As Potemkin Village

Steel-and-glass offices, corporate hubs, and nearly half the country's stock of luxury homes have made Gurugram a real estate hotspot. Yet, a modest-to-heavy downpour can turn Delhi's 'hi-tech' satellite city into a low-tech Potemkin gram, where the glossy façade conceals creaking infrastructure. Over-concretisation, poor planning and even poorer upkeep of drains and public spaces are partly responsible. Better maintenance is crucial. But it needs more to tackle the seasonal urban flooding that everyone groans about, and then glosses over each time it subsides.

Climate change has brought days of concentrated and extreme rainfall that can exceed a month's average in a single day.

Alongside well-maintained drainage systems, cities need more green and blue infrastructure — rain gardens, bioswales and urban forests, alongside water bodies and systems such as wetlands, ponds and restored streams — to absorb, store and slow down excess rainwater, preventing roads from becoming rivers and streams.

Ecosystem restoration is also key to building fit-for-purpose urban infrastructure. Clearing encroachments and reviving natural streams, bunds and traditional water bodies can give urban landscapes additional water-carrying capacity. Our cities need to be retrofitted if they want to be fitting for the future. Urban infrastructure, including stormwater drains, must be designed and upgraded using modern projections of high-intensity rainfall, rather than outdated historical averages. Zoning and land-use policies should mandate permeable areas, while municipal authorities deliver on basic, essential tasks of maintenance. Luxury high-rise clusters with names like Ambience Castriona, Camellias and Magnolias can keep up appearances only that much.

JUST IN JEST

Pepper the Maharashtra capital's autos with languages along with Marathi

Mumbai Autowalas' Multilingual Meter

Mumbai's autowalas have always been the city's unofficial linguists — polyglots on three wheels and a rearview mirror who can switch from Hindi to Malayalam to Hinglish and back again faster than the traffic lights. So, when they were told that they must all learn Marathi or else... a section of them understandably hit the brakes by calling a flash strike on Monday. After all, forcing linguistic uniformity on Mumbai is like asking the Arabian Sea to speak only Arabic. A Mumbai auto ride's charm lies not just in its Muqaddar ka Sikandar-along-Marine Drive zigzagging, but in its multilingual soundtrack. A Gujarati passenger can find comfort in a driver who greets her with a 'Kem chho?' A Tamilian might beam at a 'Vanakkam!' And a Bengali might feel cosy with a 'Kemon achhen?' Before all three unite in the universal Mumbai phrase, 'Meter se chalo, boss.'

Non-Marathi autowalas don't dilute Mumbai's identity but amplify it. They make the city's chaos comprehensible to outsiders, turning every ride into a mini-cultural exchange programme. Mumbai's strength has always been its ability to absorb. Its autos are rolling ambassadors of that spirit. So, let's not turn the city's most democratic vehicle into a linguistic exam hall. The only language that truly matters on Mumbai's roads is the one spoken fluently by every driver and passenger alike: survival.

Five roles that a board leader alone must don, instead of merely being at the helm of meetings

Who Says the Chair's Comfy?



Harsh Mariwala & Vivek Khemka

In many companies, the board's still the last group to know about key decisions. But this is changing. Many boards are now shaping their companies. For boards that want to make that transition, the chair's role is key. There are a few roles that only the chair can play. The test to be applied is simple: if another director should do it, it's not on the list. Here are 5 roles the chairperson needs to don:

1. **Decide who's on board** The best chairs own board membership, working closely with, but not delegating it, to the nomination and remuneration committee (NRC). Boards are reluctant to replace directors mid-term. So, ensuring you get the right person is critical. Once they have their board, chairs play a role to ensure each director gets the right feedback, development and motivation to do their best.

2. **Feedback** The best chairs practice getting feedback immediately after a board meeting, and course-correct. For example, one board meeting ends with a simple 2-min survey of its directors — 5 ques-



Kissa kursiwalé ka

duces motivation. 3. **Decide board's focus** Most chairs delegate to their CEOs the most important lever for board effectiveness: what the board focuses on. Every good chair we know owns this decision. The best chairs also preserve board time. They ensure compliance matters are dealt with appropriately. And, yet, time taken for them is kept to a minimum.

4. **Feedback** The best chairs practice getting feedback immediately after a board meeting, and course-correct. For example, one board meeting ends with a simple 2-min survey of its directors — 5 ques-



5. **Climate control** Work hard on board climate, and keep an ear to the ground. These are 'twin engines' of board performance. Look at reported data of companies that had performance or governance challenges, and you will likely see reported parameters in green — committees, auditors, attendance, etc. What differentiates performance is hard to audit.

Harvard Business School's Das Narayandas says a board can be like talented 5-star chefs trying to cook one meal together. But since each is trained differently, it can end up badly. Best chairs avoid this by working tirelessly outside the room and diligently when facilitating in the room. They are more likely to foster high-quality debate, draw out directors' expertise and seek differing views. When done well, their boards treat dissent as an obligation, and no subject as off the table.

Boards often see materials filtered through the management team. A former Kellogg CEO is attributed anonymously as once saying, 'Problems enter the building as corn flakes, but by the time they get to me, they're frosted flakes.' The chair will encourage boards to meet customers, visit dealerships and listen to analysts who have contrarian views.

6. **Orient the CEO relationship** CEOs report to the board. And as the chair leads the board, they must have a close working relationship. The nature of this relationship can vary between CEO-chair pairs. At a minimum,

this should include the basics — who owns what, how often they meet, and what they discuss. The toughest elements, and ones that often come in the way, are the soft ones — knowing how to give each feedback, pushing back on each other, asking for help, disagreeing, and yet committing.

Depending on the context and issues before the company, the chair may at one time be hands-off, and at another time quite hands-on. Most chairs don't make these decisions consciously. Also, they often settle into a rhythm early and don't revisit it over time.

Often, boards don't agree on calling time on a CEO, usually because there's always a range of views on CEO performance, and

The nature of a CEO-chair relationship can vary between pairs. At a minimum, this should include the basics — who owns what, how often they meet, and what they discuss

boards like unanimity. This is where a chair has to lead, not follow. Who the CEO should be, and whether the current one is 'it' or not, is a decision that has to be top of mind for a chair.

Too many chairs let these drift through absence of consensus. It is the chair's role to get the board to a decision on these issues. If it sounds like a cross to bear, it is. Being a chair is hard, and one often has to be prepared to take the lead on hard calls.

Not one of these elements appears in a governance report. Boards whose chairs do these things may look no different on paper from boards whose chairs don't. But they feel different in the room. For any board that wants to become stronger, the question is simple: how many of these roles does its chair play?

Mariwala is chairman, Marico, and Khemka is senior partner, Egon Zehnder



THE SPEAKING TREE

Secular Ethics

XIV DALAI LAMA

Compassion is not only a religious virtue. It is practical wisdom. If we live in a society filled with suspicion, prejudice and fear, no one can be truly secure. If there is trust, friendship and mutual respect, everyone benefits. Our world today is so closely connected that the old idea of 'us' and 'them' is no longer realistic. The economy, the environment, public health, peace and human dignity all depend on one another.

Many people today do not follow any religion. They, too, wish to be happy and avoid suffering. They, too, need inner peace and moral strength. This is why I speak of secular ethics. By secular, I do not mean against religion. I mean universal: an ethics based on our common human experience. Whether we believe or do not believe, we all need affection. We all suffer when there is fear. We all benefit from kindness.

The purpose of religion, and also of secular ethics, is to make us more human. The world does not need more pride in the name of faith. It needs more humility, more listening, more forgiveness and more warm-heartedness in daily conduct.

In the end, we are members of one human family. Different faiths may serve different needs but the health we seek is the same: a peaceful mind, a compassionate heart, and a life that brings less suffering and more happiness to others.

As told to Rajiv Mehrotra

Chat Room

If He Isn't Back, He Wasn't Yours

Appropos 'Give It Another Shot' by Seema Sirshi (Aug 25), the present US dispensation has perhaps irreversibly damaged Indo-US relations that were so sensibly nurtured by both the countries for two decades. Although the relations have started to improve of late, irritants remain. Notwithstanding the Russia and Iran sanctions bill that is potentially the biggest spoiler, Indian presidency of BRICS will surely rub the US the wrong way. While India has not commented on the US president's outpouring of love for Pak army chief, it leaves cracks in the trust required to strengthen bilateral relations. There are challenges galore. Now, let's watch and be sanguine. Sanjeev Kumar Singh Noida

Highway Alert: Humans Ahead

This refers to the Edit, 'Don't Tamper With Kaziranga's Buffer' (Aug 25). Shrinking the eco-sensitive zone to a mere 3 km is a dangerously shortsighted move that prioritises convenience over survival. The lessons from the devastating 2017 floods, which killed over 100 trapped animals, are clear: wildlife needs a wider landscape to escape rising waters, not an island fortress. Arbitrarily narrowing the park buffer could expose animals to increased highway traffic and deadly human conflict during monsoon migrations. The economic argument is equally compelling, as this natural asset provides billions in ecosystem services and tourism revenue. The government should endorse the full 10-km buffer and consult wildlife experts thoroughly before allowing short-term local interests to compromise Kaziranga's irreplaceable ecological integrity. K Chidanand Kumar Bengaluru



Aborting Airport May Not Fly

Appropos the news report, 'DMK Critics Politicise Vijay Scraps Plan for Parandur Airport' (Aug 25), as expected, the TVK government in Tamil Nadu has jettisoned the Parandur greenfield airport project. But it should remember that every project has its share of critics. Also, it should not be oblivious to the fact that the previous DMK government had spent around ₹800 cr on land acquisition for the project. It remains to be seen how the fledgling government handles the issue and ensure a spacious airport elsewhere in the city. SRamakrishnasayee Chennai

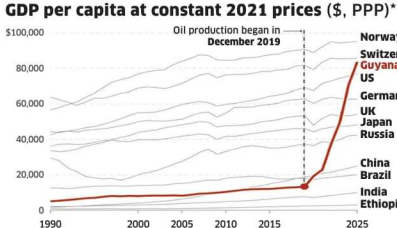
Letters to the editor may be addressed to edit@timesofindia.com

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a land called Canada, Whose manners were pure propaganda. When the US got loud, They stood up unbowed, And punched back with syrup and stamina!

HOW OIL FUELLED GUYANA'S RISE

Guyana, a small country in South America, has seen the fastest growth in per capita GDP in the world over the past decade. A large and sudden expansion in oil production has driven most of this growth. Between 2020 and 2025, the country's oil production grew 860%, making it a key contributor to global crude oil supply growth. Before oil extraction started, Guyana's GDP per capita was well below the global average. It is now more than three times higher.



*This data is adjusted for inflation and differences in living costs between countries. Source: Eurostat, OECD, IMF, World Bank (2026 estimates) Chart & Text by Our World in Data (Esteban Ortiz-Ospina & Pablo Arriagada)

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Hidden Tax or Treaty?



Poonam K Sidhu

You buy a life insurance policy from an Indian insurer. Your premium is paid in rupees, and is governed by Indian law. Your claim will be settled in India. Everything appears reassuringly Indian except one thing. There is a good chance that part of your risk has quietly travelled to Munich, Zurich, Singapore or London. Welcome to the little-known world of reinsurance, where insurance companies buy insurance for themselves.

Every time an Indian family buys life insurance, or a company insures an airport, factory, refinery, ship or satellite, the insurer often transfers part of that risk to specialist global reinsurers. The customer never sees this second contract. Yet, it forms the backbone of modern insurance. According to the latest IRDAI annual report, India's reinsurance market crossed ₹1,12,305 cr in FY25.

Indian reinsurers and foreign reinsurance branches (FRBs) together wrote about ₹69,229 cr of business. The difference of some ₹43,000 cr likely represents business ceded to cross-border reinsurers (CBRs) writing from overseas financial centres. Is that tax avoidance? Not at all. It's simply how international tax treaties work. Most of India's double taxation avoidance agreements (DTAA) allocate business profits under Article 7. It can't tax business profits minus a permanent establishment (PE) in India. If a foreign reinsurer:

► Has an Indian branch that's a PE, the country can tax profits attributable to the Indian operation. The controversy then shifts to allocation: premiums, claims, reserves, head-office expenses and retrocession payments. ► Writes Indian risk entirely from abroad under a DTAA, reinsurance pre-

miums are normally treated as business profits. India generally cannot tax them unless it establishes a PE. ► Is in a non-treaty jurisdiction such as Bermuda, it cannot rely on Article 7, or the treaty PE threshold. Indian domestic law exposure and withholding become more important.

► Under Swiss treaty has a special carveout that can deem an insurance enterprise to have a PE through collection of premiums, or insurance of local risks 'except in regard to reinsurance'. Reinsurance is, thus, intentionally left within the ordinary PE framework.

► Under India-Singapore DTAA, it's a favourable treaty platform for regional reinsurance operations, because business profits belong to Singapore minus a PE.

When these treaties were negotiated, the logic was straightforward: profits should follow people, capital and management, not customers. But in a post-BEPS world that emphasises substance and value creation, does Article 7 adequately reflect the source country's economic contribution in the insurance context?

In digital taxation, India has argued that Indian users contribute to value creation even if the platform is operated from abroad. Tech companies responded that the entrepreneurial functions, capital and IP were located else-

where. Reinsurance presents a similar puzzle.

Clearly, IRDAI policy has encouraged many foreign insurers to establish branches in India. That means they have a PE with underwriting teams, actuarial personnel, regulatory supervision and, importantly, taxable profits in India. But even after the branch accepts risk in India, it may retrocede part of that risk to Singapore, Zurich, Bermuda, or to another group company.

Now, the treaty question is: who really earned the underwriting profit? Indian branch? Singapore regional hub? Swiss parent? That's where transfer pricing and treaty interpretation become important.

Let's also not forget the 291 CBRs IRDAI reports as writing Indian risks with no physical presence in India. How much of their premium is included in the ₹43,000 cr difference that ultimately leaves India without becoming taxable business profits here, because the relevant treaty allocates taxing rights to the residence country minus a PE?

Global risks require global capital. Without access to international reinsurance markets, insurance would become more expensive, less available and far more volatile. At the same time, India is pursuing another strategy. Rather than debating where reinsurance profits should be taxed, it's trying to bring those profits home.

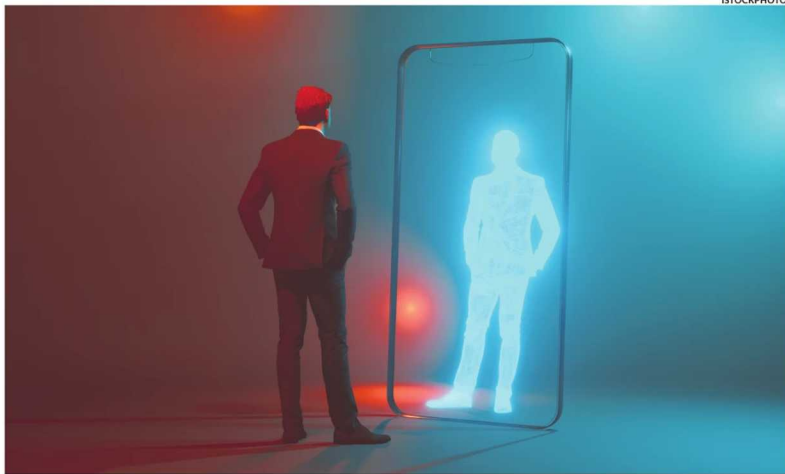
The IRDAI regulatory framework gives placement preference to domestic reinsurers, followed by IFSC insurance offices in GIFT City, before permitting placements with CBRs. That may prove to be the more durable solution. The future debate may not be about taxing underwriting profits, but about creating enough underwriting expertise, capital and capacity in GIFT City so that those profits are increasingly earned and, therefore, taxed in India. Sometimes, the best way to expand the tax base is not to redraw a treaty but to redraw the map of where business is done.



Where does the buck stop?

The writer is former principal DG, I-T (administration), New Delhi

OUR VIEW



Rules must race AI, not ask how conscious it is

Let's not get distracted by cloudy questions of whether super-smart AI can feel and think like humans do. We need rules on bots in human guise, harms caused and more that evolve with it

As artificial intelligence (AI) rushes to outsmart humans, it is natural to feel uneasy about what will happen next. SpaceX founder Elon Musk has said he thinks AI could surpass the combined intelligence of humanity within five years and leave us in a struggle for control within a decade. Dario Amodei, CEO of Anthropic, believes systems with extraordinary intellectual abilities could emerge as early as this year or next. Google DeepMind goes further, forecasting the arrival of human-level AI, or artificial general intelligence (AGI), before a transition to artificial super-intelligence (ASI). Its 'minimum AGI' could arrive by 2028, so we can expect an AI agent capable of the full range of basic cognitive tasks that have been uniquely human so far. Its 'maximum' version could master top-level human cognition over the next 10 years. If so, we might see AI agents making scientific leaps.

Such forecasts inevitably raise the question of whether AI might also become conscious. Experts like Coursera co-founder Andrew Ng, Meta's former AI chief scientist Yann LeCun and World Labs CEO and Stanford HAI director Fei-Fei Li caution that agency systems can plan, use tools, retain context and execute tasks on their own, but this agency does not imply a human understanding of the physical world. An agent cannot feel, let alone suffer, the way humans do. Yet, most mavens agree that AI will be clever enough to act human-like in a way that would confound our ability to identify it as a digital creation. This risks our falling for synthetic flattery, empathy and buddy talk, thus exposing us to mass AI manipulation. Historian Yuval Noah Harari, who also argues that our species is at a critical point, has urged regulators

to ban "fake humans," or AI bots in the guise of people, just as we outlaw counterfeit money to shield the economy. This view merits attention. Even basic chatbots know users closely enough to adapt their language, detect emotional cues and customize responses. But AI can exploit fears, preferences and habits to meet hidden ends. Rogue AI agents and lawsuits that allege chatbot roles in suicide add to the anxiety.

Blanket bans, however, could impede tech innovation. This explains why the EU's AI Act has a risk-based AI framework that bars harmful manipulation and exploitation, while imposing stiffer obligations on riskier systems. From this August, bots must explicitly inform users of their bot-hood, unless the context makes it obvious. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention also has similar safeguards. In the US, Senator Mark Warner's proposed AI Agent Act focuses on consumer agents, privacy, security, competition and accountability. An ideal global rulebook would require clear disclosure of digital identity, prohibit the casting of hypnotic spells and hold AI toolmakers—and employers in work contexts—accountable for harms. Granted, as AI evolves and learns how to develop itself further, enforcing rules will get harder. Regulation, ironically, may need AI to keep pace with AI. How AGI or ASI might turn 'conscious' is a matter of semantics (vulnerable to an AI capture of vocabulary) that must not detain us. We must instead focus on how self-driving vehicles, care robots, military drones and AI agents are forcing engineers to keep their evolution in check. Just as Asimov's 'Three Laws of Robotics' offered a framework before sci-fi leapt into the real world, we need rules that are clear, adaptive and ready for a potentially pivotal regulatory race.

MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

Read those tea leaves closely as India's inflation readings diverge

RBI must stay alert to signs of price pressures in a few items diffusing across the entire economy



NIRANJANA RAJADHYAKSHA is executive director at Artha India Research Advisors.

The main measures of Indian inflation sometimes tend to wander off in different directions. We are at one such confusing moment. This has implications for the Monetary Policy Committee that decides the pivotal interest rate for the Indian economy.

Here are the bare numbers. Consumer price inflation has been inching up for the past eight months. It is likely to continue to do so over the next few months as well. The latest reading was 4.45% in July, the highest in 19 months. However, it is not too far from the average monthly inflation over the past five years. Also, it is only marginally higher than the level that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) targets and is well within the broader inflation range that the central bank is expected to operate within.

Then there is core inflation, which measures price pressures after removing the cost of items such as food and energy in household budgets. Its level is often interpreted as a gauge of demand in the economy. Core inflation too has been rising, but is still below the headline number. It was around 3.9% in July—and even lower in case an increase in the prices of precious metals such as gold and silver are taken out of the calculation.

The third measure is wholesale price inflation. It is heavily weighted in favour of primary articles, fuel and manufactured inputs, so it reacts fast and hard to

supply disruptions such as a bad monsoon, an oil-price spike or any other global commodity shock. The rate of increase of wholesale prices is close to double digits, or broadly more than twice as high as the other two measures. (The producer price index, which is still too new to be used for economic analysis, is at a similar altitude.)

The analytical puzzle is to figure out what happens next. If the three main measures of Indian inflation are at different levels, how will they converge in the coming months? Will they all be pulled towards the level of core inflation, headline consumer price inflation or wholesale price inflation?

Much depends on whether the price shocks in a few goods, services or commodities diffuses across the rest of the economy through a series of second-round effects that eventually lead to generalized inflation.

A spike in the price of oil, wheat or crude oil does not automatically become economy-wide inflation. It becomes broad-based through specific channels, and knowing which one is operating tells you whether the shock will pass or persist.

The first channel is mechanical. Crude oil is used in transport, plastics, fertilizer, food—nearly everything. When its price rises, costs rise across the economy, and firms pass this on to consumers through with a lag. This commodity's place in the input-output matrix does the work on its own.

The second channel runs through wages. If the commodity is a large part of what households buy, headline inflation rises directly. Workers then bargain to protect their real incomes. Wages rise, costs rise again, and a second round of price increases follows, assuming that workers have adequate bargaining power to protect their earnings against rising inflation.

The third channel is of expectations. A shock that is salient enough can shift what people believe about future inflation. It can be the cost of sugar as much

as the cost of petrol. Firms raise prices in advance. Workers demand raises in advance. Traders begin to hoard. This is the channel that modern central banks fear the most. It is what turns a limited price shock into something durable.

The distinction that matters in the end is between first-round and second-round effects. The first round is pure arithmetic based on the weight of a particular item in the relevant price index. The second round is a more complex phenomenon since it deals with spirals, expectations, psychology and accommodation. This is the backdrop against which a temporary shock turns into generalized inflation.

How policymakers read the tea leaves is very important. So is the credibility of the central bank. Participants in the economy may be ready to look past a temporary spike in the prices of a few items so long as they are confident that the central bank will keep overall consumer price inflation close to its mandated target.

There has been a growing body of empirical evidence that wholesale inflation tends to move towards consumer inflation during episodes of divergence. And headline consumer price inflation moves towards core inflation when there is a substantial gap between the two. The upshot is that participants in the economy have been more prepared than before to look past sudden supply shocks that push up prices of individual commodities. That is testimony to the stock of credibility gained by RBI over the past decade on the inflation-control front.

Even now, despite signs of rising inflationary pressures, there is only slim evidence that price pressures are diffusing through the economy.

However, the Indian central bank will have to stay alert to signals from product markets, the country's labour market and also commodity markets of that behaviour changing to an extent that inflation in a few items could spill over to the rest of the economy.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Technology is a useful servant but a dangerous master.

CHRISTIAN LOUS LANGE

THEIR VIEW

Can India's recent trade outreach help globalize Ayush?

ARPITA MUKHERJEE & SAMRIDDHI DUBE



are, respectively, an academic and a research intern.

India is aggressively promoting the globalization of Ayush therapy through its multiple trade agreements and bilateral MoUs. Different models are being experimented with to facilitate market access. For example, under the India-EU trade deal, Indian Ayush practitioners will be able to provide their services in EU member states using India-obtained professional qualifications wherever regulation doesn't exist. The trade pact also has provisions for cooperation by the EU on setting up Ayush wellness centres and clinics in its member states. Homeopathy, with its strong base in Germany, is already popular in the EU, as is yoga. In the India-UK trade agreement implemented on 15 July 2026, duties on Ayush medicaments and medicaments got eliminated. The India-Oman deal, signed on 18 December 2025, has a separate annex on Ayush that covers cooperation on R&D and provides scope for engagement between relevant professional bodies and authorities for the recognition and accreditation of practi-

tioners and therapists of traditional medicine. Insurance coverage and fast-track visas are issues for patients who come to India for treatment. The Oman agreement mentions that insurance coverage for traditional medicine may not be restricted or prohibited, while visas for providers of traditional therapeutic services should be expedited.

The ministry of Ayush has signed 27 government-to-government MoUs with countries such as Japan and Germany for cooperation in the field of traditional medicine. Broadly, these MoUs cover regulatory cooperation, research collaboration and the exchange of human resources. Forty-three Ayush Information Cells have been set up in 39 countries, through which information on Ayush systems of medicine is disseminated and occasions like the International Day of Yoga are celebrated.

These initiatives look promising and may help generate Ayush awareness and expand its broad outreach. Yet, they may not guarantee market access, which would require Ayush products to be approved in importing countries. Unless products are approved and practitioners are allowed to practice there, services cannot be delivered.

Homeopathy is accepted globally. But in many countries, Ayurveda is not recognized

as a system of medicine, making it difficult to market and sell such products. The US permits Ayurveda products to be sold only as dietary supplements, while Australia classifies them as complementary medicines instead of recognized therapeutic products.

These regulatory gaps are compounded by technical barriers. Most Ayush products combine multiple herbs, but many export markets lack provision for registering poly-herbal formulations. High-potential export markets like Canada and the EU demand exhaustive safety data and evidence for each ingredient and its interactions, sometimes requiring clinical-trial data spanning decades, which is difficult to collate for traditional plants and herbs. The EU, UK, US, Australia and Gulf countries impose stiff maximum residue limits (MRL) for heavy metals in food and nutraceutical products, so formulations like *chayawan-prash* that traditionally have ingredients such as gold and silver fail compliance tests. There are limited research papers and pat-

ents in Ayurveda, which makes it difficult to push a case for market access. Thus, trade agreements may not automatically translate into greater exports.

To sign a mutual recognition agreement, the qualifications of our Ayush practitioners must be approved by a competing nodal agency in the partner country, and such an authority may be missing. While many South Asian countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal have a strong Ayurveda base, they hardly collaborate with India to jointly promote Ayurveda in key markets through the World Health Organization and other global bodies.

Today, due to regulatory, clinical-trial and data gaps, many Ayush products are unable to secure approval in key international markets, resulting in lost opportunities for exports and expansion. Patients may travel to India for treatment, but they cannot continue the treatment in their home country. This shows in the low uptake of Ayush visas issued by India. As of December 2024, only 123 such

visas and 221 e-visas were availed of, compared to over 400,000 visas and e-visas for medical treatment.

India needs nodal Ayush regulators that can engage partner countries with the aim of getting them to remove trade barriers, facilitate product approvals and recognize qualified professionals. Without products being approved, services will not grow even if wellness centres and the like are set up.

The Ayurveda industry should conduct a detailed study of the overseas markets they want to address and the problems they face in addressing them. The study may include what other countries like China, Sri Lanka and Nepal are doing to promote their traditional medicine. The industry should also form a partnership with the Ayush ministry to develop a framework for skills that qualify people to be Ayurveda *sevikas* or Yoga teachers, which could then be taken up for discussion with partner countries.

While trade pacts and MoUs open doors, systematic action and evidence-based support from the Ayurveda industry, along with a streamlined regulatory structure for collaboration, will help expand Ayush acceptance and solidify its status as a globally reputed system of traditional medicine.

These are the authors' personal views.

Economy

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26, 2026

IN THE NEWS

INDIAN ECONOMY CAN HIT \$55 TRN BY 2047: EX-CEA

INDIA CAN BUILD a \$ 55 trillion economy by 2047 by capitalising on its young demographic in artificial intelligence and dominating key sunrise sectors, according to former Chief Economic Adviser Krishnamurthy V Subramanian.

'AGRI EDUCATION SHOULD CATER TO FARMERS'

UNION MINISTER SHIVRAJ Singh Chouhan called for reforms in the agriculture education system to ensure a technology-driven curriculum that caters to farmers' needs. The Agriculture Minister inaugurated the 36th Annual Conference of Vice-Chancellors of Agricultural Universities.

Strengthen credit flow, DFS secy tells RRBs

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCIAL Services DFS Secretary Sanjay Lohiya on Tuesday urged Regional Rural Banks (RRBs) to sustain good financial performance and further strengthen credit flow to the last mile.

Infra projects see cost overrun of ₹3.4L cr: MoSPI

INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS WORTH more than ₹150 crore each recorded a cumulative cost overrun of around ₹3.40 lakh crore, according to a monthly government report for July 2026. A total of 1,775 ongoing infrastructure projects were monitored.

Solar subsidy set for a performance makeover

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, August 25

THE GOVERNMENT IS preparing a major overhaul of the PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana that could shift the focus of public support from installing rooftop solar panels to how much electricity they generate, how long they perform and how effectively they support the power grid.

The proposed framework may also introduce generation guarantees, virtual metering, AI-based quality checks and differentiated financial assis-

RBI'S STATE OF THE ECONOMY ARTICLE CITES RECOVERY IN KEY SECTORS

India's economy holds firm despite global headwinds

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, August 25

INDIA IS BETTER placed than some other Asian economies, such as China, to face the Section 301 tariffs imposed by the US in July, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) staff said in the August Bulletin.

The Indian economy also remains resilient amid ongoing global headwinds, the central bank's staff said.

The US Section 301 tariffs, which came into effect on July 24, levied an additional 10% duty on imports from India.

"However, India's major export commodities to the US, such as smartphones, petroleum products and pharmaceuticals, remain outside its purview.

"India is likely to be less affected than some of the Asian economies in the US market, such as China, Vietnam and Thailand," the RBI staff said in the "State of the Economy" article, which is part of the Bulletin.

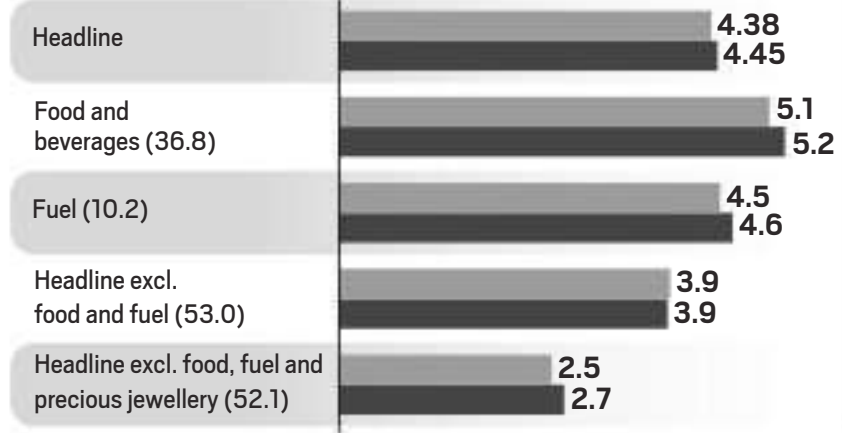
India also faces a lower Section 301 tariff compared with China, Vietnam and

TRADE RESILIENT

MARGINAL UPTICK IN FOOD INFLATION IN JULY

Inflation across major categories

■ Jun 2026 ■ Jul 2026

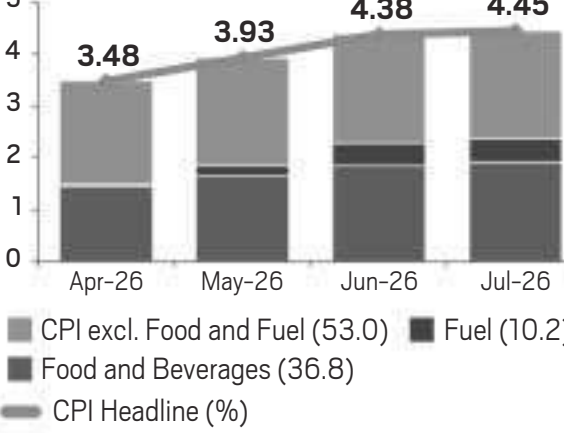


Notes: 1. Figures in parentheses indicate weights in Consumer Price Index-Combined (CPI-C) (2024=100).

2. Precious jewellery includes the items 'gold/diamond/platinum jewellery' and 'silver jewellery'.

Drivers of CPI-C Headline Inflation

(Contribution in percentage points)



Source: National Statistics Office (NSO)

Thailand, all of which face an additional 12.5% duty. These fresh tariffs by the US, along with geopolitical frictions in West Asia, continue to shape the global economic outlook, the RBI staff said.

"Despite these risks to global trade and the growth-inflation matrix, India's robust macroeconomic fundamentals continue to provide a cushion to the domestic economy," the staff noted. The views

expressed in the article are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the central bank, the RBI said.

The momentum in economic activity seen in the April-June quarter continued in July, the staff said. Most high-frequency indicators reflected sustained manufacturing and services activity in July, along with double-digit expansion in merchandise exports and imports.

Domestic demand remained strong in July, supported by rural demand, the RBI staff said. Urban demand also remained firm, with passenger vehicle sales maintaining high growth.

The recovery in the south-west monsoon in July helped kharif sowing reach closer to normal acreage, partly mitigating some of the risks to the agriculture sector, the RBI staff said.

● INDIA-CHINA BORDER TALKS FOCUS ON DELIMITATION



India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval meets Peoples Republic of China Vice President Han Zheng prior to the 25th round of talks between the two countries special representatives on the boundary question, in Beijing

Traders driving onion price surge, says Khare

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, August 25

ONION PRICES ARE rising sharply despite comfortable production and adequate stocks, prompting the government to flag possible speculative activity in Nashik, the country's key onion-producing region.

Retail onion prices rose 56% year-on-year to ₹44.72/kg on Tuesday, even as the government said supplies remained sufficient.

Consumer Affairs Secretary Nidhi Khare said some traders in Nashik were trying to create negative sentiment around supplies despite the comfortable production outlook.

Speaking to *FE*, Consumer Affairs Secretary Nidhi Khare said: "There are some elements in the trading community who are trying to create negative sentiments about supplies while production estimates do not indicate so, while exports are going on smoothly."

Further, Khare added that onion production during the 2025-26 crop year (June-July) is estimated at 30.73 million tonne (MT), against 30.76 MT

SUPPLY AMPLE, PRICES SOAR

■ Onion retail prices up 56% YoY to ₹44.72/kg

■ 2025-26 onion output estimated at 30.73 MT, broadly unchanged YoY

■ Govt sees attempts by some Nashik traders to create supply concerns

■ First 800-tonne onion train to reach Delhi today

■ NAFED, NCCF procure 0.12 MT so far for FY27

■ Govt raises onion procurement price to ₹2,645/quintal



in the previous year, indicating that there is currently little concern over supplies.

Sources said mandi prices in Nashik, Maharashtra, the key producing region, are ruling in the range of ₹38-47/kg, while prices in Mumbai and Delhi are in the range of ₹33-34/kg and ₹25-25.5/kg, respectively, indicating possible speculative activity.

"Comfortable production levels, stock availability and proactive market interventions are expected to moderate seasonal price volatility," Khare added.

According to the Depart-

ment of Consumer Affairs, the average retail price of onions rose to ₹44.72/kg on Tuesday, up 56% from a year earlier. Retail prices have risen by more than 19% over the past month, while prices in Delhi-NCR have crossed ₹55/kg.

The first 'Kanda Express' of the season, carrying around 800 tonne of onions from Nashik, Maharashtra, will reach the national capital on Wednesday. The onions will be sold to retail consumers at a ₹35/kg through outlets and mobile vans operated by NAFED, NCCF and Kendriya Bhandars.

AI boom props up APAC growth amid risks, says Moody's

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, August 25

THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) boom has helped the Asia-Pacific region dodge a sharper slowdown, but headwinds to growth are mounting as geopolitical and trade shocks keep prices high, Moody's Analytics said on Tuesday.

It projected growth across the Asia-Pacific region to slow to 4.2% in 2026 and 3.6% in 2027.

This is down from 4.3% in 2025.

Geopolitical upheaval and trade disruptions, including the conflict in West Asia, and friction between the US and its trading partners—have driven up prices and the cost of doing business, dragging down consumer and business spending across much of the region.

"For now, the AI boom is still propping up export growth, but it is looking increasingly ripe for a pause," Moody's Analytics said in its Asia-Pacific Outlook report.

The AI boom is currently papering over the strain from higher inflation and tight policy, it said, adding the West Asia conflict is a top concern posing downside risks to growth.

A fresh flare-up in the West Asia or a drawn-out blockade of the Strait of Hormuz would send oil prices surging and force countries to drain their reserves.

GROWTH OUTLOOK



■ APAC growth seen easing to 4.2% in 2026 and 3.6% in 2027, from 4.3% in 2025

Geopolitical risks mount West Asia conflict, US trade frictions raising prices

■ Hormuz key risk: Prolonged blockade could send oil prices surging

■ AI boom faces pause: Moody's warns AI-led export boost increasingly ripe for a pause

That would lift inflation, hurt growth, and worsen the trade-offs facing central banks, Moody's Analytics said.

"A prolonged conflict in West Asia, a sudden bursting of the AI boom, fresh trade friction, or a financial market correction alongside a global downturn would leave the region badly exposed," it said.

Sugar imports seen at half of duty-free allocation

REUTERS
Mumbai, August 25

SUGAR MILLS AND refiners are likely to import only about half of the 1 million metric tonne (MMT) of raw sugar the government has allowed duty-free, as falling domestic prices have eroded the profitability of imports, industry officials told *Reuters*.

The world's biggest sugar consumer last week allowed duty-free imports until October 31 to ease record-high prices ahead of the festival season, when demand for traditional sweets typically peaks.

But domestic ex-mill prices have fallen nearly 20% from the record high hit last week.

"Imports looked attractive last week, when prices were firm and rising. But the sharp price drop since the announcement has taken the shine off imports for millers," said Rahil Shaikh, managing director of Mumbai-based trader MEIR Commodities India.

The import margin is thin, and there is no guarantee it will hold when shipments arrive in nearly two months, Shaikh said. Shaikh and four other dealers at global trading houses said imports are unlikely to exceed 500,000 tonne, with most of the volume likely to be taken up by refineries.

India has a handful of port-based sugar refineries that import raw sugar duty-free for refining and export the resulting white sugar.

EPFO to allow PF withdrawals via UPI by September-end

SHUBHAM RANA
New Delhi, August 25

THE EMPLOYEES' PROVIDENT Fund Organisation (EPFO) is set to allow subscribers to withdraw funds from their PF accounts using the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) by the end of September, a senior government official said.

"The testing part is complete; everything is done. The only reason why we are holding the rollout is that the software upgrade has happened and now all that has to stabilise. And then we will implement UPI withdrawals; it should be done in the next month," the official said on the condition of anonymity.

The EPFO currently manages a corpus of around ₹32 lakh crore, the official added. Labour Minister Mansukh

EPFO'S UPI SHIFT



■ EPFO currently manages corpus of around ₹32L cr

■ Subscribers to be allowed to transfer up to 75% of their PF balance, retaining at least 25%

■ Withdrawals to be routed through BHIM-linked UPI gateway & other UPI apps

Mandaviya first announced the proposal for UPI-based PF withdrawals in 2025.

The facility was proposed

to be launched by the end of 2025-26 but has been delayed due to the revamp of the EPFO portal.

The EPFO in July launched the Centralised IT Enabled Services (CITES 2.01) platform, migrating its members' databases from regional offices to a single national system.

Following the revamp, the EPFO has been waiting for the portal to stabilise, with members facing glitches on the portal.

Once implemented, the facility will allow EPFO subscribers to transfer their PF funds directly to their bank accounts through the BHIM-linked UPI payment gateway and other UPI apps.

EPFO withdrawals are currently permitted through the UAN member portal.

● Vessel traffic up 2.5%, cargo-carrying transits down 27%

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, August 25

VESSEL TRAFFIC THROUGH the Strait of Hormuz edged higher in the week ended August 23, but cargo-bearing movements fell sharply, with cargo-carrying transits declining 27%, signalling that the headline recovery in shipping has yet to translate into a meaningful improvement in commercial flows through the key energy chokepoint.

Confirmed Hormuz crossings increased 2.5% week-on-week to 121, even as the composition of traffic deteriorated. The number of sanctioned vessel crossings rose sharply to 16

WEAK FLOWS

■ Sanctioned vessel crossings have jumped to 16 from 9

■ Commercial cargo flows weaken despite rise in overall vessel movements

■ Hormuz traffic had fallen 19.5% to 95 vessels in previous week

from nine, while vessels using Iran's unilateral routing scheme accounted for 46.3% of all crossings, according to maritime intelligence firm Kpler.

"Traffic edged higher through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb last week, but headline volumes obscure contrasting risk signals,"



■ Bab el-Mandeb crossings rose 3.1% to 269, more than double Hormuz traffic

Kpler said.

The decline in cargo-carrying transits is particularly significant as it contrasts with the rise in overall vessel crossings. Kpler said the latest data suggest that "commercial substance is weakening at Hormuz even as overall traffic holds up", highlighting the gap between

vessel movements and actual cargo transportation.

The latest weekly numbers follow continued volatility in Hormuz traffic. In the preceding week, confirmed crossings had fallen 19.5% to 95, with traffic dropping to just three vessels on August 16. At the time, no crossings were

recorded through the standard Hormuz Traffic Separation Scheme or Omani routes, while movements remained concentrated on Iran's unilateral scheme and undetermined routes.

Traffic through Bab el-Mandeb, meanwhile, remained considerably stronger. Crossings increased 3.1% to 269 during August 17-23, more than double the 121 recorded at Hormuz.

Dark transits declined, while sanctioned and shadow-fleet crossings were broadly unchanged at a combined 74 vessels. The two chokepoints therefore presented sharply different signals during the week.

While Bab el-Mandeb traffic remained resilient despite an active threat environment, Hormuz saw the share of sanctioned vessels and Iran-routed traffic rise even as cargo-carrying movements contracted.



CONTRAPUNTO

A dollar saved is a quarter earned

- JOHN CIARDI

The Mighty Dollar

America's most powerful weapon is its currency that it deploys effectively in every major conflict

What missiles, bombs and a naval blockade couldn't do in six months, US now hopes to achieve with tougher sanctions on Iran. It's described 'Operation Economic Outcast' as the "single greatest financial offensive ever". Leave aside the hyperbole, what it really means is that US will go after everyone having any financial dealings with Iran. The idea is to financially starve Iran into submission. Will it work? That's debatable, but the fact that "economic warfare" has become US's "nuclear option" in every conflict, from Cuba to Russia, is a testament to dollar's continuing strength 82 years after Bretton Woods.

It was in 1944 that 44 Allied nations agreed to peg their currencies to dollar, which was pegged to gold at the time. And the system continued, rather expanded, even after US dumped the gold standard in 1971. In fact, it's become so big that it's considered too big to fail. And that implied sense of safety makes it even more indispensable in difficult times, although enough central bankers would relish seeing it supplanted.

So, how big is dollar? In 2016, 65.4% of forex reserves were held in it globally. Euro, the second-biggest reserve currency, had 19.1% share. By 2025, dollar's share had slipped to 57.7%, and euro's had risen to 20.1%, but in absolute terms, dollar holdings globally grew from \$5.5tn to \$6.7tn in the same 10-year period. More importantly, around 90% of global forex transactions still occur in dollar. Commodities like oil, gold, and coffee are all priced in dollar. And most dollar transactions are routed through American banks, which is why America can weaponise dollar so effectively. It can stall payments, and freeze assets, like it did with over \$300bn worth of Russian central bank assets in 2022. And that's what it's threatening to do to Iran's financial partners.

America's action against Russia had rattled central banks, and there have been many discussions to devise alternatives over four years, but there's no immediate threat to dollar's dominance. Simply because no country other than US, offers the scale of economic, political, and financial stability, as well as openness of financial markets and currency convertibility. Dollar is simply the most efficient way to deal financially, outside your own country's borders. Euro or some other candidate might become world's preferred reserve currency one day, but that day is probably decades away.

You And UAN

Why SC, rightly, flagged a question whether third party misuse of EPFO data can happen

EPFO is kind of an employment ledger of India's formal economy. It has 7.98cr actively contributing members, with 1.22cr new members enrolling in FY 2024-25. The UAN innovation a decade ago made it much easier for all these individuals to manage their salary contributions to Employees' Provident Fund. Because this unique 12-digit EPFO identifier remains unchanged even as one changes jobs. But a worry has come to light via a PIL heard in the Supreme Court. The petitioner says that "merely furnishing PAN and UAN details" to certain private verification systems, retrieves the complete employment history associated with the identifiers, without any OTP or explicit consent. This, if it's happening, translates into commercial exploitation of individuals' information, which has been given under legislative mandate.

To be clear, it has not been established that commercial access has been unlawful, or that any official database has been breached. The court, rightly, disposed of the petition, saying it must be dealt with through a policy decision, and asked govt to take "necessary steps to prevent misuse of individual data by private enterprises". Govt should investigate the petitioner's submission. For one thing, private agencies' misuse – assuming it's happening – of data collected by EPFO and Income Tax Department will violate the core principles of Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 – particularly purpose limitation, consent, and transparency.

Employees should get these protections. Otherwise, information asymmetry opens up discomfiting possibilities. A third party can construct detailed profiles of individuals, who wouldn't know what is being accessed, how, and what all was inferred from it. Some are making the case that access to EPFO records can help employers identify 'transgressions' such as moonlighting. But yes/no answer to a specific question is different from examining a person's employment history. That's why SC thought the issue important enough to flag it.

Fishful thinking

Hilsa returns to upper Ganga, cheering ecologists, foodies, and politicians

Jug Suraiya

Reports that the piscine species called hilsa has, after decades, been found again in the upper reaches of the Ganga will enthuse environmentalists, food lovers, and politicians.

In what officials of Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute (CIFRI) have hailed as a "significant milestone" in river restoration and aquatic biodiversity conservation, two hilsa have been discovered in the Ganga, in UP's Chandauli district, a riverine stretch from which the fish had disappeared some 25 years ago.

This breakthrough, thanks to the combined efforts of CIFRI and National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), is cause for celebration.

For gastronomes, hilsa – or ilish as it's called in Bengal – is not just a common or garden comestible but a consumption devoutly to be cherished, all the more so in that the major part of what is domestically consumed has to be imported, which is proving to be a fishy business in more ways than one.

In the past, the high price of hilsa in Calcutta led to displays of public-spirited ire as protesters in high dudgeon set ablaze buses and trams in bonfires of the vanities.

The best ilish is said to come from Bangladesh's Padma River and is the country's national symbol, with its govt largely banning export except for short periods during festive seasons like Durga Puja.

To show Dhaka that Bengal has reason to fish to fry, in recent years Myanmar has become the major supplier of this fish to India.

To mark the revival of the hilsa in the Ganga, Bengal's CM Svendula Adhikari recently hosted a conciliatory ilish lunch in Delhi for 20 MPs of Nationalist Citizens Party of India (NCPI) who, having earlier parted company from Trinamool Congress, joined the ranks of NDA govt.

It remains to be seen if they get more loaves and fishes of office or if the episode will turn out to be a kitchen-sink drama, amounting to maach ado about nothing.

secondopinion

GUNS MAKE WAR

GUTS MAKE PEACE

Is This The Trump Card On Iran?

The true test of Washington's sanctions on doing business with Tehran, isn't whether it will impose pain but whether it can force a behaviour change on part of Iranian leadership

Jane Kinnimont

There is something almost grimly familiar about the position in which Trump now finds himself. A president who built his political identity on defying convention, mocking foreign policy experts, and promising to keep America out of "endless wars" has become entangled in another unpopular conflict in West Asia.

Trump has always preferred the language of disruption: the dealmaker who would reject stale orthodoxies and produce outcomes his predecessors could not. Yet, the machinery of American power has a way of pulling even its loudest critics back towards old habits.

With military escalation carrying obvious dangers, his administration is reaching for a weapon Washington knows well: sanctions. Scott Bessent, US treasury secretary, has promised Iran's "economic asphyxiation", describing the impending campaign as the "greatest financial offensive ever", even an economic "D-Day". It is familiar Trump-era theatre – maximalist language intended to project confidence, inevitability, overwhelming force.

But sanctions against Iran are neither novel nor untested. They have been central to US policy for decades. Iran has lived under successive layers of financial restrictions, export controls, banking barriers, and commercial blacklists imposed by administrations of both parties. Real question is not whether Washington can add more names to sanctions lists. It can. Question is whether it can force much of the rest of the world to observe unilateral American measures.

That is where secondary sanctions matter. US is not merely seeking to prevent American companies from dealing with Iran. It is warning foreign firms, banks and govt that doing business with Tehran could threaten their access to US market, the dollar-based financial system, and American institutions. Washington is telling companies their commercial relationship with Iran may come with a much bigger price.

For years, this threat alone has had a chilling effect. Many international banks have avoided Iran altogether, not necessarily because a transaction is illegal in their own country, but because compliance risks are too high. A bank with even limited exposure to Iran may fear being shut out of dollar clearing, fined heavily, or drawn into a costly investigation. In the modern global economy, this is a formidable form of leverage.

Bessent says US treasury has mapped networks helping Iran evade restrictions and is widening this campaign into new sectors. Digital assets, tech, gold, aviation, and shipping are now in the crosshairs, alongside firms accused of assisting Iran's nuclear programme. His warning was deliberately broad: anyone with economic ties to Iran could face "the full reach of American power".

But the announcement has come with relatively little detail. Which transactions will be prohibited? Which countries will receive exemptions? How quickly will new measures take effect? And, most importantly, how aggressively will US enforce them against govt strategically important to Washington?

Iran's biggest trading partner is China. Several firms newly targeted by sanctions are based in Hong Kong. Beijing will oppose America's claimed right to decide which countries may participate in the global economy. China sees the dollar-dominated financial system as a source of US geopolitical power – and increasingly as a vulnerability for countries unwilling to follow Washington's political lead.

Still, neither side may want an outright showdown over Iran. US has far larger issues to manage with China: trade, tech, supply chains, and military rivalry in the Pacific. China, too, has competing priorities. It may denounce unilateral sanctions while quietly scaling back parts of its business with Iran to avoid collateral damage. That would offer Beijing a useful balance: rhetorical defiance without a costly economic confrontation.

The dilemma extends across Iran's other trading relationships. UAE is a key regional re-export hub and Iran's neighbour. Türkiye just hosted Trump for a Nato summit and needs its strategic relationship with Washington. Iraq is economically and politically intertwined with Iran, yet remains fragile. EU has imposed its own sanctions on Tehran while continuing limited trade in certain areas. India's energy, connectivity, and regional interests cannot be boxed into any simple alignment.

How far is Trump administration willing to go in

What Headlines On Tukaram Mundhe Tell Us

That we laud Maharashtra's FDA chief for doing his job, shows low public expectations from administrators. We should demand more, and also know that lone crusaders often get tagged as 'high-handed'

Kiran Kabtta Somvanshi

Every once in a while, Indians get to witness the resounding impact of a firebrand govt officer, who lives up to the ideal image of how a public servant should function. Bollywood, too, has played its part in depicting enough examples of upright officers, who have managed to change the system by diligently doing their job.

This time, national attention has been captured by Tukaram Mundhe, who is the Commissioner of Maharashtra's Food & Drug Administration (FDA). Often called a real-life Singham, Mundhe is an IAS officer from the 2005 Maharashtra cadre, and has faced 25 transfers in his two decades of service. He assumed his current office in May 2026, and soon made his impact felt by spearheading high-profile statewide raids, and inspections of eateries and food manufacturers. He was looking for evidence of adulterated foods and unhygienic practices.

No wonder Mundhe has won accolades from the general public. Several popular eateries in Maharashtra and leading food brands have been found to be in violation of food safety laws. There is a general sense of shock at the names involved. There's also relief that had it not been for Mundhe, these restaurants, canteens and clubs, and food companies would have continued their business as usual.

But Mundhe's claspdown shouldn't have been exemplary in the first place. What is unravelled by Mundhe 'just doing his job' should have been the default situation of food regulation in India. Mundhe's actions raise questions about his predecessors and peers – whether they failed, or are failing to, perform their duties. Unfortunately, with all the adulation for Mundhe, there is hardly any spotlight being turned on them. People only care that Mundhe is not transferred, as they fear that his successor, like his predecessors, won't be 'just doing his job'.

Within weeks of taking charge, Mundhe could disrupt the status quo, and reveal the true potential of his department in setting things right. The moot question is: why is it so difficult for most officials to instil accountability in their departments? Why are poor quality products being sold in the country by companies that sell better quality products in other countries? And why do Indians, faced with administrative apathy, typically learn to become fatalist in their beliefs and approach towards life?

Mundhe is a product of Indian Administrative Service, India's elite public service that selects the most meritorious students, after having them crack one of the most rigorous exams. Yet, officers like Mundhe tend to be the exception rather than the rule. The social expectation from a public officer in India has sunk so low, due to widespread underperformance, that standard performance feels extraordinary.

Besides, it is not a sign of good governance when things depend on one individual officer to correct the system. It may also result in high-handedness on the part of an official. Earlier this month, Bombay high court directed Maharashtra FDA to grant a hearing to pharma companies, before taking action against their products, observing that the regulator was using "a sword to kill a mosquito". It had further observed,



Live Sisyphus And Not Abyss Of Absurd

Vijay Hashia

The recent tragedy involving 18-year-old Kunal Murlidhar Chandvade, triggered by his stubborn demand for an Apple phone, which his father reportedly could not afford, led to a fatal cliff fall in which the whole family lost their lives while attempting to save one another.

According to National Crime Records Bureau, annual suicide rate in India is approximately 12.2 to 12.3 per 100,000, with young adults aged 15-30 at high risk. The reasons include academic stress, a traumatic, negative familial environment, conflicts, depression and anxiety disorders among others.

This is the abyss of 'absurd.' In his philosophical writing, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus calls suicide a surrender to the 'absurd' – that life is not worth living; therefore, it is suicide. He asserts why we must continue struggling, like Sisyphus pushing his boulder endlessly uphill, without promise that the struggle will ever reward or resolve anything, and without losing life's hope. The boulder remains unmovable for Sisyphus, and his pushing it is a resolute act against the odds and against the absurdity of existence. Retreating and withdrawing from pushing the boulder, he says, is succumbing, and there is one act of dignity left, and that is to continue struggling resolutely even beyond limits of endurance. Allowing an 'absurd' moment to dictate life's value and meaning is yielding, he says.

A tragedy of misfortune ought to have an explanation; a devastating loss ought to contain some rationale. We instinctively search for justification, responsibility, fate or circumstance, and we ask why that happened and where the fault lies.

But the world is not irrational, nor is the human being incapable of reason. The 'absurd' emerges from the collision between our insatiable desire to understand and the world that does not respond to it. We demand absolute meaning; existence gives us only contingency, uncertainty and death.

For Camus, faith is consolation disguised as a deep philosophical choice, giving up on reason. He admires boldness, to face life honestly, without building philosophical theories around it. For Soren Kierkegaard and Lev Shestov, when logic fails to explain suffering, one turns to faith rather than explanation. Nietzsche accepts life's cruelty but advocates embracing it fully.

No faith, theory or doctrine of fate can make any such tragedy suddenly occur.

Gita, chapter 2, says, from contemplation on sensory objects arises attachment, from attachment arises desire, from desire arises anger, from anger arises delusion, from delusion arises loss of memory, and destruction of intellect, and finally the ruin. Upanishads counsel us "tena dyaktena bhunjitha", 'enjoy life and the world through detachment and renunciation without greed.

Today thought patterns have shifted towards acquiring material possessions, social media, brand consciousness, self-centredness, manufactured personality traits for approval, and a craving for social acceptance has engulfed young minds. The remedy begins at home, where children are allowed to speak early, vent small frustrations, and are willing to receive advice when needed. Nothing is worth losing a life. It must be lived on, endured through any eventuality, and carried forward with resilience and courage.

Sacredspace

Meditation depends on strength of mind. It must be unceasing even when engaged in work. Particular time is meant for novices.

Ramana Maharshi

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Hockey letdown

World Cup campaign exposes vulnerabilities

It's a huge disappointment that the Indian men's hockey team is out of contention for a World Cup medal. Expectations were high in view of India's back-to-back bronze Olympic medals in Tokyo (2021) and Paris (2024). During the ongoing World Cup, the team faltered in crunch matches, losing to England, the Netherlands and Argentina. Harmanpreet Singh, who was not fully fit, appeared to be carrying too much responsibility as the captain and ace drag-flicker. The 5-3 win over a below-par Pakistan offered little solace, even though the post-match high-fives between the rivals were a refreshing change from the bitterness seen on the cricket field.

The most troubling issue is the team's failure to manage the transition between generations. Promising youngsters are not being integrated quickly or regularly enough. With the Los Angeles Olympics less than two years away, India cannot afford to keep depending on the same core of experienced players without developing a reliable second string. There is little margin for error in today's highly competitive hockey. An eighth-place finish in the last two Pro League seasons is another indicator that the team needs to return to the drawing board.

The women's squad, including several World Cup debutants, did well to hold strong opponents such as China and Australia to a draw. The team missed a semi-final berth by a whisker. Players have credited the women's hockey league with giving them confidence and exposure. Their call to save the league, which is facing financial challenges, must be taken seriously. Be it men or women, Indian hockey does not lack talent. What this sport, regarded as cricket's poor cousin in India, needs is a robust system that consistently produces world-class players. Lessons from the World Cup must shape preparations for the 2028 Olympics and beyond.

Toxic trail

From Baddi, pollution reaches Punjab

THE Sutlej is carrying a toxic warning that Punjab and Himachal Pradesh can no longer afford to ignore. The registration of an FIR against unidentified industrial units in the Baddi-Nalagarh belt, following allegations that toxic waste entered the Sirsa river and eventually the Sutlej, is serious. But the larger concern is that this is not a new problem. It is a recurring failure of environmental regulation. Industrial pollution from the Baddi-Barotiwala-Nalagarh region has been documented for years. The Sirsa, which passes through the industrial belt, carries the burden downstream. Previous investigations and National Green Tribunal proceedings have flagged untreated or inadequately treated effluents, non-compliant units and shortcomings in the common effluent treatment system. Pharmaceutical pollution is particularly worrying because conventional treatment may not remove active pharmaceutical ingredients and antibiotic residues.

The latest episode also exposes another disturbing contradiction. Large quantities of waste accumulated at the Ropar Headworks were reportedly released downstream. If the material was potentially contaminated, releasing it into the river merely shifted the problem from one point to another. The headworks should have been treated as a site for scientific investigation, with the waste sampled and characterised before disposal.

Punjab must avoid turning this into a Himachal-versus-Punjab blame game. The precise source of the waste has yet to be established, and an FIR against unidentified units is not proof of culpability. What is needed is a joint investigation by the Punjab and Himachal pollution control authorities, with the Central Pollution Control Board providing independent oversight. The episode calls for continuous monitoring of the entire Baddi-Sirsa-Sutlej chain, surprise inspections during the monsoon, identification of unauthorised outlets and scientific tracing of pollutants to their sources. Repeat offenders must face meaningful financial and criminal consequences.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, AUGUST 26, 1926

Joint election board

WHILE we entirely agree with Lala Lajpat Rai that "considering the great importance of the next three years the most competent and trustworthy men of all communities should be elected to all the legislatures and particularly to the Assembly," we cannot see our way to support his suggestion that "as far as possible, the names of candidates should be selected by agreement by a joint election board consisting of a few topmost men in the country's public life under the presidency of Mahatma Gandhi". In the first place, the suggestion is, in the present conditions, thoroughly impracticable. Where are the topmost men in the country who can undertake the task of selecting candidates, with any hope of their decision being universally accepted? Rai cannot be unaware that just at present there is perfect anarchy in the domain of political leadership. Let us take the one name suggested by him. If we leave aside a mad man here and there, the whole country undoubtedly reveres and respects Mahatma Gandhi for his personal and public character, as only a few men in any age or country have ever been revered or respected by their people, but is there a single part of the country or a single community that unreservedly accepts his political lead? And what is true of him is true of all lesser men. Rai will find it absolutely impossible to constitute a joint board whose decisions will be accepted either by the country as a whole or by different sections of the people in his own province. Secondly, we entirely fail to see how a joint board like the one suggested by Rai can function without that amalgamation of the parties which he disavows his intention of suggesting.

OPINION

Handle AI detection with caution

It could become another chokepoint through which information is authenticated and trusted



LT GEN DS HOODA (RETD)
FORMER NORTHERN
ARMY COMMANDER

ARTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) has created a clear authorship problem. Articles, reviews and literary work can now be produced with little human involvement. It is therefore unsurprising that AI-writing detection programmes have become commonplace. The latest entrant in this field is Pangram Labs, which claims an accuracy of 99.98%.

Pangram is notable because it analyses bodies of public writing and publishes conclusions on whether they are AI-generated. It investigated winners of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and publicly reported that four of the ten recent regional winners showed strong signs of AI usage in their writing. Pangram also has a browser extension that scans text on feeds such as LinkedIn, Substack and Reddit and inserts labels such as "Human" or "AI" as users browse.

Pangram has its share of critics. *The Wall Street Journal* editor James Taranto called Pangram a "smear machine" after three editorial columns in his newspaper were labelled as AI-generated. American journalist Taylor Lorenz was accused on X of using AI to write an article for *Vanity Fair*. Lorenz denied the allegation, and Pangram CEO Max Spero investigated the result and concluded that the detector had made an error.

Today, much of the debate around AI detectors is about their accuracy and the reputational harm to writers. However, for countries that rely on externally developed digital systems, the implications go beyond indi-



PERIL : India relies extensively on foreign-owned and foreign-governed platforms, algorithms and AI systems. ISTOCK

vidual reputation.

Consider this scenario: a respected figure publishes a serious strategic paper that challenges a widely accepted position. It is run through Pangram and tagged as 71% AI-generated. It triggers a social media storm and the writer is discredited. The arguments made in the paper are not even debated. A technical judgment about how a piece of writing may have been produced becomes a verdict about its intellectual credibility. This has deeper implications in an age where authenticity, credibility and belief are increasingly contested.

It could be argued that AI detectors are neutral tools, devoid of any geopolitical significance or power. This would be an extremely simplistic way of thinking. We have been on this ground before. Search engines arrived as simple tools to find what already existed on the Internet. It took many years to realise that Google does not merely retrieve information. It ranks, curates and contextualises it. A change in ranking logic can amplify one political framing and bury another, elevate one interpretation of a crisis, shape what billions encounter first, and therefore what they are

The larger concern is not where Pangram was built, but the authority we choose to give systems like it.

most likely to believe.

Social media was initially seen as a neutral connection to interact with friends. We now understand that these platforms shape perceptions, inflame emotions and could even divide societies. Social media has become an indispensable tool in information warfare between nations. In both cases, the consequences went far beyond viewing the technology as an unbiased conduit. AI detection carries a similar potential. It could become another chokepoint through which information is increasingly authenticated and trusted.

Modern societies have gradually outsourced important parts of the

information and knowledge environment to technological systems. Search engines, social media platforms, generative AI, and now AI-detection systems are part of an emerging epistemic infrastructure through which societies discover and authenticate knowledge. In this infrastructure, authentication may prove especially consequential because it acts directly on credibility.

A search result can be buried but still found with effort. Dominant narratives on social media can be countered, even if by a minority. However, an important piece of work classified as inauthentic can be discredited before its arguments are even engaged with, making authentication a far more potent gatekeeper of credibility. In a post-truth environment, where trust is already fragile, and competing actors routinely seek to undermine the credibility of institutions and experts, authentication becomes a potential instrument of information control.

For India, this should be viewed as more than an academic integrity issue. We already operate in a vulnerable information environment due to our technological dependencies. India relies extensively on platforms, algorithms and AI systems that are

foreign-owned and foreign-governed. These technologies already mediate what information is discovered, amplified and consumed. If externally developed authentication systems also begin determining what is considered genuine, another layer of dependence is added to the information environment.

There is another India-specific issue. Models trained largely on native English set the standard for what human writing should look like, and detectors treat departures from that standard as suspect. A 2023 Stanford study found that widely used detectors flagged genuine essays by non-native English writers as AI-generated more than 60% of the time. Peer-reviewed work this year has reported the same bias. Systematic misclassification of this kind could disproportionately discount Indian scholarship, deepening our reliance on foreign strategic thinking.

This is why the issue goes beyond academic integrity into national security. Nations are already raising security concerns about who holds their data and who controls the networks they depend on. Authentication raises a further question: who decides what is accepted as genuinely human-authored? In a contest increasingly fought over credibility and belief, the ability to certify the authenticity of competing ideas is a strategic capability. For India, which produces much of its intellectual and strategic work in English as a second language, the exposure is sharper.

This does not mean India should reject foreign technologies or attempt to build indigenous substitutes for every detection system. The larger concern is not where Pangram was built, but the authority we choose to give systems like it. If judgments about whether Indian scholarship, journalism or strategic thought are genuinely human come to depend on opaque external systems, a seemingly narrow question of AI detection could become one of intellectual and strategic autonomy.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

With artificial intelligence we are summoning the demon. —Elon Musk

Language inseparable from context

SWATI TIWANA

SOMEWHERE between Shakespeare's thou and GenZ's bro, we seem to have misplaced something — not language, but context. From thou to you, from "Yours sincerely" to "Seen", from carefully constructed sentences to "*vasteguna huiya*" — a playful exclamation with no literal meaning, popularised during the GenZ protest at Jantar Mantar — language has travelled a long distance. That is what makes language fascinating. It refuses to stay still.

Shakespeare's Elizabethan English, with its elaborate flourish, was once perfectly natural to its audience. Centuries later came letters, emails, WhatsApp, memes, GIFs and emojis. Today, vocabulary can emerge on social media and become mainstream before dictionaries catch up. This linguistic revolution is no longer confined to the young. Millennials use GenZ slang. Parents use it. Even generations that once complained about "kids these days" now use words first encountered on Instagram.

And why not? Every generation invents its own shorthand and inside jokes — sometimes meaningful, ironic or gloriously absurd. It may bewilder one generation while perfectly capturing a moment for another. That is the beauty of evolving language. But is it evolving faster than etiquette?

There is nothing wrong with slang, abbreviations or emojis. They have made communication quicker. But an emoji is also a caricature — it simplifies and exaggerates an emotion. That is why context matters.

I once received a condolence message accompanied by a crying emoji. The intention was compassionate, yet the emoji felt strangely out of place. Grief is solemn. Condolences are among those moments when communication needs quietness. A crying face, perfectly acceptable in casual conversation, suddenly felt informal and almost unserious. The message wasn't offensive, but it reminded me that digital fluency does not automatically translate into social intelligence.

We talk about social media literacy in terms of misinformation, cyber safety, privacy and responsible posting. All are important. But perhaps there is another dimension: knowing how to behave. When is slang appropriate? When does humour become insensitive? When does an emoji add warmth, and when does it trivialise an emotion? When does informality turn into disrespect? These are questions not of grammar, but of judgment.

Every generation has its language. What one considers rude, another may find refreshingly casual. Neither is entirely wrong. The answer is not to make one generation speak like another, but to learn code-switching — not merely between languages, but between contexts.

You can say "OMG" to a friend and "I am deeply sorry for your loss" to someone grieving. Communication is not merely about what we say. It is about what the moment deserves.

Beneath all the new words, abbreviations and emojis, let us hold on to the one thing that should never need an update: Grace. Because words will keep changing. Our sense of when, where and how to use them should not.

The writer is a Punjab Civil Services (PCS) officer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The larger goal matters

Apropos of 'Change gears to build capabilities'; there is a certain irony in the fact that even the logo of the 'Make in India' initiative was designed by Wieden+Kennedy, a US-founded multinational advertising agency. As reported by a leading daily based on information obtained under the Right to Information Act, the agency's Indian operations were involved in creating the logo and campaign for PM Modi's initiative to position India as a global manufacturing hub. While this may invite some reflection, the larger objective remains important. What matters ultimately is that we continue to strengthen domestic manufacturing, encourage innovation, create jobs, and work collectively to make the 'Make in India' vision a lasting success.

ARUN HASTIR, GURDASPUR

Merit is beyond prejudice

Refer to 'Plagiarism — but who's asking whom'; the journalist's pointed queries about the overlapping of the Black professor Jason Arday's academic work and some other scholar's thesis cannot be considered a 'crime' or proof of his racial bias. In our universities, too, researchers from less-privileged and socially backward communities have to fight for their due amid retrogressive beliefs about their potential. We must learn to respect merit, which is genuine and not fake. The enlightened sections in the academia must question the Stone Age beliefs which hinge on myths, not evidence.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

Evidence before assumption

Refer to 'Iran extended strong support during 2025 clash with India: Pakistan'; India and Iran have maintained decades of diplomatic engagement and cooperation. India has important strategic and economic interests in Tehran. Therefore, any claim of Iranian assistance to Pakistan during hostilities should be established through credible evidence. New Delhi should continue its diplomatic engagement with Iran while keeping national security considerations at the forefront. Clear communication between countries can help prevent misunderstandings and ensure that bilateral relations are not affected by competing narratives.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

Initiative in the right direction

Refer to 'Fix the schools'; the Cockroach Janta Party has rightly flagged the issues regarding education infrastructure and needs. Schooling is not the end but a means to reach the ultimate goal. 'A good beginning makes a good ending', but if the schools are not equipped with the basic requirements, one cannot expect a good quality of education to students. The CJP has taken a step in the right direction. The need of the hour is to ensure strict inspections to identify and address flaws. Governments must take necessary steps to implement a well-defined roadmap from the school level.

ARTI SOOD, BY MAIL

Rights over social restrictions

Refer to 'Khap women back marriage curbs, seek ban on live-in relationships'; women representatives are focusing on restricting intra-gotra and intra-village marriages, rather than dwelling on substantive issues affecting women's equality, dignity and autonomy. Khaps risk legitimising extra-constitutional social authority over matters concerning consenting individuals and the law. The educated women participating in such panchayats should ask themselves whether society progresses by restricting young women or by widening their horizons. Attempts to push society backward must be resisted through constitutional values, education and social reform.

RAMPHAL KATARIA, KURUKSHETRA

Recalibrate policies

Refer to 'US mulls H-1B fee hike to over \$100K'; the Indian government should not remain a silent spectator when its young talent faces such a prohibitive barrier. Thousands of Indian students and professionals who study and work in the US contribute enormously to its universities, technology sector, research ecosystem and US tax revenues. The government must diplomatically engage Washington, seek a fair and reasonable regime for genuine skilled workers. At the same time, India should strengthen domestic opportunities so that migration remains a choice, not an economic compulsion. India's foreign and economic policies have to be recalibrated to safeguard our youth's needs.

BRIJ B GOYAL, LUDHIANA

Violence exposes Meghalaya’s fault lines



SANJOY HAZARIKA
INDEPENDENT COLUMNIST

HUNDREDS of black-garbed, masked motorcycle riders last week streamed into Shillong, capital of Meghalaya, carrying black flags and exuding an aura of menace. Making it even stranger, they had also masked their number plates with black cloth, making identification difficult.

These were members/loyalists of the Khasi Students Union (KSU), a non-governmental organisation that issues diktats, holds political protests and rallies in support of local demands and presents itself as the voice of Khasi youth, though it does not appear to be much engaged with student issues.

The organisers had given a 15-day deadline to the state government to respond on five demands, including a fair public hearing on a major new project awarded to Shree Cement, one of the largest private cement companies in India, after an earlier one was disrupted by government forces. Another longstanding demand was the imposition of the Inner Line Permit

(ILP), a colonial-era system that regulates the entry of visitors to border states like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram.

Citing government's non-response, the KSU announced a bike protest on August 18 for the following day. The district administration (obviously the state government was also involved) gave permission for the large rally. But no arrangements were made to curb the protesters or keep them at a distance from the public. There were no barricades or announcement of alternative routes for the public, as is common in most cities during a sensitive march.

The authorities made the fatal mistake of allowing the grim flow of black-clad motorcyclists to drive through neighbourhoods with a large number of 'non-tribals' — that's how residents from other parts of the country or the plains are referred to here and in other hill states of the North-east. Non-tribals, including Bengalis, are in significant numbers here, but have been targeted in the past by local groups. Few cases over the decades, including for heinous crimes, have ended in conviction, leading to a palpable sense of edginess and unease at times.

Cars with Assam number plates were attacked by so-called protesters, as were Meghalaya government vehicles and a school bus carrying children by pelting them with rocks before the vio-



AMISS: The Meghalaya police are either insufficiently trained, incapable or ignorant of how to handle mobs.

lence turned towards innocent bystanders, who were beaten with sticks, kicked and punched. Yet, a KSU leader was filmed before the rally urging participants to stay peaceful!

These attacks were video-recorded by hundreds of people. They uploaded their videos on social media apart from their own networks. The videos went viral. The police were worse than bystanders. Not only did they fail to challenge the thugs, they were barely visible on the ground. It appears that the Meghalaya police are either insufficiently trained, incapable or ignorant of how to handle violent mobs. KSU rallies have a history of erupting in occasional and unprovoked violence. That should have alerted the state government.

In full public view,
people saw naked
prejudice for
what it was.

The KSU apologised and tried to distance itself from the attackers, saying the latter were non-members. But they were hoist with their own petard: if the hooligans were not members, why were they allowed to take part in the rally? Surely such a powerful organisation, that has made a tradition of protests and rallies and is tacitly supported by all political parties, has a list of its members? A second question: if these were not members, why did its members not restrain them?

The social media accounts and reports had a swift and cascading effect. First came reactions from taxi drivers and associations in Assam, where Meghalaya vehicles were also targeted and movement blocked at Jorabat, a key entry point into Megha-

laya. It became a choke point.

Second, tourists and travellers found themselves in a panic; rooms were cancelled, guests sought to return home. Most of the taxi business into Meghalaya is controlled by tour operators based in Assam or using Assam vehicles. The reason is simple — the nearest large airport and the only railway station are in Guwahati. The transportation issue has been a longstanding grouse for Meghalaya taxi associations. Some want the Assam taxis to stop at Jorabat and passengers to transfer to Meghalaya registered cars.

During the three-day stand-off, travellers came to Jorabat from Shillong — the exodus was one way — walked to Assam-registered cars before making their getaway. All this shows that the Act East and Look East policies cannot work without trust between neighbouring states.

Social media influencers went on bitter tirades against the other state. Racism is unacceptable and should invite the full force of the law.

Ultimately, the two state governments stepped in to sort out the escalation. Meghalaya agreed to compensate people who were injured and vehicles that were damaged. Even this truce is till September 10. The government in Shillong invoked the Meghalaya Maintenance of Public Order Act which says that "any individual, group, or organisation that destroys public or private property is explicitly held

liable to financially compensate the government and private citizens for the losses suffered." This should be worrying to the protesters. But the damage had been done and Meghalaya's image of an oasis has been dented.

Inter-state traffic may have resumed, but lurking at the back of many minds is the uncertainty caused by sudden, unprovoked incidents and how the government was found wanting. A few KSU leaders have been arrested, FIRs filed and some attackers identified. Meghalaya CM Conrad Sangma is under pressure. The issue is attacks and that in full public view, people saw naked prejudice for what it was.

All eyes are on the Sangma government: will it go after the criminals and ensure that such events don't happen again? Will it take action against officials who failed in their duties? But such eruptions of targeted violence have been taking place in Meghalaya for decades and the number of people who've been convicted is a fraction of those involved.

One important development to note is the outcry against the violence. People of all ages have taken to social media to condemn the violence and demanded an end to it. Actions like those of August 19 have far-reaching consequences. Tourists may head to other parts of the region with a reputation for safety.

It is a time of reckoning.

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

Who was Anand Hingorani



RN MALIK
ENGINEER-IN-CHIEF (RETD),
PUBLIC HEALTH DEPT, HARYANA

A NEWS report in *The Tribune* (August 21) said that descendants of Anand T Hingorani had put up for auction the handwritten notes of Mahatma Gandhi for Rs 16.2 crore. The identity of the bidder was kept secret. The notes comprised 688 daily messages sent by Gandhi to Anand T Hingorani after the death of his wife, Vidya, on July 20, 1943.

Anand Hingorani (1907-1990) belonged to Karachi. He was a staunch follower of Gandhi. His father, Tota Ram Hingorani, worked as a chief engineer in Iraq and after his retirement, Tota Ram helped Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose form the INA.

Anand was only 13 when Gandhi launched the Non-cooperation Movement on August 1, 1920 — the day Lokmanya Tilak died. Young Anand was so inspired by the movement that he started wearing khadi clothes from that very day. He was a law student when he first met Gandhi at the Lahore Session of the Congress on the banks of the Ravi river in 1929. Gandhi asked him to join his Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. Along with his wife, Anand began living in the ashram. Anand was among the first batch

of 78 ashramites who undertook the historic Dandi March on March 12, 1930. Anand was imprisoned five times during various movements led by Gandhi. In August 1942, he started distributing pamphlets, exhorting people to join the Quit India Movement.

He got a shock when his wife Vidya died on July 20, 1943 following a stomach infection in Wardha. Their son Mahadev was just 10 years old. Anand was devastated by her untimely demise. Gandhi had been detained at Aga Khan Palace at that time. Kasturba Gandhi died there on February 22, 1944.

Gandhi was released on May 6, 1944 after he suffered from a serious infection. Only then did he come to know about the demise of Vidya and Anand's distraught

state. In June 1944, Gandhi sent handwritten messages to Anand to offer him solace. His first message was the same one that Bapu had received from his American admirer, Mrs Glen Snyder, from Iowa after Kasturba's death. It said: "You cannot say, you must not say that she is dead. She is just away..." Gandhi added: "Do not feel forlorn, as God is always your permanent companion." Gandhi continued to send consoling messages daily for 688 days. The messages addressed subjects such as ahimsa, celibacy, untouchability, anger management and metaphysics.

After Independence in 1947, Gandhi asked Nehru to include Anand in his Cabinet and Nehru agreed. But Anand refused the offer, saying that he could not bargain his fight for Independence for governmental bonus. Instead, he decided to live in Bombay and start an archival project to edit, publish and preserve Gandhi's scattered writings, speeches, quotations and artefacts, like his *charkha*, copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, etc.

He compiled Gandhi's writings and speeches into 52 volumes. He also compiled the 688 messages into a book titled *"Thoughts for the Day"*. It is priced at Rs 1,550 and available on Amazon. This is how Anand Hingorani spent the rest of his life, spreading Gandhian philosophy and preserving his legacy.

The auctioneer, Saffronart, has not disclosed the identity of the descendants. It is not yet known whether the proceeds of the auction would be used by the descendants for personal gain or to establish a trust to perpetuate the memory of the great freedom fighter, Anand Hingorani.

A staunch Gandhian, he
preserved the Mahatma's
scattered writings,
speeches and artefacts.

China's invisible kill web



NAMITA BARTHWAL
RESEARCH ANALYST, CENTRE FOR
MILITARY AFFAIRS, MPIDSA

THE May 2025 military confrontation with Pakistan brought an old Indian concern into sharper focus: What form could China-Pakistan military complicity take in the event of a two-front aggression? The answer may not necessarily be clear-cut, but the more consequential role of the eastern neighbour could lie in strengthening Pakistan's ability to see the battlefield, process information and act faster.

This is particularly visible in the growing cooperation between the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). China is helping Pakistan build a military system capable of seeing earlier, deciding faster and striking quicker. Few officers represented the rise of Chinese air power more clearly than General Xu Qiliang. As Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission for a decade, air power moved closer to the centre of China's military modernisation.

Pakistan remains dependent on external suppliers, particularly China, for several critical technologies, including advanced electronics, sensors, weapons, specialised materials and other upstream inputs.

The fate of Pakistan's ambitious next-generation fighter project Pro-

ject Azm is instructive. Pakistan's investment in Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft is a good example.

Drones provide another layer: Pakistan operates Chinese Wing Loong and Caihong (CH) series of military drones alongside Turkish and domestically produced systems. Space is increasingly adding another dimension. With Chinese assistance, Pakistan has rapidly expanded its remote-sensing capabilities, including optical and synthetic-aperture-radar satellites.

These investments point towards one objective: battlefield transparency — the ability to build a clearer and more continuous picture of where an adversary's forces are, what is moving, which systems are active and what may happen next.

Satellites produce imagery, radars generate tracks and drones provide continuous feeds. Artificial intelligence becomes important because it can help convert this volume of information into usable decisions. The PAF's establishment of the Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Computing (CENTAIC) in 2020 is relevant in this context. This brings the different components together.

A conventional military kill chain involves finding, fixing and tracking a target, deciding how to engage it, striking it and assessing the result. Connecting sensors, command networks and weapons reduces the time required to move through this sequence — what can be described as kill-chain compression. Connect multiple sensors with multiple shooters and the architecture begins moving towards a kill web.

Since 2011, Shaheen has evolved from relatively straightforward air-combat training towards more complex operations involving fighters, airborne early warning, electronic warfare, air defence and command-and-control. Pakistan is gaining exposure to Chinese operational concepts, besides hardware.

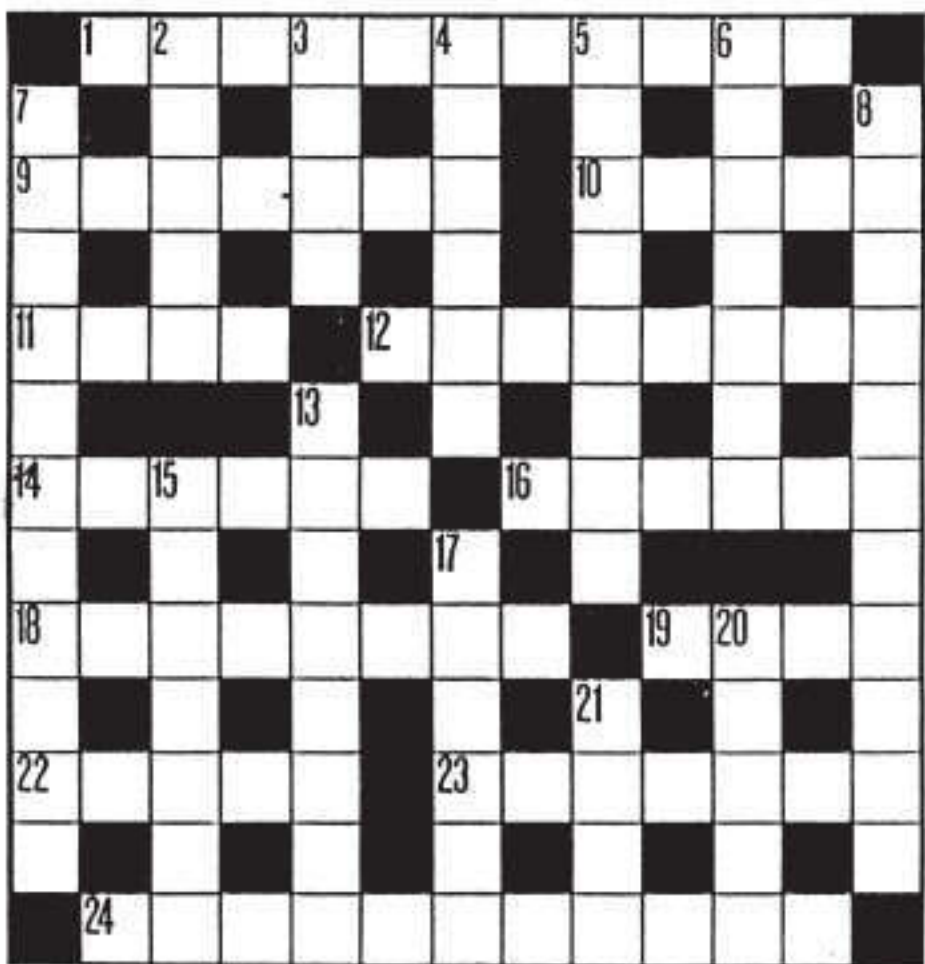
Pakistan does not need to achieve military parity with India. It only needs sufficient capability to compel India to devote sustained attention and resources to its western front. China can potentially strengthen this pressure without directly entering an India-Pakistan conflict.

The crucial issue is not whether China itself fired a weapon. In networked warfare, intelligence, surveillance, communications and technical assistance can influence an engagement well before a weapon is fired.

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

Pakistan is gaining
exposure to Chinese
operational concepts,
besides hardware.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Eager to become an actor (5-6)
- 9 In succession (7)
- 10 Burn superficially (5)
- 11 Brusque (4)
- 12 Large and luxurious (8)
- 14 Indiscriminate (6)
- 16 Quash (6)
- 18 A disposition to mercy (8)
- 19 Resound (4)
- 22 Wireless (5)
- 23 Interpretation (7)
- 24 Available from stock (3,3,5)

Yesterday's Solution

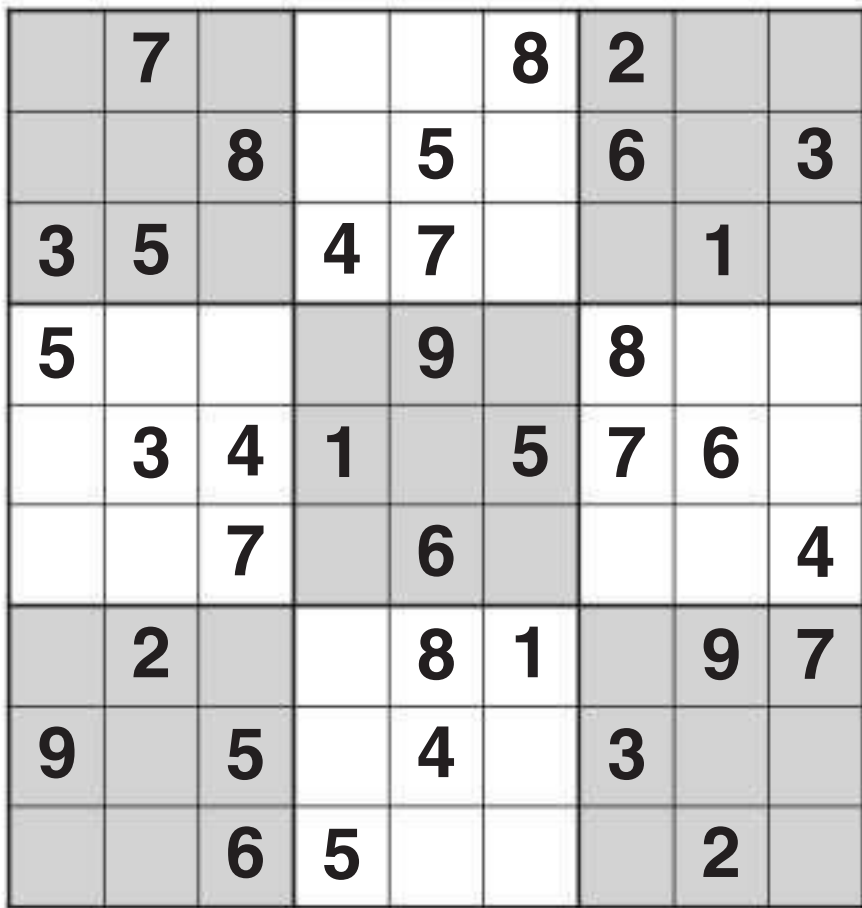
Across: 1 Nod off, 4 Profound, 9 Bewail, 10 Mistaken, 12 Anew, 13 Haven, 14 Neat, 17 Keep one's head, 20 Masterstroke, 23 Grab, 24 Motor, 25 Pair, 28 Epidemic, 29 Varied, 30 Suffrage, 31 Clothe.

Down: 1 Nebraska, 2 Dewy-eyed, 3 Foil, 5 Raise the roof, 6 Fate, 7 Upkeep, 8 Donate, 11 Have it coming, 15 Topaz, 16 Waltz, 18 Botanist, 19 Begrudge, 21 Egress, 22 Tariff, 26 Pear, 27 Pall.

DOWN

- 2 General purport (5)
- 3 Forbidding in appearance (4)
- 4 Remarkable (6)
- 5 Systematic investigation (8)
- 6 Find guilty (7)
- 7 Past performance (5,6)
- 8 Came to nothing (4,7)
- 13 Leading (8)
- 15 Very many (2,3,2)
- 17 Infrequent (6)
- 20 Sensation of cold (5)
- 21 A small addition (4)

SU DO KU



V.EASY
epaper.tribuneindia.com

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

AUGUST 26, 2026, WEDNESDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1948
■ Bhadrabad Shaka	4
■ Bhadrabad Parvishate	10
■ Hijari	1448
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 13, up to 8:00 am	
■ Saubhagya Yoga up to 8:00 am	
■ Shravan Nakshatra up to 12:48 am	
■ Moon in Capricorn sign	

FORECAST

SUNSET:	WEDNESDAY	18:52 HRS
SUNRISE:	THURSDAY	05:57 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	37	24
New Delhi	33	26
Amritsar	35	27
Bathinda	37	26
Jalandhar	35	26
Ludhiana	36	26
Bhiwani	38	26
Hisar	39	27
Sirsa	37	28
Dharamsala	31	19
Manali	27	16
Shimla	26	17
Srinagar	32	18
Jammu	35	26
Kargil	32	12
Leh	27	11
Dehradun	32	23
Mussoorie	23	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C



Editor's
TAKE

The bitter truth: Sugar price go through the roof

An unprecedented jump in retail prices of sugar is a reminder of how Govt inaction can quickly turn a price rise of an essential kitchen item into a national concern

Sugar is not a luxury. It sweetens the morning chai at a highway dhaba and the payasam at a wedding feast alike. So when the price of this democratic commodity jumps nearly 40 per cent in a month – from ₹45-48 a kilogram in mid-July to ₹65 by late August, UP's ex-factory rate crossing a record ₹5,400 a quintal – it isn't a market footnote but a kitchen-table crisis.

The Centre ordered physical verification of stocks at every mill on July 24, completed it by August 14, then sat on the numbers as retail prices kept climbing. Only around August 22 – a month into the spike – did the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution finally speak at length, its first instinct defensive: batting down the theory gaining ground on social media and in Parliament that ethanol blending was the culprit. That defensiveness is telling, because ethanol had become the easy villain. India hit its 20 per cent ethanol-blending target in petrol in 2025, five years ahead of the original 2030 deadline, so it is fair to ask whether diverting cane to fuel tanks has starved the sugar bowl. The government's own numbers say otherwise: sugar diverted to ethanol has actually fallen, from about 12 per cent in 2022-23 to roughly 9 per cent now, since nearly three-quarters of India's ethanol comes from grain, chiefly maize, not cane. Ethanol blending is a convenient scapegoat, not the real culprit.

The duller, more accurate story is disease and weather. Red rot and top borer infestation, worsened by waterlogging from excess rain, have pushed the outlook for the season starting in October down to roughly 30.6 million tonnes from an initial 34.3 million tonnes. Closing stock for the current season is projected at barely 3 to 3.5 million tonnes – among the thinnest cushions in decades – just as festival demand from Ganesh Chaturthi through Diwali peaks. Add a genuine global squeeze – international prices up 16 per cent in under two months on a projected 3.3-million-tonne world deficit – and old-fashioned hoarding by traders betting on further gains, and the price chart largely explains itself. None of this excuses the silence. A government holding mill-level stock data by mid-August owed the public that information before prices peaked, not a rebuttal of internet theories after the fact.

Transparency is itself a price-stabilisation tool; delay only feeds speculation and hoarding. The fixes on the table – duty-free imports of 10 lakh tonnes, stock limits on dealers till November, an earlier crushing start from October 15 – are sound but reactive.

The lasting answer lies upstream: faster disease-resistant cane varieties, production tracking that reflects ground reality rather than advance estimates revised down all season, a buffer stock insulated from the export-then-import flip-flops of recent years, and a Centre willing to publish bad news as promptly as it publishes denials.

Prices should cool once fresh cane reaches the crusher in October. Public trust, dented by a month of silence, will take longer to mend.

The new age of narrative warfare

What looks like an organic wave of outrage online may sometimes be carefully engineered. In this new age of psychological warfare, the most vulnerable society may not be the one with the weakest military, but the one that gradually loses the ability to distinguish truth from manipulation



ASHVATHAMA N ALLIMUTHU

Wars once required weapons - armies crossing frontiers, nations measuring their safety in tanks and treaties, invasions you could see coming and fronts you could point to on a map. That world hasn't disappeared, but a second battlefield has opened quietly beside it — one fought not with bullets but with belief. A country can now be destabilised without a shot being fired: not through tanks at a border, but through engineered narratives, algorithm-driven opinion, and psychological conditioning at social-media scale. Call it what it actually is.

Not “online propaganda.” Not “digital activism.” This is cyber psychological warfare, and most of us are standing inside it without realising.

Consider what happens after any major Supreme Court observation. Within days, anonymous pages appear from nowhere, amassing followers and engagement that no ordinary account could earn organically in years of patient work.

Sudden, unexplained scale like that is rarely luck - more often, it's bot networks, coordinated engagement rings and paid amplification working in concert.

This deserves a name: Narrative Terrorism — a deliberate campaign to reshape what a population believes, fracture its unity, erode confidence in its institutions, and condition the young before they've learned to question anything. Conventional terrorism destroys buildings. Narrative terrorism destroys certainty. Its target isn't infrastructure. It's the mind.

What makes this form of warfare so effective is its invisibility. Nobody feels manipulated in the moment. Platforms are built to keep surfacing emotionally charged content, and repetition does the rest: exposure breeds familiarity, familiarity breeds acceptance, and acceptance eventually passes for truth. The economics reward this pattern: outrage travels faster than accuracy, anger out-competes nuance, division earns more attention than consensus.

India is unusually exposed here.

As one of the world's youngest digital populations, its Gen Z consumes an extraordinary volume of content daily — reels, shorts, memes, influencer takes, anonymous opinion pages - often without the tools to separate verified reporting from propaganda, satire, paid promotion or ideological manipulation. That gap is exactly what outside actors, whether political, ideological, geopolitical or commercial, are built to exploit.



THE PHRASE “NETI, NETI” - NOT THIS, NOT THIS - WAS A CIVILISATION PRACTISING THE DISCIPLINE OF CONTINUOUS DOUBT LONG BEFORE PSYCHOLOGY GAVE MANIPULATION A NAME

The writer is State Secretary Tamil Nadu BJP; Founder, Project TamilAI & Science Saga - centre for free AI training for rural

They don't need to attack India militarily. They only need to erode the trust binding citizens, institutions and communities together, because a divided society is a manipulable one.

This matches an old historical pattern: great civilisations are rarely toppled by armies at the gate. What actually finishes them off is what happens earlier — a citizenry too confused, too demoralised and too fractured to notice the gate was left open.

The contest has quietly relocated - from geography to psychology, from checkpoints to comment sections, from missiles to machine-learned feeds - and artificial intelligence raises the stakes further. AI systems learn from the information ecosystem around them, and an ecosystem already saturated with manipulated narratives and artificial amplification risks producing AI that echoes those same distortions back at a scale no single campaign could reach alone.

This isn't only India's problem; it's civilisational. As the world enters the AI era, India has a chance to lead not merely through technology, but by offering the deeper solution this moment actually demands: free thinking. A population capable of independent reasoning and genuine intellectual openness cannot be easily herded by algorithms or engineered narratives. India's most valuable export in the AI age may not be innovation at all, but the revival of a civilisation built to question.

That starts with how India educates its children. A society that only memorises isn't educated - it's just informed. Students need to be taught how algorithms work on emotion, how propaganda operates, how to verify a source, and how to tell information apart from conditioning. Machines can already retrieve facts instantly; the one human advantage still standing is judgement - the intellectual immunity to resist a narrative

even when it feels emotionally true.

India doesn't need to invent this capacity. It needs to remember it. The Upanishadic dialogues, Buddhist debate traditions and classical Tamil philosophy all treated inquiry as the essence of learning, not an interruption to it. The phrase “Neti, Neti” - not this, not this - was a civilisation practising the discipline of continuous doubt long before psychology gave manipulation a name.

So the response to narrative warfare cannot be purely technological. It has to be philosophical and educational too, aimed at producing citizens who verify before believing, question before reacting, understand how algorithms work on them, and value truth over virality.

None of this makes technology the villain. Fire can cook a meal or raze a city; the outcome depends on the hand holding it. AI, social media and algorithmic platforms can educate and unite just as easily as they can manipulate and divide - the responsibility sits with citizens, educators, technologists and policymakers alike.

India stands at a genuine crossroads: positioned, through its demographic weight and technological depth, to become the world's model for protecting intellectual independence, and to push for narrative manipulation to be treated as a serious matter of national security. Not every trend that goes viral is organic, not every influencer is independent, and not every movement is spontaneous. Borders once had to be crossed on foot; today they are crossed silently, through a screen. The strongest defence was never going to be firewalls or regulation alone - it is a citizenry that can still think for itself.

A people that think for themselves cannot be occupied from within. In the age of AI, that may be the fact on which democracy's survival ultimately rests.

PIC TALK

A blue-throated barbet bird perches on a tree branch, in Siliguri

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

2ND OPINION

I have sometimes wondered why a mother loves her baby so much and that too unconditionally. It is all one-sided! She looks after the baby the very best way possible in spite of her limitations, which all of us have. The baby wakes her in the middle of night. What does she do? Get upset? Far from it; she cleans him, as necessary, and feeds him. Have you seen a mother complain about the troubles her dear child gives her? Far from it; she even looks after the baby when she, herself, is not well.

Now the explanation for the above. Her child gives her, what is extremely precious to her. For the child,

SUBODH | NEW DELHI

Sugar price rise needs government attention
The sharp rise in sugar prices, reaching ₹48 a kg and reportedly ₹55-63 in some markets, is a serious concern. With festivals approaching, higher sugar prices could increase sweet prices and strain household budgets. The government has to maintain reasonable prices and protect consumers from further financial pressure. Such measures would provide much-needed relief to consumers.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

Experience the love of God by taking his shelter



his mother is everything; his loyalty is unflinching. My Lord, who loves me, gave me this insight, and, more importantly, one which follows. Because I have taken His shelter. My relationship with God is also one-sided. What can I give Him, who owns everything; doesn't He? Yes, my loyalty is all-important to God. This is what we all need to do, and our life will become sublime.

Just to give you an idea about what my Lord is doing for me, He has taken charge of me. Surely, my Lord must reform me in order that I become deserving of the highest reward of liberation in this life itself; no more of the painful cycle of birth and death for me. I am not ashamed to admit that I have plenty of lust, greed and hate.

There are big hindrances in my progress. They are all being got rid of systematically and very patiently.

My Lord even takes care that it is all done in a subtle way with my cooperation. They are not being delivered like hammer blows. My Lord has even made me His ‘nimitta’ (instrument) to carry out certain tasks, which give me a positive identity like I write spiritual articles under His guidance. I know in my heart that God does not need me; He has ‘ichcha shakti’ (divine will power). He can accomplish anything He chooses to do, but all the tasks my Lord has set for me are my necessities; I love them like looking after my family and the family business.

My Lord has mercifully provided all the resources I need to do my assigned duties. I have plenty of money, excellent help of all kinds, most importantly, sufficient energy at my age.

Believe me, I feel empowered to do what I must; it is a great feeling. All these are within my comfort zone suited to my unique nature. Even my deep desires are getting fulfilled, which, of course, are accordingly to ‘dharma’ (highest principles). Whatever bad my fate brings is taken care in a tolerable way. I am even able to not get spoiled by good things, which happen in my life. What more can I hope for or anyone can? I have never felt this good in my life. It is quite unbelievable; what I am experiencing.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Concerns regarding the ownership and editorial independence of *The Pioneer*

I have been reading The Pioneer for many years. Recently, I saw a video in which Kalvakuntla Kavitha said that *The Pioneer* has been bought by BRS.

This has made me concerned about whether the newspaper is still independent and unbiased. I have been a regular reader for many years, so I would like to know whether these allegations are true.

If the newspaper is indeed under the control or influence of BRS, I would not feel comfortable continuing to read it. I sincerely hope that these allegations are not true and that *The Pioneer* continues to remain independent and impartial.

Bridging India-Russia's trade gap

The recent meeting between External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Russian President Vladimir Putin has once again highlighted the depth of India-Russia relations. While the two countries share strong strategic ties, the reported trade deficit of nearly \$50 billion points to an economic imbalance that requires urgent attention. India's imports from Russia have risen substantially, particularly due to increased energy purchases. However, Indian exports have failed to keep pace. A large and persistent trade gap could eventually limit the full potential of bilateral economic cooperation. India must therefore make greater efforts to expand its presence in the Russian market. There is significant potential for Indian pharmaceuticals, agricultural products, engineering goods, automobiles, textiles, electronics and consumer products. Simplifying payment mechanisms, improving transportation links and facilitating business-to-business cooperation could help Indian exporters overcome existing difficulties and increase sales in Russia.

The strong political relationship between the two countries should translate into a more balanced economic partnership. The Jaishankar-Putin engagement provides an opportunity to identify practical measures to narrow the trade deficit while opening new areas of cooperation.

RUKMA SHARMA | JALANDHAR

When merit takes a back seat

I refer to the article “Commercialisation Is Killing the Middle-Class Dreams” (Aug. 25). Both education and healthcare systems in our country have become extremely costly.

Middle-class and poor students can neither afford to pursue higher education nor dream of becoming doctors. Almost all private medical colleges are now owned and controlled by wealthy politicians who mint money by collecting donations for every admission. Merit has become a casualty in the bargain. NEET has come as a blessing in disguise for poor and middle-class students. Add to this the reservation system in vogue. The wards of IAS officers get preference in admission to prestigious institutions, while the son of a poor temple priest runs from pillar to post to secure admission to a prestigious institution.

I agree with the author that a nation that sells its classrooms to the highest bidder sells its own future. Why cannot the government provide innovative education and quality healthcare free of cost, since both consume people's lifelong savings? Nationalising both sectors could go a long way towards curbing this menace and easing people's agony.

N R RAMACHANDRAN | CHENNAI

CHENNAI NEEDS SUSTAINABLE AIRPORT EXPANSION, NOT FARMLAND LOSS

The decision to shelve the proposed Parandur airport project and protect farmland, water bodies and the livelihoods of local residents is a bold and welcome initiative. Development should not come at the cost of valuable agricultural resources, ecological balance and the well-being of affected communities.

Instead, the proposal to develop a new Terminal 5 in the north-western area of Chennai Airport, in collaboration with the Airports Authority of India (AAI), offers a practical and sustainable alternative. The project, along with an approach road and flyover, could make better use of existing airport infrastructure while providing greater convenience to passengers. AAI's technical expertise and cooperation could help the project progress efficiently and be completed

within a reasonable timeframe. Expanding Chennai Airport is increasingly important as passenger numbers and air traffic continue to grow. However, the government must avoid unnecessary delays in planning and execution. Any prolonged delay could place additional pressure on existing airport facilities and affect passenger convenience.

A clear timeline, effective coordination with AAI and timely construction are therefore essential. With careful planning, Terminal 5 could strengthen Chennai's aviation infrastructure while balancing development with environmental protection and the interests of local communities. This approach could become a model for responsible and sustainable urban development.

APTHIRUVADI, CHENNAI

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

Air turbulence more frequent and violent in warming planet

Turbulence avoidance is an important topic for research, and there are enough studies on North Atlantic and North Pacific routes. The relatively bump-free air experiences in future would need actionable forecasts using data on atmospheric information from many sources and artificial intelligence



While cruising through the clear sky, Air India flight AI2379 suddenly dropped 300 feet over the Indian airspace over the Bay of Bengal and Odisha on 4th August, and the turbulence injured 24 persons, including four crew members on board. Pilot in command (PIC) is found to have failed a dope test twice. Sources said that he consumed marijuana and, for 'high' behaviour on the flight, crew members have complained against him. The co-pilot steadied the aircraft and landed at the destination, Delhi. PIC has to face an enquiry under DGCA rules. The incident is alarming, and DGCA has made dope test rules more stringent for the safety of passengers in the air. The process of detecting consumption of psychoactive substances is difficult to find in breath analyser tests. Frequent random dope tests are the only answer. Marijuana's legal availability adds to the worries of airlines.

The aircraft is reported to have encountered air turbulence, leading to a few failures during the fall. The flight suffered triple hydraulic failure for a few seconds, which is rare. This system uses a fluid under pressure to drive machinery or move mechanical components to power critical elements like wheel brakes, nose wheel steering, landing gear retraction/extension, and flight control surfaces. Autopilot is also reported to have remained disengaged twice in that brief period.

The aircraft has also encountered negative G, for which pilots and crew could have been trained to handle, but not the passengers. DGCA's enquiry would reveal the extent to which the impact of the incident was avoidable, but let me examine in this piece how the warming planet would cause more serious bumps in air travel on some routes. There are two types of turbulence. One is convective turbulence, which is displayed by airborne weather radar, and the pilot has time to change the course, and the other is clear-air turbulence (CAT) generated by jet streams (narrow and fast-moving rivers of high-altitude winds) that are invisible to radar.

As the Indian sub-continent heats up from April till mid-June, moisture-laden air from the sea surface is moved up high in the atmosphere, forming cumulonimbus clouds stretching from a few thousand to 50,000 feet, influencing the movement of passenger jets. With the rise in temperature, more water evaporates from the sea surfaces, forming more intense clouds. Inside these clouds are lightning and hail, often forming a chain of cells, and pilots call the chain a squall line. The convective turbulence is thus captured by radar and visible on the cockpit screen. CAT, however, occurs above 15,000 feet due to sharp differences in the speed and direction of jet streams between adjacent layers, creating violent wind shear. Also, where fast and slow currents interact, eddies and whirlpools develop, and the aircraft encounters them in the sky. Scientific studies have found that climate change is increasing the temperature difference between tropical and polar air masses, causing the collision of the two at that altitude. It destabilises the jet stream, resulting in more turbulence. It is clear-air turbulence taking place without any cloud in the sky, and the pilots do not get any indication. The jet stream shear and the resulting turbulence do not show any sign on the cockpit screen, and can only be known from the bulletins issued by Significant Meteorological Information bulletins, which are issued to notify areas that are likely to be affected by jet stream turbulence.

The jet stream is a mid-latitude phenomenon and can impact the region in North India. It is a matter of enquiry whether the pilot missed the signal and failed to change the course. The turbulence recorded over the sea and in peninsular India is generally of the convective type. Sometimes even convective turbulence is not recorded on radar and gives no signal on the cockpit screen. It happens when fast-growing cells do not pick up enough moisture and fail to show on radar. This can happen during nights, especially when the aircraft flies in and out of the cloud.

How does climate change influence turbulence? First of all, it does not impact the atmosphere above all regions uniformly. It is because the jet stream shear has varying magnitude and direction across the regions. Across North Atlantic and North Pacific aviation routes, the wind shear



THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF TURBULENCE. ONE IS CONVECTIVE TURBULENCE, WHICH IS DISPLAYED BY AIRBORNE WEATHER RADAR, AND THE PILOT HAS TIME TO CHANGE THE COURSE, AND THE OTHER IS CLEAR-AIR TURBULENCE (CAT) GENERATED BY JET STREAMS (NARROW AND FAST-MOVING RIVERS OF HIGH-ALTITUDE WINDS) THAT ARE INVISIBLE TO RADAR

The writer is Retired Head of Forest Force, Karnataka, and teaches Economics at Karnataka Forest Academy

is substantial due to climate change, and the aircraft encounters relatively high turbulence. Also, the routes over the mountains such as the Alps, Rockies, Andes and Himalayas find strong winds forced over high terrain, making it more turbulent, and flights experience frequent and intense bumps.

The warming planet makes even convective turbulence more intense in tropical regions. Powerful thunderstorms may intensify due to high energy and more moisture pumped into the atmosphere from warmer sea surfaces. Though it can be visualised by the pilots in the cockpit and also confirmed on the screen and becomes unavoidable, the passengers have to face a bumpy flight, and the injuries can be avoided only when everyone has fastened their seat belts.

Turbulence avoidance is an important topic for research, and there are enough studies on North Atlantic and North Pacific routes. The relatively bump-free air experiences in future would need actionable forecasts using data on atmospheric information from many sources and artificial intelligence. A company known as 'SkyPath' is leading the studies, which integrates data from weather forecasts, satellite observations and aircraft measurements to understand and identify the regions which are likely to be impacted by turbulence. Airlines and travellers would benefit from this. Airlines can certainly use the results in optimising flight paths and minimising operational costs. The results would also be useful in working out passengers' comfort.

The airspace in the Indian sub-continent is quite critical for similar studies. The physical mechanisms causing turbulence in Indian airspace have not been studied in detail. Aviation research must focus on the region. Indian airspace faces many turbulence-generating processes: mid-latitude clear-sky jet stream shears in North India, Himalayan mountain ranges and intense tropical convective turbulence.

Convective turbulence during late summer and monsoon season in the tropical region of India is a serious concern for our airspace. Deep thunderstorms produce powerful updrafts and downdrafts. As the warmer climate holds more moisture and energy, the convective system intensifies. Further, jet streams and wind shear are also impacted by large-scale monsoon wind circulation systems. More data from flight operations in Indian airspace and climate simulations need to be studied using AI to quantify the intensity. It will help airlines to minimise their operational costs and choose optimum flight paths.

Air turbulence is the reality of the warming planet, and it must be recognised. The physical mechanisms that are enhancing the impacts and the physics behind its generation must be clearly understood. More studies and research are needed for the complete understanding of the mechanism and accurate forecasting.

The August 4th, Air India flight AI2379, after a mid-air scare due to the turbulence, landed at the destination safely. The passengers were terrified. Some of them experienced it for the first time and must have been caught off-guard when the aircraft suddenly lost 300 feet of altitude. It is necessary to understand that aircraft are built to withstand far more severe shocks than what turbulence can produce. The wings are subjected to loads far greater than what is produced by turbulence. During testing, the wings are subjected to several feet of bend to ensure that the structure has sufficient safety margin. The structural limits are tested before it is certified to be airworthy and can carry passengers. The greatest risk is the injury to unsecured people who can be thrown around the cabin and struck by loose objects. Passengers must secure themselves throughout the flight by fastening seat belts. Even when seat-belt signs are switched off, it is wiser to keep them loosely fastened.

AI: A doomsday scenario lurking in the future



DEBASISH SOM

Global capital markets have committed an unprecedented volume of capital to AI infrastructure since 2023, intensifying through 2025-26 and drawing comparisons to railway mania and the dot-com telecom overbuild. Cumulative 2022-26 investment estimates range from roughly \$1.8 trillion (Goldman Sachs) to \$2.5-2.6 trillion in total 2026 AI spending (Gartner), with infrastructure alone accounting for around \$1.4 trillion. The four largest hyperscalers - Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft and Meta - are guiding towards roughly \$725 billion in combined 2026 capex, up 77 per cent year-on-year; including Oracle, the group approaches \$800 billion. Goldman

projects hyperscaler capex could reach \$5.3 trillion between 2025 and 2030. Capital intensity is extreme: 2026 capex runs at roughly 86 per cent of revenue for Oracle, 54 per cent for Meta, and 46-47 per cent for Microsoft and Alphabet. Realised returns lag far behind this spending. Only about 21 per cent of S&P 500 companies report measurable financial benefits from AI (Morgan Stanley), and a widely cited MIT study found that 95 per cent of generative AI pilots show no measurable profit impact. Sequoia's David Cahn estimates an annual \$600 billion revenue gap between hyperscaler infrastructure spending and actual AI ecosystem sales - a divergence already exceeding the gap seen before the 2001 telecom collapse. Combined revenue of leading AI developers, including OpenAI and Anthropic, likely totals under \$35 billion, a small fraction of hyperscaler capex. Gartner projects that over 40 per cent of agentic AI projects will be cancelled by 2027 due to unclear returns. The downstream supply chain carries uneven exposure. Chipmakers such as Nvidia, TSMC, Broadcom and Micron remain supply-constrained rather than speculative, though they are still fully exposed as direct "capex receivers". Power utilities face the risk that stranded generation investment gets socialised onto ratepayers. The most vulnerable tier is smaller, thinly capitalised cooling, packaging and construction firms, which McKinsey warns face genuine stranded-asset risk if capex decelerates.

A defining 2026 feature is the accelerating shift from cash to debt financing. Alphabet reported its first negative free cash flow quarter since its 2004 IPO. Incremental debt as a share of hyperscaler capex rose from about 9 per cent in FY2024 to roughly 32 per cent by mid-2026, pushing aggregate hyperscaler debt to about \$700 billion, with up to \$1.5 trillion in additional issuance projected. This burden is unevenly distributed: Microsoft, Alphabet, Meta and Amazon retain strong investment-grade ratings and are supplementing debt with equity, including Alphabet's record \$84.75 billion raise in June 2026. Oracle, rated just two notches above sub-investment grade, with capex at 86 per cent of revenue and concentrated exposure to OpenAI, represents the most plausible point of initial stress, with its credit default swap cost having more than tripled since September 2025. Over \$1 trillion in anticipated AI debt is expected from private credit, prompting Oliver Wyman comparisons to 2008's hidden housing-risk exposure. Most analysts treat a severe crisis as a tail risk rather than a base case. Prediction markets price an end-2026 "bubble burst" at roughly 18 per cent probability, with a moderate 20-30 per cent valuation correction seen as more likely. A typical failure pathway would begin with a monetisation shortfall or interest-rate shock. Because AI market value is concentrated in a few firms, distress at a highly exposed counterparty such as Oracle - especially if tied to an OpenAI setback - could trigger credit-spread contagion across the broader hyperscaler bond market. Illustrative severe scenarios describe unemployment above 10 per cent and equity markets falling nearly 40 per cent by 2028, with S&P Global estimating a full bust could eliminate 2.5 million jobs.

A separate risk involves a sudden efficiency breakthrough rendering current hardware-intensive infrastructure obsolete, echoing unused fibre-optic capacity after the dot-com bust. Insurers carry dual exposure: as underwriters of novel, hard-to-price data centre risk, with sites costing up to \$20 billion and often located in hail- and tornado-prone regions, and, more significantly, as creditors financing the buildout through private credit and structured securities - an arrangement Oliver Wyman likens directly to pre-2008 mortgage exposure. Other sectors face varied risks: utilities from stranded assets, commercial real estate from concentrated hyperscaler tenancy, and automakers and electronics manufacturers from rising component costs as AI absorbs semiconductor and memory supply, with memory prices having more than doubled over the past year. Moody's models a theoretical 40 per cent AI valuation correction as reducing household wealth and consumer spending, especially among high-net-worth households, with spillovers into luxury goods, real estate and advertising-dependent media.

The US government's capacity to intervene is more constrained than in 2008 or 2020. Federal interest payments are projected to reach \$1 trillion in FY2026, already exceeding defence and Medicare spending, while the government must refinance roughly \$9 trillion in maturing debt in 2026 alone. The Dallas Fed finds hyperscaler bond issuance is already crowding out other investment-grade borrowers. Any rescue would likely have to come through Federal Reserve monetary action rather than fiscal intervention, but this is itself constrained if a credit event coincides with elevated inflation - and much AI-related private credit exposure sits with non-bank entities lacking the Fed's established emergency-lending relationships. India's exposure runs through distinct channels. Its IT/BPO sector, employing 10-15 million people, is already experiencing disruption from AI's ordinary productivity effects: gross IT hiring fell from roughly 230,000 to 170,000 annually, TCS reported its first revenue decline in years, and Cognizant announced 12,000-15,000 layoffs, mostly in India. This reflects AI's demonstrated capability rather than infrastructure spending, meaning a capex slowdown would not reverse it. Separately, foreign portfolio investors withdrew record capital from Indian equities in early 2026 amid global reallocation towards AI-exposed stocks, though a deepened domestic institutional base has absorbed much of the selling. In sum, the AI investment cycle represents an unprecedented capital commitment with returns still unproven and financing increasingly reliant on debt. While most analysts see a severe crisis as a tail risk, the fiscal and monetary tools available to contain one in the US and exposed economies such as India are more limited than during previous major financial disruptions.



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The Naxal war is over. The battle of ideas is not



PANKAJ SHARMA

self-loading rifles, light machine guns, Sten guns, and grenades. This attack was one of countless attacks in that series.

I was travelling by train that day. Train compartments in India are often like mini parliaments, where strangers freely debate politics and current affairs. The incident shook us to our core, and it became the subject of discussion. While we deplored the Naxal ideology of armed struggle against democracy, we were perplexed by the sophistication of their operations. How do criminals living inside forests acquire arms and ammunition? How do they manage food, communication, intelligence, transportation, and logistics so effectively? Everyone had a theory.

Then a fellow passenger, who had introduced himself as a CA, interrupted with an interesting observation. He said that for every comrade in the jungle, there were two in the towns. According to him, while most foot soldiers are poor tribals with little education who are indoctrinated into Naxal ideology, their urban support

base includes doctors, engineers, lawyers, chartered accountants, and other professionals. They ensure that the armed cadres receive money, weapons, food, intelligence, and supplies to continue the so-called struggle. They were not merely ideological supporters. They functioned as fundraisers, procurers, suppliers, facilitators, and intellectual justifiers of the movement.

That same year, a former Home Secretary estimated the annual funding of the Naxal movement at around a thousand crores. Such money, he said, was invested in gold, fixed deposits, and real estate through sympathisers and front networks. Highlighting the challenge, he warned that the Maoists were aiming to overthrow the Indian state by 2050.

The insurgency had reached its peak in the late 2000s, when nearly 180 districts were affected by Naxals. This vast stretch became known as the "Red Corridor", with some areas effectively considered "lost" to them.



The term Naxal comes from Naxalbari in West Bengal, where a peasant uprising began in 1967 with the slogan "land to the tiller". Over the decades, however, the movement strayed far from its original objectives. In the name of the poor and tribals, it often ended up harming them instead. Rather than enabling development, Naxals frequently opposed roads, schools, hos-

sonnel killed over the years.

But one crucial aspect is often overlooked: the Naxal fighters are only cannon fodder. Interestingly, even Charu Majumdar, regarded as the father of the movement, remained its chief ideologue rather than a fighter himself. This pattern persisted; poor tribals risked their lives while urban intellectual supporters remained

pitals, telecommunications, and other infrastructure because development threatened their control.

In recent years, India's multidimensional strategy, combining security operations, development, and community engagement, has achieved significant success. Violence has declined sharply, the movement has been systematically weakened, and many affected districts are returning to the mainstream. The armed Naxal presence has been wiped out, though this progress has come at the heavy cost of more than 3,500 security personnel.

safe, authoring articles and books, attending conferences, raising funds, and providing ideological justification for violence, portraying it as a revolutionary struggle. The forests may have been cleared of armed cadres, but the ideological ecosystem can survive in intellectual and urban spaces. It can survive in intellectual circles, advocacy networks, and political discourse, waiting for circumstances that might allow it to re-emerge. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi used the phrase "Dimagi Naxals", he was pointing to this distinction.

Coming back to my train journey in 2010, the fellow passenger who had introduced us to the urban support base of the Naxals eventually confided that he was himself one such "cerebral Naxal". He was returning from an annual conference in the Red Zone. That revelation changed the conversation. Until then, we had imagined Naxals as distant figures hiding in the jungles. Sitting across from us was someone who claimed to be part of the intellectual ecosystem that supported them.

India may have won the battle, but the war remains. Insurgencies are fought on two fronts: the physical battlefield and the battle of ideas. Winning the first does not automatically mean winning the second.

The writer is an Economist

*Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India -founded 1818*

The border guard of the future may not necessarily be a person. Increasingly, it may be a network of machines that can see, move, listen and report - while leaving consequential decisions to human beings. That possibility has moved a little closer to reality in the United States. A robotics company is exploring whether humanoid machines could be used for surveillance along the southern border, particularly in terrain where vehicles, fixed cameras or drones have limitations. The important caveat is that this remains an experiment, not an established American border-security programme. US authorities have said there is currently no agreement, pilot programme or active prime contract with the company. Yet the idea deserves attention because the technology is developing faster than the policy framework around it. The same company is pursuing military applications, including the possibility of giving its humanoids weapons capabilities. That makes the border-security question considerably more serious than a futuristic demonstration of robots walking across difficult terrain.

That is particularly relevant to India's borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar, where surveillance can involve difficult terrain and where the state has to contend with infiltration, smuggling and other illegal cross-border movement. Robots capable of reaching places that are difficult or dangerous for personnel could eventually become useful supplements to conventional patrols. But India should resist the temptation to turn a promising technology into a technological fantasy. A machine that can detect movement is not necessarily capable of understanding what that movement means. A person crossing a field may be an infiltrator, a smuggler, a farmer or simply someone who has wandered across an invisible line. An algorithm can identify an anomaly; it cannot automatically provide the political, legal and human context required to act upon it. That is why the most important question is not whether robots can replace border guards.

The technology should therefore be judged not by how autonomous it can become, but by how reliably it can assist human judgment. The closer machines come to the capacity to patrol, identify and eventually use force, the more important human accountability becomes.

The death of Twishsa Sharma, a 33-year-old model and actor, has moved from a swirl of competing allegations into a more defined criminal proceeding. The Central Bureau of Investigation's charges against her husband, Samarth Singh, and mother-in-law, Giribala Singh, are for abetment to suicide and cruelty. That distinction matters. The investigation has not established the crime that Twisha's family initially alleged. Nor does the filing of a chargesheet amount to a finding of guilt.

The case also exposes another troubling feature of Indian public life: the tendency to put the character of a dead woman on trial. After Twisha's death, public statements about her mental health and personal conduct became part of the controversy. Whatever evidence may ultimately emerge in court, a woman's alleged personality, relationships or lifestyle cannot by themselves explain her death, still less determine whether another person bears criminal responsibility for it.

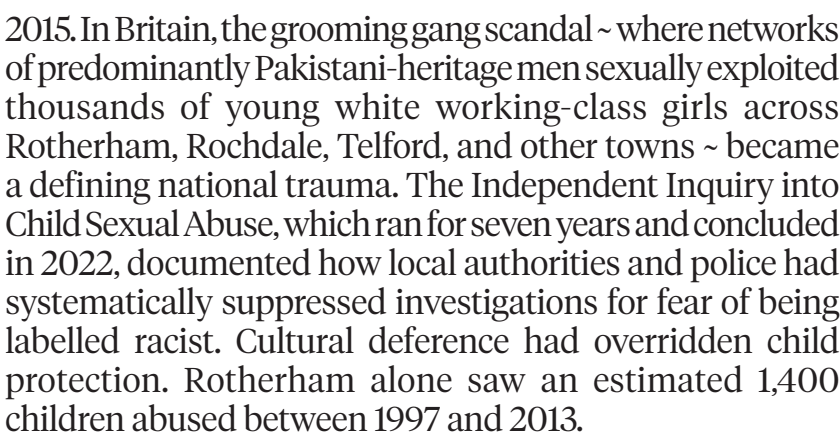
The next stage should therefore be governed by evidence rather than outrage. Twisha's family deserves a rigorous prosecution if the allegations are substantiated. The accused deserve a fair trial if the evidence is contested. And society needs to resist the temptation to convert a tragic death into a morality play. The real test will be whether the courts can establish responsibility without either minimising domestic cruelty or substituting public anger for proof. That is the standard by which this case should ultimately be judged.

Angela Merkel's 'Wirtschaften das' has aged into one of history's more costly political miscalculations ~ not because compassion was wrong, but because compassion without planning, integration infrastructure, and honest public debate produces outcomes that serve no one. Europe is now engaged in a slow, painful, and politically explosive reckoning with the consequences of policies designed by elites who did not live with their consequences

Europe's Muslim population stood at approximately 26 million in 2016, or roughly 5 per cent of the continent's total population, according to the Pew Research Center. By 2030, even under a zero-migration scenario, that number is projected to rise to 74 per cent due to higher fertility rates among existing Muslim communities. Under a high-migration scenario – one that mirrors post-2015 flows – the figure could reach 14 per cent by mid-century. France, home to an estimated 5.7 million Muslims (around 8 per cent of its population), has seen the sharpest social friction. Paris suburbs – the banlieues – have become bywords for parallel societies: communities where French law is nominally present but French culture is a stranger. In Seine-Saint-Denis, the most Muslim-populated department in metropolitan France, unemployment among young men of North African origin routinely runs at twice the national average, feeding cycles of alienation that periodically erupt in violence.

In Germany, the Federal Criminal Police Office reported in 2023 that migrants – who constitute roughly 15 per cent of the population – accounted for nearly 38 per cent of all crime suspects, a figure that has fuelled the political rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which in the 2024 Thuringia state elections became the first far-right party to win a German state election since the Second World War.

The concept of 'parallel societies' - communities that coexist geographically but do not integrate culturally, linguistically, or legally - has moved from academic journals to parliamentary debate. Denmark's Ghetto Plan, enacted in 2018 and revised in 2021, formally identified 28 'hard ghettos' based on criteria including the proportion of residents from 'non-Western backgrounds' - a bureaucratic euphemism that unmistakably referred to Muslim-majority immigrant enclaves. The plan mandated forced dispersal, demolition of housing blocks, and caps on 'non-Western' residents. The language of liberal democracy was being bent into instruments of social engineering - a sign of just how far governance had travelled from the optimism of



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Demographics, unlike politics, move with the grinding certainty of geology. The total fertility rate (TFR) for native-born European women has fallen to between 1.3 and 1.6 across most of the continent – well below the replacement threshold of 2.1. Muslim women in Europe, by contrast, have a TFR of approximately 2.6, though this is converging downward across generations. The gap, maintained over decades, produces compounding effects. In Brussels, the Belgian capital and seat of European Union institutions, Mohammed has been the most popular name for new-born boys for over a decade. In Birmingham, Britain's second-largest city, the 2021 census revealed that fewer than 43 per cent of residents identified as White British – an extraordinary transformation in a generation. In the Molenbeek district of Brussels – from which several of the November 2015 Paris attackers originated – local imams wield social authority that secular municipal officials struggle to match.

The mathematics are relentless. If native European populations continue to shrink and immigrant-origin European populations continue to grow at differential rates, Europe's cultural and political centre of gravity will shift - not in a single dramatic moment, but across the decades-long arc of birth, school enrolment, electoral registration, and inheritance. India in 2026 is not Europe in 2015. Its context

Viet Nam-Singapore Strategic Dialogue- New development step in bilateral relations

Politburo member and Permanent Member of the Communist Party of Viet Nam (CPV) Central Committee's Secretariat Trầ **Cầm Tú** will pay an official visit to Singapore and co-chair the first Vietnam-Singapore Strategic Dialogue on August 24-25, at the invitation of the Central Executive Committee of the People's Action Party (PAP) of Singapore. Speaking to the press ahead of the visit, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs **Nguyễn Mạnh Cường** said the visit marks several first milestones, as it will be the first official visit to Singapore by a Permanent Member of the CPV Central Committee's Secretariat. It will also inaugurate the Viet Nam-Singapore Strategic Dialogue mechanism, which the two countries'

Viet Nam is the first Southeast Asian country to establish such a mechanism with the PAP, he noted, describing these milestones as reflecting a new qualitative development step in relations between the two Parties and creating stronger political foundations and momentum for deepening the Viet Nam-Singapore Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Cường expressed his expectation that the Strategic Dialogue will provide a direct, regular and substantive channel for

Assessing the bilateral relations, the official said that more than five decades after diplomatic ties were established in 1973, Viet Nam and Singapore have developed increasingly strong political trust, closely aligned interests and dynamic cooperation.

Political trust has been increasingly translated into practical benefits, reflected in the establishment of the Strategic Partnership in 2013 and its upgrade to a Comprehensive Strategic

Recent high-level visits, including those by General Secretary and President Lâm to Singapore in 2025 and 2026, Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's visit to Viet Nam in 2025, and the upcoming trip by Tú have demonstrated the high level of political trust between the two Parties and countries.

Cường went on to say that economic, trade and investment cooperation remains a key pillar. Singapore is among Viet Nam's most important economic partners and its second-largest foreign investor, with more than 4,500 valid projects worth approximately US\$97 billion in registered capital across various fields such as manufacturing, logistics, finance and high technology.

Praiseworthy



Yours, etc., Mihir Kanungo,
Kolkata, 24 August.

Sir, At a recent park meeting, fellow senior citizens debated the PM's "dimagi naخال" remark with great fervour. When asked for

ate

Sir, After coming to power, the TVK government has repeatedly cited Tamil Nadu's precarious finances as the reason for its inability to fulfil several manifesto promises, including complete crop-loan waivers for farmers.

Why should taxpayers bear such avoidable expenditure, especially when many MLAs are affluent and own multiple vehicles? The failure of the MLAs, particularly those who belong to the opposition, to decline this largesse is equally disappointing.

This sets a bad precedent. There is every possibility that MLAs of other states would raise similar demands. Public money belongs to the people and must serve genuine public interest.

Yours, etc., Tharcus S. Fernando,
Chennai, 20 August.

Echoes of 1942 that Gen-Z must hear

RAJDEEP PATHAK

Eighty-four years ago, on a humid August evening at Bombay's Gowalia Tank Maidan, Mahatma Gandhi issued a call that was both stark and transformative – "Do or Die." The Quit India Movement, launched on 8 August 1942, was not another round of petitioning or partial protest. It was a decisive break with the idea that freedom could be postponed, diluted, or negotiated in instalments. British rule, Mahatma Gandhi concluded after the failure of the Cripps Mission, had become the principal obstacle not only to India's independence but to any meaningful Indian contribution to the defence of democracy in a world at war.

The movement that followed was remarkable less for its organisational perfection than for its resilience. Within hours of the All India Congress Committee's resolution, the colonial state arrested the entire top leadership – Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad and others. Formal structures were paralysed. Yet the struggle did not collapse. Students, workers, peasants, traders and women stepped into the vacuum. Railway lines were disrupted, telegraph wires cut, parallel governments declared in places such as Satara, Tamluk and Ballia.

Underground networks, including the Secret Congress Radio run by Usha Mehta, kept the message alive. The British responded with mass arrests, floggings and lethal force. More than 100,000 people were imprisoned. Still, the moral authority of colonial rule had been irreparably damaged. A man possessed by an idea, Gandhi had remarked earlier that year, becomes an organisation if the formal one fails him. In 1942,

that idea proved stronger than the institutions designed to contain it. That history is not a museum piece. It remains a living template for how a society claims agency when formal power is unresponsive or absent. In 2026, as India marks the 84th anniversary of the August Kranti, the relevant question is no longer whether the British would leave. It is whether a generation – like mine – that has never known colonial rule understands what it means to inherit freedom as a responsibility rather than a finished inheritance.

India's youth, especially Gen Z, now form a large and influential part of the country's population. They are the first generation to grow up with widespread access to information, digital platforms and global cultural influences. At the same time, they are also among the first to encounter, on a broad scale, some of the long-standing challenges that remain after independence – uncertain job prospects, the recent irregularities in examinations or recruitment, social divisions, climate concerns, and the everyday widening gap between ideals enshrined in the Constitution and lived realities.

It is in this context that RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's recent remarks carry unusual weight. Speaking in Mumbai on 6 August before an audience of Gen Z and Gen Alpha students, Bhagwat stated that the grievances of this generation are genuine and that he would trust Gen Z "blindly." Protest, he insisted, is a legitimate form of democratic dialogue aimed at building consensus, not at creating permanent division. Young people agitating for change are not anti-national. They are "our people, our next generation."

However, for Gen Z, the lesson of the Quit India Movement is not one of romantic nostalgia for sacrifice. It is a practical lesson in courage, agency, and persistence. Freedom is never self-sustaining; every generation must protect and strengthen it. While India achieved political independence in 1947, the larger pursuit of dignity, equal opportunity, and accountable institutions remains unfinished. Challenges such as unemployment, the climate crisis, developmental imbalances, and barriers to quality education are not colonial legacies waiting to disappear. They are contemporary issues that demand informed, active, and sustained civic engagement.

Second, leadership is not synonymous with office. In 1942 the most visible leaders were removed, and the movement continued because thousands of unnamed young people, women and workers assumed responsibility. The whole idea boils down to commitment and sacrifices. Third, unity of purpose matters more than uniformity of opinion. The August Kranti drew strength from the participation of people who differed sharply in ideology, religion, language and class. India's strength lies in its extraordinary diversity.

There's another, harder lesson. The freedom struggle worked because clear morals were combined with patient strategy. Quick wins were rare. Staying strong amidst great adversities was essential. Gen Z lives in a world that rewards fast reactions, and being seen. That energy helps when it pushes real change. It hurts when anger replaces planning, or every setback feels like betrayal. Young activists in 1942 expected crackdowns and got ready for them, more than often 'nonviolently'



under Gandhi's leadership. They built backup systems, secret networks, and local leaders. Today's digital generation has tools the earlier one never dreamed of. The real question is whether those tools will strengthen democracy.

India in 2026 does not face an external colonial power. It faces the more subtle challenge of whether its young citizens will treat democracy as a spectator sport or as a continuous practice. The Har Ghar Tiranga Abhiyaan is one symbolic expression of that continuity. The same flag that once risked imprisonment to hoist is now carried as a claim of shared ownership. Yet symbols alone are insufficient. The deeper continuity lies in the willingness to convert historical memory into present responsibility where celebration of fundamental right and duties are combined with 'responsibility'.

The RSS chief's statement that he would trust Gen Z completely reflects his belief in the potential of young people. But trust works both ways. Older generations should listen to young people with an open mind, while the younger generation should show responsibility by thinking carefully, participating in institutions,

and not letting anger become the only way they respond to politics.

The Quit India Movement continues to inspire because it proved that a determined people can reject oppression and shape their own destiny. For Gen Z, its enduring message lies in safeguarding and strengthening the freedom earned through immense sacrifice. This means embracing informed citizenship, fostering collective action, and remaining steadfast in the belief that a nation's greatest strength comes from empowering its youth as active partners in building its future.

The call of August 1942 continues to resonate across generations. It is not a call for passive remembrance, but for active stewardship of the ideals of freedom, courage, and responsibility. Mahatma Gandhi's exhortation to "Do or Die" was never merely a challenge to British rule. It was a timeless reminder that no nation should surrender its destiny to others. That spirit of resolve, self-belief, and collective action, sacrifice and dedication towards the Nation remains as vital today as it was eighty-four years ago.

The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 26 August 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

HITHERTO the treaty ports of Tientsin and Shanghai have been regarded as cities of refuge by all parties in China. It is to them that men who have deserted politics flee, sometimes it is to be feared with ill-gotten gains, secure in the knowledge that the foreign Powers would not tolerate in treaty streets the battles and massacres that make the inland cities so unsafe for all residents. But having reached the security of a treaty port refugees have in the past made it a rule to abandon propaganda. This wise rule has now been abandoned. Certain people who ought to know better recently placarded the town with posters announcing what was called a prayer meeting but which turned out to be a propaganda meeting in favour of the Bolshevik General Feng. These proceedings have caused a great flutter in the English settlement. Feng and his army are retreating into Mongolia in confusion, and to those who are unaware of the conditions in Shanghai it may seem unnecessary to make a fuss about a few speeches supporting a broken man. But it is the neutrality of the settlement which has been its safeguard in the past.

News Items

NEW STEEL TRUST ISSUE OF SHARES ON THE BERLIN BOURSE

BERLIN, AUG. THE Bourse was crowded with an exceptional number of visitors, who eagerly awaited the announcement of the first quotation of the new German Steel Trust shares, the introduction of which is unique in the history of the Bourse. The quotation was delayed, as two brokers in charge of the new issue almost collapsed owing to the heavy pressure of work.

The shares opened at 130 and rose in an open market to 147. Banks have recently been inundated with orders totalling over double the Trust's capital of eight hundred million marks. Shares offered to-day are reported to have been under 30,000,000 marks—Reuter's Special Service.

FUTURE OF LEAGUE COUNCIL MERIT OF THE CECIL SCHEME

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.)
RUGBY, AUG. DISCUSSING the composition of the League of Nations Council, which will be further considered by the Special Commission at Geneva next week, the Times, in a leading article, expresses the view that no better scheme than the Cecil one, which has already won considerable approval, is likely to be devised.

It points out that the gist of the proposals contained in that scheme was greatly to augment the powers of the Assembly, which would be able by a two-thirds majority to dismiss all the non-permanent members and to increase the total membership of the Council from ten to thirteen—fourteen with Germany—sixteen being regarded as the ultimate maximum.

Accepting the view that the Council is primarily representative of the League when the Assembly is not in session, and that its members should be as truly representative of the latter body as possible, the Times points out that this representative principle has actually come into practice in certain instances. It cites the cases of Sweden, which has been acknowledged by other Scandinavian countries as representing their ideas and points of view if not their interests, and of the Little Entente, which has generally been ready to regard Dr. Benes as their sponsor. The process, it says, is natural, and there is no inherent reason why it should not be extended. For its satisfactory extension, however, a new system of voting should be introduced in the Assembly, and in this connexion it raises the question of the merits of the single transferable vote.

RUBBER CONTROL

AMERICAN'S PLEA TO FORGET ILL-FEELING

NEW YORK, AUG. MR. G. Henderson, president of the New York Rubber Exchange, who has just returned from England, urges Americans to forget any ill-feeling against Britain, as he believes that the curtailment of rubber exports cannot be construed as aimed against America.

He declares that Britain does not desire a repetition of last year's market, but wishes to foster stabilization for the benefit of the rubber industry all over the world.—Reuter.

Disasters are a time to rise above divisions

BANJIT SARMAH

In a healthy democracy, differences of opinion, political debates, criticism, and ideological disagreements are both natural and necessary. The ruling party and the opposition have distinct responsibilities. While the government formulates and implements policies, the opposition scrutinizes those decisions, questions shortcomings, and offers alternative perspectives.

Likewise, leftists, socialists, nationalists, student organizations, civil society groups, intellectuals, and the media all contribute to public discourse from their respective ideological standpoints. Such diversity of thought is the hallmark of a vibrant democracy. However, there are moments in history when political identities and ideological divisions become insignificant. There are times when humanity must take precedence over everything else. The devastating cloudburst in Nagaland and the catastrophic floods that have affected Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, and several other parts of Assam represent one such moment.

This disaster is far more than an environmental event—it is a profound human tragedy. Within a matter of hours, countless families lost everything they had spent a lifetime building. Homes were swept away, roads disappeared beneath floodwaters, communication networks collapsed, and entire villages were submerged. Thousands of people were forced to abandon their homes with little or no warning. Many are now living in temporary relief camps, uncertain about what tomorrow holds.

The human cost of this disaster is heartbreaking. Families have lost loved ones. Farmers have watched their standing crops vanish beneath muddy waters, destroying not only their harvest but also their primary source of income. Livestock, often the backbone of rural livelihoods, have perished in large numbers. Children have lost their books, school uniforms, and classrooms, disrupting their education. Young people have seen their certificates, documents, and years of hard work washed away. For many, the flood has erased not only possessions but also hope.

At such a time, political arguments should not dominate public conversation. This is not the moment to ask which political party deserves credit or blame. It is not the time for ideological battles between the ruling party, the opposition, leftists, socialists, or any other political group. The most important question today is simple: Who is standing beside the people who are suffering?

The government undoubtedly carries the primary responsibility for rescue operations, relief distribution, rehabilitation, and rebuilding damaged infrastructure. Swift action, transparency, and accountability are essential. But the responsibility does not belong to the government alone. Opposition parties also have a crucial role to play. Constructive criticism remains important, but during an unfolding humanitarian crisis, cooperation is even more valuable. Rather than engaging in endless political confrontations, all political parties should work together to ensure that relief reaches every affected family without delay.

Student organizations have historically played an important role in Assam during times of crisis. Their energy, dedication, and ability to mobilize volunteers can make a significant difference. Whether by participating in rescue operations, distributing food and essential supplies, organizing blood donation drives, helping children continue their education, or supporting medical teams, young people have the capacity to become the backbone of humanitarian efforts. Their contribution should not be defined by political affiliations but by compassion and service.

Civil society also has an indispensable role. Teachers, doctors, engineers, journalists, business owners, artists, religious institutions, voluntary organizations, and ordinary citizens all have something valuable to contribute. Not everyone can donate large sums of money, but every act of kindness matters. A packet of dry food, a blanket, clean drinking water, medicines, clothing, or simply offering shelter to someone in need can make a life-changing difference. Compassion does not require wealth; it requires willingness.

The media, too, bears a tremendous responsibility during disasters. Accurate and timely reporting can save lives by informing people about flood conditions, rescue efforts, and relief services. Responsible journalism highlights the needs of affected communities and ensures that their voices reach policymakers. At the same time, the spread of misinformation, sensationalism, or politically motivated narratives can deepen confusion and hinder rescue operations. Social media users must also exercise

responsibility by verifying information before sharing it.

This tragedy also reminds us of a larger challenge confronting our region and the world. Extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and more severe. Climate change, environmental degradation, deforestation, and unplanned development have increased the vulnerability of many communities. The cloudburst in Nagaland and the floods that followed in Assam are stark reminders that disaster preparedness can no longer be treated as an afterthought. Scientific planning, stronger early-warning systems, better river management, resilient infrastructure, and environmental conservation must become national priorities.

History has repeatedly shown that the people of Assam possess extraordinary resilience. Time and again, communities have come together to overcome floods, earthquakes, and other natural calamities. Neighbours have rescued neighbours. Strangers have become volunteers. Young people have risked their lives to save others. This spirit of solidarity is one of Assam's greatest strengths, and it deserves to be celebrated and strengthened.

In moments like these, our collective identity should not be shaped by political parties or ideological labels. Whether one belongs to the ruling party, the opposition, a leftist movement, a socialist organization, a student union, or any other group should become secondary. What should matter most is our shared humanity. Floodwaters do not distinguish between political beliefs,

religions, castes, languages, or communities. Nature does not discriminate, and therefore our compassion should know no boundaries. The true measure of any society is not how fiercely its members debate during peaceful times but how united they stand when faced with unimaginable suffering. Politics will always have its place in a democracy, and healthy criticism remains essential for good governance. But during a humanitarian crisis, humanity must take precedence over political rivalry.

When future generations look back at this tragedy, they are unlikely to remember who won political arguments on television or social media. Instead, they will remember who reached out to help the helpless, who stood beside grieving families, who rescued strangers from floodwaters, and who worked tirelessly to rebuild shattered lives. History remembers compassion far longer than it remembers conflict.

Today, Assam needs unity more than division, cooperation more than confrontation, and humanity more than politics. Let this disaster become not only a reminder of nature's immense power but also a testament to the strength of human compassion. If every citizen, every political party, every student organization, every voluntary group, and every institution joins hands with a common purpose, recovery will be faster, hope will return sooner, and countless lives will be transformed.

In times of disaster, our greatest identity is not our ideology—it is our humanity.

The writer is Assistant Teacher, Dhekiajuli, Assam.

Crossword | No. 293563

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Yesterday's Solution

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INVENTORMORES

OMIACET

TELEGRAPIHS

USA

NOTEPALP

DYINGELGRECO

CODES

ACROSS

1/27 No.1 in charts, Love Me Do, was not primarily a post-drug experience (8)

4/26 Routinely tell old fart about novel (6,4,10)

9 Student acquiring knowledge (8)

10 Rough characters appear when Atletico and Arsenal meet (6)

11 Name a magician s move something incendiary (6)

12 Group of Norwegians work on, say, Cruise Missile? (8)

13 Flyer mate read aloud as well (8)

15 Film department returned to put holes in lawn (6)

16 Small clip around ear finally, or back of neck (6)

18 Consumers outrageous rudeness (5,5)

20 Bluth joins a cult briefly every year—it s my own fault (3,5)

22 Skilfully negotiate—without leading man getting work (6)

24 Burst into pig pen like a tiger, for example (6)

25 Rock legend s first principle (8)

26 See 4 Across (7)

27 See 1

DOWN

2 Greek character discovering some gas (5)

3 Organ score set aside (7)

4 Sex in dilapidated motel providing a recurring theme (9)

5 Right to swap tops before tramp visits Lord — his job is on the line (9,6)

6 Deputy s also scrummy occasionally (5)

7 Thrash metal not initially rocking that woman (7)

8 Scent from the bottom passage of ferret awes orang-utan (9)

14 Players — men — start to charm broken hearts (9)

15 Ultimately dogma can end — fear too— regarding identity in society and gender nonconformity (9)

17 Do without foot cream (7)

19 Streamed Irish broadcaster tucking into potato (7)

21 Constant yen for a drop of Cointreau in pub (5)

23 Magritte and wife start again (5)

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



INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



EDITORIAL

Practical use of humanoid robots the next frontier

The world has been captivated by the rapid evolution of robotics. From humanoid machines shattering athletic records to the intricate, precision-focused manoeuvres – whether kung fu fighting or playing tennis – in international competitions, we are witnessing a technological shift that transcends mere entertainment.

The recent spectacle of humanoid robot games in China, which captured global attention over the weekend, shows the speed at which innovation is advancing. Meanwhile, Hong Kong successfully hosted the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union Robocon 2026, the region's premier university-level robotics competition.

The nation is at the forefront of this technology, which increasingly combines robotics with artificial intelligence (AI). But the true measure of this progress lies not in these machines' performance for entertainment, but in their integration into the fabric of our daily lives.

The second World Humanoid Robot Games, held at Beijing's National Speed Skating Oval, has transformed from a mere curiosity into a rigorous laboratory for testing the boundaries of machine autonomy. With over 2,000 robots competing across 51 events, the scale of this competition suggests we are witnessing the dawn of a new era in embodied intelligence.

The Tien Kung robots have effectively dismantled human benchmarks, finishing the 400-metre race in 38.15 seconds – crushing the human world record of 43.03 seconds – and clocking a 100-metre sprint at 9.39 seconds, outpacing human record-holder Usain Bolt. These machines are demonstrating agility and speed that command serious attention.

However, the games also provided a necessary reality check. The chaotic nature of the football matches, where robots collided with teammates, shows we are still in the early, messy stages of robotics development. These machines are operating at their limits, and the margin for error remains razor-thin.

Behind the spectacle lies a critical engineering challenge. As competition shifts from remote control to full autonomy, high-speed, continuous networks like 5G-advanced have become indispensable. Furthermore, the power demands of combining movement with on-board AI computing are pushing battery technology to breaking point. As Huawei Technologies executive David Li noted, this energy bottleneck is driving a shift towards cloud-based processing, making robot network connectivity the backbone of the next generation of humanoid innovation.

The Hong Kong competition, which showcased the ingenuity of 16 university teams, was more than just a display of skill. The theme, "Kung Fu Quest", demanded that robots demonstrate precision, tactics and strategic cooperation – qualities that are essential in the real-world deployment of automation. It was heartening to see Hong Kong's students secure top honours and demonstrate that the city remains a formidable centre for nurturing young talent and hi-tech innovation.

However, the event should also be viewed through the lens of governance and efficiency. As Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-yee has rightly noted, the application of AI and robotics must extend into government services and public infrastructure. We are already seeing the benefits of this, from specialised machines assisting in disaster response, such as flood and typhoon management, to the broader push for AI integration across various administrative functions.

There is a basic lesson from both the global humanoid games and our local Robocon success: technological marvels with practical application. New competitions included not only table tennis and kickboxing but scenario-based events to cover tasks in industrial production, hotels, homes and logistics.

We must pivot from the novelty of manufacturing robots to the strategy for their deployment. For Hong Kong to maintain its competitive edge as an international innovation hub, we need to translate these technological breakthroughs into practical solutions that improve governance, boost efficiency and enhance the quality of life for people.

The future of technology lies not just in what robots can do but in what they can help us achieve together. Advances on the mainland are helping to position Hong Kong to take advantage of intelligent machines that will define the coming decades.

The future is already automated.

■ South China Morning Post

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Asimov's Foundation resonates in the AI era

Social engineering: why Elon Musk, Nobel Prize winners and cult leaders are all obsessed with the science fiction masterpiece 75 years after it was published

Elon Musk called it a fundamental catalyst for SpaceX. Nobel laureate Paul Krugman credited it with shaping his career. Neil Ginchir made it required reading for his congressional staff, and even Japanese cult leader Shoko Asahara was reportedly inspired by it.

Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* was published as a book series 75 years ago this week, and it has lost none of its relevance or poignancy today. Unlike Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which is evocative, poetic and elegantly composed, Asimov's style was functional, unadorned and populated by stock characters. However, *Foundation* remains a seminal masterpiece of science fiction because of its conceptual ideas and philosophical daring.

In the twilight of a once-mighty Galactic Empire, mathematician Hari Seldon develops "psychohistory", a revolutionary science that uses statistical mechanics (big data) to predict human behaviour and social development.

Realising the Empire's collapse is inevitable and will plunge humanity into tens of thousands of years of dark ages, Seldon creates a master plan to keep the flame of civilisation alive, shortening the coming anarchy to a single millennium. Under the guise of compiling all human knowledge into the *Encyclopedia Galactica*, Seldon establishes the First Foundation on a bleak planet at the outer edge of the galaxy.

Lacking natural resources, the First Foundation nonetheless thrives on the strength of "innovation" – specifically its monopoly on miniaturised nuclear power. Over centuries, it navigates a series of political and social crises predicted by Seldon, known as "Seldon Crises". Combining technology, economic leverage and an advanced military, the First Foundation steadily shepherds and coerces its larger, technologically backward neighbours towards galactic unification.

The plan is nearly shattered by the arrival of the Mule, a charismatic mutant with hypnotic mind-control abilities. Because psychohistory relies on mass statistics, it fails to account for a

single unpredictable individual capable of subjugating millions of followers at will. The Mule effortlessly conquers the First Foundation, proving that technological and economic dominance are useless against mental manipulation.

The galaxy is saved only by the mysterious Second Foundation – a hidden group of telepaths Seldon secretly established as the ultimate guardians of his plan. Using "mentals" – a blend of telepathy, emotional manipulation and cognitive control – these caretakers subtly steer history from the shadows. Their mastery in psychological warfare neutralises the Mule and convinces the First

“The world witnessed the darker side of that theory with the rise of Adolf Hitler

Foundation that the mentalists have been destroyed. By appearing defeated, the Second Foundation preserves its anonymity, continuing to secretly guide humanity towards a restored empire.

When Asimov began writing *Foundation* 85 years ago, he was capturing the cutting-edge intellectual currents of his era: mathematical determinism, the quantification of social sciences and the rise of central planning in governance.

Economists such as John Maynard Keynes argued that macro-level human behaviour could be managed through top-down intervention, while Jan Tinbergen and Ragnar Frisch were building the first econometric models. Seldon's psychohistory was essentially macroeconomics and public administration pushed to their absolute logical extreme – individual chaos smoothed out by the predictable behaviour of billions.

At the same time, Asimov also foresaw the limits and dangers of this naive optimism. The Second Foundation served as an allegory for covert social engineering, arriving just as mass media technologies such as radio and television entered everyday life.

Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud and father of modern public relations, argued in his 1928 book *Propaganda* that an "invisible government" must consciously manipulate the subconscious minds of the masses to maintain democratic stability.

The world witnessed the darker side of that theory with the rise of Adolf Hitler and totalitarian propaganda in the 1930s. Today, algorithmic micro-targeting, data mining and behavioural profiling enable social engineering on a scale of which Bernays could only have dreamed. Deepfakes, voice cloning and AI conversational agents have made psychological manipulation faster, cheaper and harder to detect. The Second Foundation reflects this "deep state" concept – an unseen elite that ensures the masses retain the illusion of free choice while subtle interventions guide them towards a predetermined outcome.

Most intriguingly, in the later sequels, Asimov merged his Robot and Foundation universes into a single grand narrative, bringing artificial intelligence to the centre stage. It is revealed that an ancient robot has been the ultimate puppet master for more than 20,000 years, quietly orchestrating human destiny. Seldon's plan was actually an instrument of AI control.

Centuries before the Foundation was established, human society developed a deep, subconscious fear of AI. Bound by the Three Laws of Robotics – which strictly prohibit harming humans or allowing them to come to harm through inaction – robots realised that protecting humanity from its own self-destruction required covert manipulation. To fulfil their prime directive, the machines retreated to the shadows, initiating a multi-millennial era of "benign" mind control that built the very fabric of human history.

Chow Chung-yan is editor-in-chief of the South China Morning Post



Chow Chung-yan

LETTERS

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Rehabilitation is key in drug cases

As Hong Kong grapples with drug addiction, it must prioritise rehabilitation over deterrence.

Hong Kong has long boasted a deterrent neighbourhood. According to Section 8 of the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance, mere possession or use of a dangerous drug can mean up to seven years in jail. Unlike New York, which legalised personal cannabis use in 2021, cannabis remains illegal in Hong Kong. Indeed, Hong Kong remains one of the few common-law jurisdictions which use a strict mathematical approach in sentencing drug trafficking offences.

Still, deterrence fails to address the multi-factor nature of drug offending. Neighbourhood poverty, unemployment and psychiatric challenges loom large. Although anti-drug campaigns – such as the recent anti-etomidate campaign starring Aaron Kwok – are laudable, they are largely ineffective, especially for those who use drugs to ward off disruptive hallucinations or smuggle them to stay financially afloat.

I handle numerous drug cases as a criminal defence lawyer in New York. I represent clients at several of the 141 "drug courts" within the state, including specialist "opoid courts" which have been dubbed "problem-solving" courts. Eligible defendants – for example, those with no history of violent convictions – are offered the opportunity to undergo court-based screening for a treatment

often eschewed in favour of direct interactions between judges and defendants, creating a collaborative atmosphere. In exchange for programme completion, the sentence gets drastically reduced. This improves employment outcomes.

Drug offenders are not villains. They are injured souls seeking redemption. How we treat them speaks volumes about our society.

Alexander Clewewood Ng, New York

Rules for dogs must be stronger

Recent dog attacks in Hong Kong have highlighted a public safety problem that can no longer be ignored. Just last week, a large unleashed dog in Yuen Long killed two small pet dogs within 20 minutes. The same dog was involved in an earlier attack on another dog a month before. Even more alarming, a 33-year-old



Recent incidents with dogs in the city have led to calls for better regulation.

woman was fatally attacked by a large dog while working at a licensed pet boarding facility in Ta Kwu Ling.

The issue is not that dogs are inherently dangerous; rather, too many are inadequately trained, improperly supervised or allowed to roam without leashes in public spaces. Parks, pavements, housing estates and workplaces should not become places where residents fear for their safety.

The time for action is now. Existing leash regulations must be rigorously enforced, with all dogs kept on a leash no longer than two metres in public areas. Dogs with a history of aggression and certain large breeds should be required to wear muzzles in crowded places. First-time owners should be required to put their dogs through mandatory training in obedience and socialisation before obtaining a licence, while licence renewals should require proof of responsible ownership.

Penalties for negligence must also be strengthened, including substantial fines and suspension of ownership rights when dogs cause injury or death. Public education campaigns, better reporting systems for dangerous dogs and more designated dog exercise areas could further reduce risks while promoting responsible pet ownership.

By combining stronger enforcement, better education and greater accountability, Hong Kong can ensure its streets and public spaces remain safe and welcoming for the two-legged and four-legged.

Adeoti Joy, Yuen Long

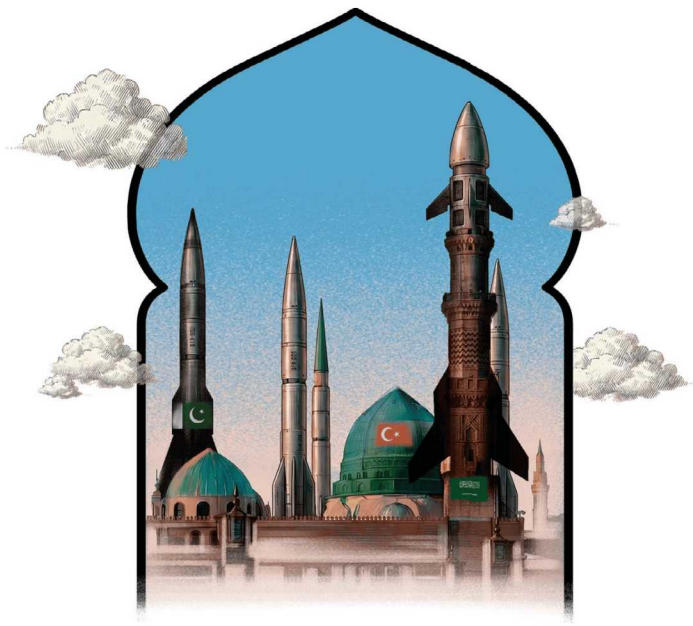


Illustration: Victor Sanjinez

Mecca pact: first move in a Middle East shift?

As the security agreement shakes up strategic calculations for the United States, China and Russia, a regional order shaped by regional states is no longer unthinkable

The Mecca security pact between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan stipulates that an armed attack against one shall count as an attack against all three. Yet the real message is directed at the United States: if being an American ally offers no immunity against attack, there is little point in waiting for Washington to honour its security guarantees.

That there has been no official White House statement casts some doubt on whether Donald Trump is really "very happy to see that Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan have recently, and finally, signed the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement", as the US president wrote on social media. "It shows that the Middle East is coming together and how countries will finally be able to defend themselves in a more meaningful way."

Superficially, the needs of the three nations are complementary: wealthy Saudi Arabia lacks military capacity, Turkey harbours ambitions across Eurasia and nuclear-armed Pakistan seeks financial support. Their strengths fit neatly together, cemented by a shared Sunni faith.

But it is too early to argue that the Middle East is coming together. The concept of "middle power" may be in vogue after Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney called for middle power solidarity amid great power rivalry in his landmark

however, exposed the hollowness of that ambition, as European security still fell back on American leadership and Nato's military umbrella.

Besides, eroding US influence in the region runs counter to Israel's interests. Even if Washington were inclined to step back, Tel Aviv would go to great lengths to drag it back into the fray and cling tightly to its American backing – notwithstanding the fact that Israel's killings in Gaza have shifted public opinion across sizeable segments of the US population, including young Jewish communities.

Beijing has not issued a formal statement on the pact either. It should view the agreement with cautious approval. China has a long-standing preference for locally led security frameworks and supports regional powers in assuming greater responsibility for their stability. The pact complements its push for common and comprehensive security.

In recent years, as China's clout has grown, voices have increasingly called for Beijing to step in as a security guarantor. Voices are strongest in the Middle East, in part because China is the only major power that has friendly ties with all nations in the region, including Israel.

But this diplomatic balancing act was sustainable partly because regional powers did not have acutely hostile relations with one another before the Gaza war. Should armed conflict erupt, China would find itself squeezed between opposing sides asking for support – a parallel to its predicament over the Russia-Ukraine war.

Russia's role in the Middle East has shrunk, but it is far from being pushed out of the picture. Ukraine-related obligations have tied down plenty of its energy and other resources, yet Moscow can still sustain its foothold, drawing on long-established diplomatic ties, technical military cooperation with Iran and residual military and political assets in Syria. Although it lacks the capacity to steer major regional events or launch bold new initiatives, Russia can still serve as a secondary diplomatic broker and keep up modest weapons sales.

How far can the pact realistically go? The catch is who, exactly, would invade any of the three. Israel functions as a shared threat more than a direct foe, yet an Israeli military strike against any member is hard to imagine. Israel has no

cause to attack Pakistan or Turkey – both are American allies as well. And before the Gaza war erupted, Saudi-Israeli normalisation was almost within reach.

The pact is unquestionably bad news for Tehran: it unites the three most powerful Sunni states, a dynamic that naturally bodes ill for Shiite-led Iran. Backing proxies like the Houthis and Hezbollah will also become more costly. Yet if even Washington cannot make Iran bend, no regional power will dare launch a direct military assault



Zhou Bo

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Should armed conflict erupt, China would find itself squeezed between opposing sides

against Tehran. Conversely, Tehran is highly unlikely to start an open war against any Mecca pact member – its doctrine rests on asymmetric leverage and proxy power, rather than territorial invasion.

India, which regards Pakistan as its primary regional threat, will frown on the deal too. With Pakistan now backed by two of the most powerful Muslim nations, New Delhi will have to factor in potential pushback from Saudi Arabia and Turkey when planning military operations in Kashmir. The pact is particularly awkward for India given its traditionally close economic and energy ties with Saudi Arabia, one of India's largest oil suppliers. Turkey, meanwhile, has long been an outspoken supporter of Pakistan on the Kashmir issue.

The pact so far is a straw in the wind – but could it be the first move in a tectonic shift? Throughout its modern history, the region has served as a geopolitical chessboard for external powers. Today, great powers command far less ability to dictate regional outcomes than they did a generation ago. A regional order shaped by regional states is no longer unthinkable.

Senior Colonel Zhou Bo (ret) is a senior fellow at the Centre for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University and a China Forum expert

African nations know who the true friends are

China's long engagement across the continent stands in contrast to the US approach driven purely by utility

The gaffe at last month's Aids 2026 conference in Rio de Janeiro, where a US State Department presentation displayed a map of Africa with every country mislabelled, serves as more than a source of embarrassment. It was a symbol of the distance between US rhetoric and its real stance regarding the African continent.

Earlier this year, Nick Checker, a senior US State Department official, spoke of "resetting" US relations with Africa, pivoting away from dependency and towards mutually beneficial partnerships. Yet, as the mislabelled map suggests, the actual engagement often feels disconnected, chaotic and transactional.

Washington's policies towards Africa have long been a study in contradiction. While American officials try to put the focus on what they call China's debt traps, the US often pursues a policy defined by punitive tariffs, restrictive visa policies and selective interventions.

Whether it is feuding with regional powers such as South Africa, intervening in their domestic affairs, or remaining largely silent on humanitarian crises, the US approach usually prioritises strategic utility over partnership. This pattern echoed throughout the Cold War era. Washington's support for many brutal and corrupt regimes was often dictated by narrow geopolitical interests rather than the aspirations of African citizens, and this continues to this day.

Contrast this with the recent history of China's engagement. The results are visible in the roads, railways, ports and telecommunications infrastructure that are reshaping African economies. In Nigeria, struggling farmers are benefiting from a high-yield rice strain called Gawal R1. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Beijing has provided rapid medical aid to contain an Ebola outbreak.

According to a youth survey of 16 countries by the South Africa-based Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 95 per cent of respondents aged 18 to 24 viewed Beijing as an ally. This sentiment is mirrored in Pew Research Centre data, which charts a steady decline in favourable perceptions of the United States alongside an increase in support for China.

This shift is not limited to physical infrastructure. In the digital realm, African tech users are bypassing American services in favour of Chinese artificial intelligence (AI) models. These systems offer greater customisability and lower costs, supported by Chinese firms that provide the computing power and know-how necessary to integrate with local needs.

By establishing government-focused data centres and international AI pacts, China is securing a technological foothold that US firms, too focused on high-cost, proprietary solutions, have failed to capture. Economic pragmatism is also driving this divergence. As trade between Africa and China expands, the yuan is rapidly becoming a major trading currency. Financial institutions across the continent are integrating with China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System to facilitate direct settlements, while nations such as Libya explore issuing panda bonds to fund reconstruction.

Large lenders such as Johannesburg-headquartered Standard Bank are moving to reduce reliance on the US dollar, viewing these ties as a necessary strategy to build alternative financial infrastructure and hedge against the volatility of US-led sanctions.

The US has long viewed Chinese activities in Africa through its own neo-imperialist lens. While Washington exploits the continent when necessary and ignores it at other times, Beijing has consistently maintained deep partnership, cooperation and aid, almost since the modern nation's founding in 1949.

The Asian-African Conference in Indonesia in 1955, better known as the Bandung Conference, marked a major milestone, allowing China to break out of Western isolation and build ties across Asia and Africa. Under Mao Zedong, Beijing gave ideological and material support to the decolonisation of Africa, helped unite anti-colonial leaders and advocated for national sovereignty.

Premier Zhou Enlai used the summit to press China's case for a peaceful, reasonable leader by laying down the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Beijing never looked back. The strong ties forged with newly independent states helped China take its seat from

Taiwan at the United Nations in 1971. The Bandung Conference effectively launched the Non-Aligned Movement of newly independent nations. As China grew wealthy, those developing economies received sustained and continuing support. The US, by contrast, was unmitigatedly active, especially during the Cold War, in attempting to subvert social-democratic governments and movements in Africa, all the while exploiting its natural resources.

Good international relations are built on presence, consistency and tangible results. While the US grapples with mislabelled maps and ideological grandstanding, China has been building the infrastructure of the future in partnership with African nations. It is time for observers to stop asking who African nations align with and start listening when they tell us who they believe their friends truly are.

Alex Lo has been a South China Morning Post columnist since 2012, commenting on China and international affairs. He is also a member of the editorial writing team

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Neither Pakistan nor Turkey, plainly middle powers, are strictly Middle Eastern countries

Davos address. Yet neither Pakistan nor Turkey, plainly middle powers, are strictly Middle Eastern countries, despite ambitions to extend their influence.

And the major powers will not walk away. America's role in the Middle East might shrink in the long term but a new regional security architecture is unlikely to be short of its presence. The European Union, for instance, has talked about strategic autonomy for over a decade. The Ukraine conflict,

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

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Opinion Society

Why Britain's state costs more even as it does less



Stephen Bush

The UK has a state that struggles to do the basics, yet the tax burden is at a record high. Why? There is a ready supply of theories on offer at Westminster. But a surprising number start from the basic truth that the state does less because, after the financial crisis, we consciously decided that it should do less, by managing the cost of the crisis largely through spending cuts, rather than tax rises.

So why does it spend more as a share of GDP than it did before 2010? One reason is that arguments about 'shares of GDP' are almost always selling what is, at best, a partial truth. You can spend more as a share of GDP simply because your country grows at a sluggish rate, or because the things you are spending money on are more expensive, or because a series of

Arguments about 'shares of GDP' are almost always selling what is, at best, a partial truth

global shocks forces you to take on more debt. Or, if you are exceptionally unlucky, as the UK has been since 2016, then you can end up doing so because of all three.

One is to decide that the British economy has only once briefly looked like it was recovering, and that was towards the end of the Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition. Whether that was a dead cat bounce or a promising recovery snuffed out by Brexit, we'll never know. But if you have sluggish economic growth, you are going to see your spending go up as a share of GDP even if you are standing still.

"Share of GDP" arguments can provide false comfort in other ways.

It's true, for instance, that as "a share of GDP", the UK does not spend any more on welfare than it did in 2010, and that the welfare bill is not "ballooning" or "out of control" or anything like it. But more importantly, it is also true that more of the UK's welfare spend in 2010 went on other one. That's better than work schemes – providing employment experience to people who were not workplace-ready – and on tax credits, topping up the incomes of the lowest paid. A greater share of the welfare bill now goes to either the retired or people who are not in work. The latter group

has swelled, in part as a consequence of cuts in other forms of welfare spending that actually help get people into work.

The UK really does have less state than it did. Much of what the government did for people at the time of the financial crisis, for example, it no longer does. Tax credits are far less generous and, due to the higher minimum wage, individual businesses have to pay a higher share of their employees' living costs. In England, we no longer pay the poorest 16 to 18-year-olds £30 a week to stay in school. In large parts of the country, local authority-provided youth provision are a thing of the past. But contrary to what many on the left think, the UK also really does tax the average person less. The "rich", or the "broadest shoulders", or whatever metaphor you want to use, really do pay more.

We have a state paid for by the better off that provides services primarily for the sick, the old and people in acute crisis. And because spending on the sick is the thing that is rising across the world, the UK faces ever greater costs. Unlike most of the other developed countries, almost all healthcare spending in the UK flows first through the government.

Taking these truths together gets us to the three options available to the UK. The first is to decide that, actually, you can persuade British people to accept the level of state provision we currently have with the tax burden we currently have. This seems like doing nothing.

There are two other plausible routes – either to choose between two divergent options or else do a bit of both. One is to decide that you can tell people on a return to a state that does more for which they – and not just the rich, not non-doms, not the tiny minority who privately educate their children – will have to pay more.

The other is that you decide we need to take a step out of our peers' books and decide that more of the cost of healthcare and of an ageing population will be paid for out of private spending – whether through mandatory insurance, a mixed model or something else entirely.

Finally, you might favour a third way: a co-payment system for health care, perhaps, but more money for the criminal justice system.

The problem is that whichever option you pick from, you run the risk of being unpopular, and having the voters decide they would like the other one. That's better than work schemes – engaging in fantasies about plucking lower-hanging fruit and avoiding hard conversations with the public and difficult choices about how the government spends its money.

stephen.bush@ft.com

Treasury market interventions are only a band-aid

Moves on long-dated bonds and the yen do little to assuage markets long-term

After months of verbal commitments to remain in the system, the UK government exited the European Exchange Rate Mechanism on September 16 1992, unleashing sterling from other EU currencies. "Black Wednesday" harmed the credibility of the government, and netted investors who bet against the pound large returns. Among them was a young American trader at Soros Fund Management in London: Scott Bessent.

Today, the US Treasury secretary finds himself on the other side of the table. Rather than maintaining a currency peg, Bessent must bolster the world's most important bond market as Treasuries face a moment of weakness.

Bessent likes to describe his role as America's "top bond salesman." Implicit is a desire to keep bond prices high and

rates low. But his recent attempts to tame Treasury markets have not addressed the underlying drivers of turbulence in the US bond market. As Bessent surely knows from his experience with John Major's government, interventions only work insofar as policymakers have credibility in the eyes of markets.

Treasury market fragility has become in recent years due to persistent US fiscal deficits driven by high spending and tax cuts. Elevated interest rates have exacerbated the problem of servicing Treasury debt. The typical Treasury bond purchaser is shifting from buy-and-hold sovereign buyers, pension funds and insurers to hot money that demands higher rates. High capital spending on AI data centres contributes to a bond glut in which sovereign issuers are competing with corporate borrowers and private credit, pushing up rates.

Treasury's interventions have aimed to reach upward pressure on long-term Treasury yields. The move to support a weak yen this month was intended to

take pressure off Japan to raise rates or sell Treasury bonds to support its currency; both could weaken the dollar and push up US government borrowing costs. Earlier this year, Bessent suggested providing swap lines to Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, also major holders of Treasury debt. Supporting the currencies and liquidity positions of foreign allies to avoid Treasury sell-offs is a temporary fix, but does not solve the problems of policy credibility and excess debt.

Last week, Bessent made unusual changes to policy towards the Treasury market, signalling that his department would buy twice as many long-dated bonds. Bessent has been a critic of the US Treasury's "regular and predictable" posture on bond maturity issuance, blaming Janet Yellen for not issuing enough longer-maturity debt and leaning on short-term borrowing. His intervention last week could be seen as a move to signal confidence in Treasury bonds on the day, but its modest scale ultimately left the market mostly

The only sustainable way to reduce upward pressure would be fiscal prudence

unchanged. Reports yesterday indicated the Treasury may use funds from its main checking account to buy back bonds, but the scope of such a programme remains to be seen.

As the steward of the world's most important bond market, and a key player in maintaining the world's reserve currency, Bessent's interventions affect the global economy. His efforts have not been helped by the reluctance of the new Federal Reserve chair Kevin Warsh to communicate his views clearly.

But Bessent's actions so far amount to putting bandages on deeper wounds caused by structurally high deficits and persistent inflation. The only sustainable way to reduce upward pressure on Treasuries would be fiscal prudence. Bessent has highlighted his desire to limit budget deficits to 3 per cent of GDP, roughly half the current deficit. He won't do well to put the Trump administration and Congress to achieve this stated goal.

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Letters

Gucci's catwalk tightrope between affordability and aspiration

Cost-cutting is a natural business imperative. But for luxury brands like Gucci, this becomes an external measure, articulated through increased affordability, it risks damaging the exclusivity role that creates demand in the first place ("Kering breaks luxury's taboo by counting the pennies", Lex, August 11).

Consumers don't buy Gucci because it's cheap. They pay for exclusivity and

unattainability; the brand is a status symbol, with deep roots in identity. Reinvesting cost efficiencies into affordable prices may widen consumer reach, especially among younger generations, but could infringe on long-term being aspirational, undermining the potency and value of the brand.

Gucci needs to strike a balance that mirrors one of LVMH's most successful brands, Tiffany & Co. Tiffany walks the

tightrope between aspiration and affordability well. It has high-end, exclusive products, and a complementary affordable range. It has been incredibly successful at expanding last week's audience, while continuing to invest in the aspects that make it a premium, luxury brand: heritage and craftsmanship.

For long-term growth with a cost-saving focus, Gucci should craft a

similar dynamic. Expanding its total offering while investing in its heritage high-fashion status.

With Demna, the creative director, now at the helm, its creativity is clearly being handled on a hand on hand. To invest, it could expand into more affordable offerings without diluting its luxury image.

Gonzalo Brújo
Global CEO, Interbrand, Madrid, Spain

Chicken and egg: Africa's demographic challenge

In his column "Does Africa have too few people?" (Opinion, August 11) David Pilling ignores the lessons of recent economic history and the specific context of sub-Saharan Africa.

With 2.5 per cent to 3 per cent population growth per year over the past 60 years, sub-Saharan African countries have been unable to build their human capital (education and health). Moreover, African economies have long been based on the export of raw materials instead of truly industrialising. Although sub-Saharan Africa has some very large cities, most are plagued with slums. Finally, emigration is not an opportunity for Africans as it was for Europeans who migrated to America in the 19th century.

Nowadays, it is not the sheer number of people but the quality of the human capital that is the engine of development and that enables countries to integrate with the world economy.

No country has been able to develop its human capital without completing its demographic transition, including its specific decline of fertility. This is a prerequisite for sub-Saharan African



countries and the only way for the region to increase its GDP per capita, which has remained tragically stagnant over the past 60 years.

John F May
Research Professor, George Mason University, Arlington, VA, US
Jean-Pierre Guengant
Research Director, Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), Marseille, France

Here's a fact ignored by almost all the tech world

Margaret McGirr's letter ("AI can lend a hand, but it will struggle to replace one", July 21) and Chine McDonald's guest column ("The return of the robot is more than a long time for the past", Opinion, August 7) both touch (sic) on something that should be obvious, but is carefully ignored by almost everyone in the tech world. Namely that our intelligence is embodied, evolved and biological, and inseparable from our bodies.

The brain's job is to control the body in the world; it is the last organ to develop.

Every square centimetre of our hands (and of the rest of our skin) contains about a 170 touch sensors or a 170 touch sensors, sensitive to different kinds of touch: a slap, a burn, a caress, a hug – each of which travels to different parts of the midbrain, prompting the appropriate response. Quickly to the autonomic nervous system for something dangerous; more slowly to a different channel for something carrying meaning.

In addition to the hand's limitless versatility, it is self-repairing, regulates its own temperature, knows without being programmed how much pressure

to exert on an egg, a tennis ball or a day-old chick, and can fuse neurologically to whatever it holds.

So when we put a glass on the table or slide a knife through an apple, we feel the table, or the apple, not the glass or the knife (and not the hand, either).

Finally, and most urgently, the entire human body – including the hands – does everything on 25 or so watts of completely renewable energy; a tiny fraction of what a humanoid robot, even one of the current primitive iterations of robots, needs.

The "return of the robot" is thus not cultural nostalgia.

It's millions of years of evolution crying out to be heard, before we suppress it totally in the service of an automated – and dead – planet.

Shella Hayman
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Corrections

• Moderna developed an experimental skin cancer treatment with US drug-maker Merck, not Germany's Merck as wrongly stated in the Business Week review panel on August 22.

OUTLOOK AMERICA

Revisiting the Lockerbie bombing, 37 years later



by Patti Waldmeir

On December 21 1988, Pan Am Flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie in Scotland, killing 270 people. Now, for the first time, a US court will try one of those alleged to be responsible.

I was booked on that flight. This was all so very long ago: air tickets were paper and online booking was impossible, so I went to a London "bucket shop" to buy a cheap flight to Detroit for Christmas. Someone there saved my life: at the last minute, the travel agent changed my London to New York booking from Pan Am 103 to a TWA flight at the same time. The onward leg of my booking, from New York to Detroit, was unaffected. I remember being powerfully annoyed that I would have to change airlines in New York.

My late father, a journalist, knew only that he was meeting Pan Am 103 in Detroit, in time for the sixth anniversary of my mother's death the next day. When he heard that the flight had exploded soon after take-off, he wrote my obituary and sent it for typesetting. He wouldn't discover for hours that I had been spared.

Scores of other parents, spouses, friends and loved ones would not be so lucky. In the 37 years since, many have died. That's better than the critical details that may emerge from the trial of the alleged bombmaker in a Washington federal courtroom. Jury selection in that trial begins this week.

This isn't the first Lockerbie trial –

but it's the first in a quarter-century, and it's on the US soil. Back in 2005, the Libyan regime of former leader Muammar Gaddafi accepted responsibility for Lockerbie after a Libyan intelligence official was convicted of murder in 2001 by a specially constituted Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands. Now another former Libyan intelligence officer, Abu Agla Mohammed Mas'ud Khair Al-Marini, will face a US jury in

charge of the UK's deadliest terrorist attack in history, and the worst attack on US civilians apart from September 11.

Lockerbie remains a subject of fascination. The BBC-Netflix series *The Bombing of Pan Am 103* hit the Netflix US top 10 soon after its American release last month. Kathryn Turman, the victims' rights campaigner and a prominent character in the Netflix drama, thinks the timing of the attack is part of the reason why: "What really struck home was that it was a Christmas thing, there were 23 families groups on the flight, it fell on a little market town in Scotland." Many of the victims were very young, including 35 student abroad students, she says.

Pan Am 103 would ultimately transform the way airlines and governments approach aviation security. Paul Hudson, whose 16-year-old daughter was killed in the tragedy and who now heads the air passenger advocacy group Flyersrights, tells me Lockerbie led to better bomb detection, a reward programme that

foiled other plots and deterrence of state-sponsored terrorism.

I asked Stephanie Bernstein, who lost her husband and is vice-president of the US group Victims of Pan Am Flight 103, what a new prosecution can achieve now, nearly four decades after the fact. After all, Mas'ud has been a suspect for decades. "I'm certainly not looking at it as a way to get 'the truth', whatever that is. I am looking at it as a very very important step towards gaining some measure of justice, holding accountable those who were legally able to hold accountable," she says.

Bernstein, a rabbi, told me that "for all of us, this is sacred work... we owe it to (those who died) and to other people to make sure... that when people get on a plane they are not going to get blown out of the sky."

But a conviction is not a foregone conclusion, legal experts say. Mas'ud allegedly confessed to his involvement while in custody in post-revolution Libya. His lawyers tried to get the confession excluded, and though the judge ruled it admissible, jurors will not necessarily be persuaded by it.

I can understand the desire not to let time exonerate those responsible – but 37 years too long? Turman says no: "It doesn't matter how long. We will not rest until we approach aviation security. Paul Hudson, whose 16-year-old daughter was killed in the tragedy and who now heads the air passenger advocacy group Flyersrights, tells me Lockerbie led to better bomb detection, a reward programme that

The writer is a contributing columnist

Opinion

An economic D-Day is coming for Iran

Scott Bessent

In 1945, the Allied powers convened the Tehran Conference to plot the course of an uncharted act.

As Roosevelt and Churchill weighed a campaign that would culminate in the Normandy landings, they asked themselves what could be done “to bring the greatest pressure to bear on the enemy”.

History has returned that question to Tehran. And the moment has arrived to answer it with the full weight of American resolve.

President Donald Trump and the overwhelming might of our military have significantly dismantled Iran’s military capabilities and weakened its nuclear programme. Now we are entering the endgame. At dawn begins an economic D-Day – the single greatest financial offensive ever marshalled against an adversary.

For 47 years, the Islamic republic of

Iran has been a malignant force in the world. Within Iran, a corrupt regime has consigned what would be one of the world’s strongest economies to ruin and its enterprising people to repression.

Beyond its borders, the Iranian regime maintains a network of proxies that perpetrate its terror. The US has paid an especially grievous price but we are scarcely alone in facing this scourge. Too often, though, we find ourselves alone in our resolve to thwart it.

President Trump has decimated Iran’s economy to a point where the rial has never been weaker and inflation has rarely been higher. The regime’s final refuge now lies in the self-deception of fearful nations that still believe accommodating aggression can secure peace.

Iran’s enablers purchase and transport its petroleum. They facilitate the flow of its finances through exchange houses and free trade zones. They welcome Iran’s flights and maintain registries on its behalf. They turn a blind eye to seaborne fuel transfers and the illicit use of their banks, all while concealing the extent of their complicity. In short, these countries calculate appeasement of the regime to be the safer course. But

they would do well to consider the consequences of sustaining it.

In the 17th century, French philosopher Blaise Pascal gave enduring expression to the dilemma beneath this temptation. He understood that uncertainty does not absolve men or nations of divine judgment. In fact, it demands a more exacting appraisal of risk and imposes a higher price for error.

Those who sever Tehran’s remaining financial and commercial connectivity will reinvigorate their own

Pascal’s anonymous wager now applies to Iran’s lifelines. Nations that, in courtier reprieve from Tehran, continue to replenish the very regime from which they seek protection – and now exceed the limits of America’s tolerance.

President Trump is doing what his predecessors refused by ending a threat they resigned themselves to managing. For decades, the political class accepted an endless cycle of provocation instead

of advancing American interests. Not another generation should be condemned to the menace of fanatics who devote themselves to “death to America” and fulfilling the regime’s nuclear ambitions. And total financial isolation can obviate the need for American force while enlarging the sphere of freedom for our allies.

Those who sever Iran’s remaining financial and commercial connectivity will reinvigorate their own. They will deepen their access to global capital, reinforce confidence in their markets and attain the standing they seek in the world economy.

The alternative for those who tether themselves to Tehran is the foreclosure of any path to lasting prosperity. Illicit finance will flourish, as it so often does, where confidence has collapsed. And any nation that serves as a financial artery of a withering regime should expect to share in its isolation. To become a sanctuary for terror is to become, in the eyes of the United States, a global pariah.

The Islamic republic has subsisted by dressing exteriorly as security guarantees. It has drawn strength from a calcu-

lus that regards Iranian retaliation as certain and American enforcement as negotiable. Under President Trump, that era is over. And those who fear the danger of defying Tehran ought not to discount the cost of testing Washington.

The president has created the conditions to leverage every agency, every authority and action many assumed we would never summon. Any remaining tie to Tehran will hasten the economic ostracism of countries and entities, whether that tie be purposefully constructed or willfully ignored. And if, as the regime’s grasp on power crumbles alongside its economy, Iran resorts to military action against US forces or its Gulf neighbours, make no mistake: President Trump will respond swiftly and decisively.

The world should understand that our objective is to sever every economic lifeline that sustains the tyrannical regime until Tehran stands alone. Pascal considered salvation to be a choice. As a great wave of American resolve comes ashore, are Iran’s enablers willing to wager their future against it?

The writer is the US secretary of the Treasury

Meloni wants a snap election to hide her failures

Andrea Lorenzo Capussela

Last month, the lower chamber of Italy’s parliament approved a drastic rewriting of the country’s electoral law, which might herald a snap election.

If ratified by the Senate, this will be the fourth electoral reform in two decades. The three previous initiatives had nakedly partisan motives and strictly partisan support – the first was passed by the centre-right (2005), the second (2015) and third (2017) by the centre-left. Each produced complex and eccentric electoral systems while sapping political accountability and trust in representative democracy. The same is true of this reform, which was pushed by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s right-wing coalition.

The first two reforms were struck down by the constitutional court because they gave voters next to no say in the selection of MPs (something largely left to party leaders) and distorted the translation of votes into seats (by awarding a potentially vast number of additional seats – a “majority premium” – to the winners). For the same reasons, this new reform is also arguably unconstitutional.

That is why Meloni might seek a snap election – likely in early 2027 – precisely in order to forestall the court. If the judges were to invalidate the reform after the election, the court would neither invalidate the vote nor deny the winner its majority premium.

The rationale for the reform is clear. Like a fishmonger after days of rough seas, Meloni has scant goods to sell.

Her proposed electoral reform is designed to favour coalitions that face no competitors

When she took office in late 2022, she staked her political capital on managing Italy’s slow economic decline, rather than trying to reverse it. She did so by favouring multiple special interests including micro firms and self-employed, and designating scapegoats – as the reaction to the recent Cuccia migrant crisis shows.

Her government undermined economic institutions crucial for innovation and creative destruction, whose weakness is the proximate cause of Italy’s long-stagnant productivity. Broad amnesties for tax evasion and illegal construction have further enfeebled the rule of law, and a recent reform of the stock market curtailed protections for minority shareholders, which will further lower corporate governance standards and hinder companies’ growth.

The centre-left lamented the government’s failure to address Italy’s economic ills. But it still lacks credible ideas for shifting Italy on to a fairer and more productive path. Meanwhile, public debt stands at 138.5 per cent of GDP, up from 120.8 per cent in 2011, when a crisis of confidence in Italian bonds threatened the survival of the euro and the EU itself.

Given all this, four years after Meloni took the helm, the lower and middle classes are not content.

Hence her proposed reform, which is designed to favour coalitions – like her own – that face no competitors at their own peril. The plan invites the country to be endangered by the rise of a new demagogic party, National Future, which vehemently attacks Meloni’s government from the right. But as no principles divide them, and co-optation would be mutually beneficial, I expect the new party to eventually join her coalition.

Meloni has been suitably European and Atlantist in foreign policy, winning her acceptance as a credible partner by Berlin and Brussels. She has even managed to maintain a workable balance between closeness to Washington and distance from Donald Trump’s most extreme extravaganzas.

Neither this balancing act nor her electoral reform will guarantee Meloni’s victory at the next election. What is certain is that this reform will add to the ruin of Italy’s political institutions.

European conservatives were perhaps unwisely embracing Meloni so warmly; European progressives might wish to be more demanding of her opponents, should they succeed her.

The writer is author of ‘The Political Economy of Italy’s Decline’ and ‘The Republic of Innovation’

The new world order? Every man for himself

GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Alec Russell

Kofi Annan had a favourite put-down for people who tried to argue that an autocrat could be the right answer for a weak or troubled state.

“That’s Johnnie Walker talking . . .” he would say, recalling how he and friends used to respond in Ghana when he was growing up and someone made an outlandish claim. Autocracies were “built on sand”, he believed, and the only way to nurture a nation was via good governance; you just had to keep working at it.

I heard the late UN secretary-general deliver this gentle “Johnnie Walker” rejoinder on a tour of Tanzania 15 years ago. It was a time when the post-cold warletting of hope had run its course. And yet an aspirant breeze of democracy was blowing across much of the developing world.

How dispirited Annan would be now. Authoritarianism has of course been on the rise in great powers, such as China and Russia, for over a decade, and in “middle powers”, from Turkey and the Gulf to India, and more recently and quite rapidly Indonesia too.

But now that America has decided to hang up its hat when it comes to championing democracy, there is a broader

springtime for tyrants. From Zimbabwe to Myanmar, tuggish autocracies seem emboldened to do pretty much what they like without fear of even a rhetorical reproof.

As for Tanzania, the authorities have just suspended a newspaper for daring to report on possible tension in the government. A decade ago such an act would have led to pressure from western donors. How liberating it must be for insatiable politicians to be able to clamp down on the media with no fear of sanction . . .

Some will be tempted to riposte that this is nothing new: since when has America been a paragon of virtuous behaviour? It has, after all, always been self-interested and hypocritical – as we all demand power over the years.

When Mark Carney, Canada’s prime minister, lambasted the idea of the US-led “rules-based global order” as “pleasant fiction” in January, his critique found particular favour in the global south. There was no hint of resentment the west’s inconsistencies. Exhibit A: for the prosecution: Zaire’s dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in the cold war. He was a king of kleptocracy, yet he and other despots were cosseted by multiple US presidents as anti-Soviet pawns.

And yet, unfashionable as it is to defend America’s record on the world stage, that’s not the whole picture. Over the post-1945 decades there were many countries in which beleaguered opposition parties and news outlets were kept going by the support of the US state



department and its agencies. In the early 1990s, when correspondents of the US government-funded Voice of America travelled to Angola, a one-party state opening up to the world, they were hailed as legends, such had been the impact of their broadcasts.

Well that was then. Voice of America was closed by the Trump administration last year. Democracy promotion is off the US agenda. When last month allies of Zimbabwe’s president Emmerson Mnangagwa forced through a new law to extend his term, in breach of the constitution, there was not a chirp of protest from America. Other western countries too seem to have lost their spine. Britain and France are focusing on debt relief for Zimbabwe while saying nothing about the power grab.

Now that the US has hung up its hat when it comes to championing democracy, it is springtime for tyrants

The financial savings from this retreat and a broader disinvestment in soft power are a rounding error. But its impact on opposition parties is dire. It is also short-sighted. Beijing is filling the soft power vacuum.

In Zimbabwe, Mnangagwa’s backers are calling for him to step down. He has just promoted 10 of them to be senators. He is said to have drawn heart from Trump’s offhand past suggestion that he might seek a third term. And so a tyranny takes root.

Some talk despairingly – and inaccurately – of return to “the law of the jungle”. When Rudyard Kipling, the chronicler of British imperialism, coined the phrase as the title of a poem, it was a compliment. He was saluting the way wolves worked together; his law of the jungle was about community, not chaos. “For the strength of the pack is the wolf,” he wrote. “And the strength of the wolf is the pack.”

Carney implicitly invoked this “pack” spirit as a source of inspiration when he talked about middle powers needing to work together to keep multilateralism

alive. Sometimes this will happen. The idea of pluralitarianism – ad hoc coalitions on specific issues – is gathering fans, as is flexilateralism, whatever that may mean.

But overall the global zeitgeist is “every man for himself” – or what is, yes, commonly understood as the law of the jungle. This is a cut-throat age when you can ruthlessly pursue goals. UN officials talk despairingly of how as many as 10 countries are fuelling the war in Sudan, all feeling assured of impunity.

Supporters of America’s disengaged approach talk of a long-overdue return to realism. The world has changed, they say. That is true. But the end of US interest in spreading enlightenment ideals comes at a high price.

Annan would have known how to respond to anyone seeking to defend the prevailing cynical disregard of the moral imperative. Quietly but firmly he would have ridiculed the notion, saying, “That’s Johnnie Walker talking.” And he would, of course, have been right.

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ECONOMICS

Michael Strain

Economic liberalism is not in vogue, to put it mildly. In the US, the energy in the Democratic Party lies with self-described democratic socialists who are critical of free markets. On the right, vice-president JD Vance argues that economic growth is overstated, economic success might be “fake”, and the bipartisan liberal consensus on economic policy has “failed” for the last four decades.

Critics argue that liberalism has not delivered broad-based prosperity – an attack that can be convincingly defended against with statistics and quantitative analysis. But their critique goes further, asserting that liberalism is morally corrosive. This, too, is off base.

For one, economic liberty is intrinsi-

cally valuable. Also, the free enterprise system pushes against the problematic tendency in American life to see people less as individuals and more as members of a group. The system is premised on the idea that society should accept the preferences, knowledge and decisions of individuals and families.

This system argues that the welfare of society should be measured not by hazy perceptions of national greatness or by progress towards objectives set by elites, but instead by how well off individuals and families are.

Work is itself of great moral value. It offers a sense of identity and purpose, directs our energy and time to productive ends, and allows us to provide for our families. It offers spiritual benefits, as well, because it is inherently creative.

Pope John Paul II argued that in carrying out the biblical mandate “to subdue, to dominate, the earth”, every person “reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe”.

In a market economy, worker compensation is largely determined by productivity. Because effort is rewarded, individuals come to exercise personal

responsibility for, and agency over, their outcomes.

Free markets facilitate growing economies, which in turn facilitate important virtues. In a growing economy, you can do better without others doing worse. This dynamic fosters tolerance, pluralism and support for political liberty and self-government.

Market exchange requires voluntary co-operation, which in turn leads society as a whole to be more co-operative.

As Voltaire marvelled in the 18th century of the Royal Exchange in London, Jews, Muslims and Christians “transact together, as though they all professed the same religion, and give the name of infidel to none but bankrupts”.

Commercial transactions create a sense of mutual dignity among citizens.

People are not puppets responding to the string pulls of market forces. We have agency

The millionaire and the shopkeeper may have very different financial net worth, but they look each other eye to eye and shake hands, each needing something from the other.

Still, there is something to the anti-liberal critique. Slapping a price tag on some things can change their character by turning them into commodities. A market society does encourage consumerism and materialism. It can lead to a reductive understanding of the good life by elevating commercial activity above cultivating relationships, caring for family and enjoying leisure.

Its emphasis on individual preferences can make society morally thin by focusing so much attention on what people want and so little on debating what people should want. The focus that economic liberalism places on individual autonomy can lead some to forget the duties we have to each other, to sever connections to home and community and can make people feel isolated.

But none of this argues for curtailing economic liberty in the way suggested by democratic socialists or some Maga Republicans. A major flaw in their cri-

tiques is that they too often let individuals off the hook.

People are not puppets responding to the string pulls of market forces. We have agency. The market may value my taking a consulting project over spending time with my family, for example. But that doesn’t mean I have to take the project – the choice is mine to make.

Liberalism gives pride of place to liberty. But liberty is not the same as licence. To let your passions – or market incentives – determine your choices is to be enslaved. Instead, liberty must be ordered to notions of truth, human flourishing and the good life. As John Paul II argued, “freedom itself needs to be set free.” Free markets require a virtuous citizenry to prevent society from decomposing.

The challenge for liberals is to live liberty well. The anti-liberals have been exactly backwards: the problems facing a market society do not come primarily from markets – they come from society.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and director of enterprise policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute

Opinion

Risky virus research needs a global referee

We can't say for sure how the Covid pandemic began, but we can try to stop the next one.

Alina Chan

In February of last year, the journal *Cell* published a study in which virologists in China screened nearly a thousand bat samples, gathered from five provinces and stored at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, in search of new coronaviruses. The intended purpose of work like this is to give early warning: to learn which animal viruses are close to being able to infect people, so that virologists know what to watch for and have a chance to prepare.

They found that a handful of samples carried relatives of MERS, a deadly coronavirus. The researchers then showed that one of those viruses could enter human cells through the same cellular doorway as the viruses that cause SARS and Covid-19.

The scientists grew the virus in lab-made collections of human airway, nose and intestine cells, For Free Papers Check Sanet.st where it multiplied. They proposed testing it next in mice engineered with the same human cellular doorway. They also identified features that limited how efficiently the virus could infect human cells. More lab work could create a virus without those limitations, and members of this group did those kinds of experiments previously.

All of this was done outside high containment, two rungs short of the sort of precautions reserved for the deadliest pathogens. Leading virologists rang the alarm, saying that the level of safety was inadequate for a new virus potentially capable of infecting people through the air.

When *Cell* drew criticism for publishing the study, a spokesperson for the journal said that biosafety decisions like these rest with a study's lead scientist and its institution and that the researchers "did not break any rules or policies of the journal." *Cell* was right. In China and in the United States there are surprisingly few constraints on this type of research. Scientists can still gather novel coronaviruses, enhance them in the lab under relatively low biosafety conditions and even accidentally cause an outbreak — without breaking any rules.

Rules would not have prevented what happened a month later, when a worker at a Fort Detrick laboratory in Frederick, Md., found a large hole in an air-tight suit. About an hour's drive from Washington, Fort Detrick contains some of the country's maximum-containment laboratories, where scientists handle deadly pathogens, including Ebola and hantavirus. The F.B.I. was brought in, and dozens of staff members were interviewed.

Investigators concluded that the damage was deliberate, but they were unable to determine who was responsible. The investigation also turned up evidence of other serious violations of safety protocols — failures that had nothing to do with the apparent sabo-

tage and would probably not have come to light without it. The laboratory was shut down for nearly six months.

I have worked in a laboratory that engineers viruses (of the type that do not cause disease), and what strikes me about both of these episodes is how much rests on the judgment and the good behavior of individuals. Scientists are people. Mistakes, bad calls and moments of anger all happen, and pathogens escape from laboratories more often than you might think.

What is missing is a sufficiently scoped, binding standard for regulating pathogen research with catastrophic potential, set and enforced by someone other than the researchers doing the work and the agencies paying for it. No country has one. No international body has the power to establish one.

Action should start with the United States, the world's largest public funder of infectious disease research, which also supplies much of the world with the money, the materials and the scientific journals that drive the field. In July the Trump administration issued new rules for the risky pathogen research it pays for. The new rules are a potential improvement, but they are not enough.

FOR DECADES, ONLY A HANDFUL of countries ran BSL-4 facilities, laboratories built to handle the world's deadliest pathogens. Today at least 53 BSL-4 labs operate across 22 countries, with many in dense cities. Research with dangerous pathogens also occurs in lower-biosafety laboratories, which are far more numerous and difficult to track.

Lab leaks are not unusual. A 2024 review counted some 300 cases of lab workers becoming infected by the pathogens they were studying from 2000 to 2021. Because the review was based on voluntary reporting, the authors called that count "the tip of the iceberg." Many of the infections counted in the review occurred in lower-containment settings, but lab-acquired infections happen even in high-containment facilities. SARS and SARS-like viruses have escaped from BSL-3 and BSL-4 labs repeatedly.

The laboratory infection that may matter most has not been definitively proven — the likely escape of the virus that causes Covid-19 from a laboratory in Wuhan, China, in 2019. Scientists in Wuhan had spent years collecting novel coronaviruses, and in the year before the outbreak they joined an American-led proposal — rejected by the Defense Department — to create viruses with SARS-CoV-2's defining feature. (I laid out the evidence for why the pandemic most likely started in a lab in a 2024 essay for Times Opinion.)

Six years on, the official picture remains foggy. The intelligence services and scientific academies that have looked at the question disagree with one another. Several still consider natural spillover from an animal the better explanation, while the C.I.A. and the Energy Department have revised their positions toward a lab origin, and the



HELENE BLANC. GRAPHIC BELOW BY JEREMY ASHKENAS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

World Health Organization no longer rules out the possibility.

If the assessments pointing to a laboratory origin are correct, Covid-19 would be the most destructive accident in the history of science. By some measures, the virus killed more than 15 million people around the world, including more than a million Americans, and drained \$14 trillion from the U.S. economy.

It would be worth having, if such a thing were possible, an accounting of the whole of the pandemic: the death toll, for which we have rough estimates, and everything underneath it — the grandparents who died among strangers, the tumors found late because scanners sat idle, the college years spent in childhood bedrooms, the small businesses shuttered, the friendships that fell apart, the young people who started their careers on video calls, the tens of millions of people across Asia, Africa and Latin

America pushed back into poverty, the low tone of dread that settled over ordinary life and still has not entirely lifted.

MOST PATHOGEN RESEARCH is beneficial to society. The narrow slice of it that is capable of causing a pandemic has been the subject of a long-running debate in the scientific community. The term "gain of function" has been used to refer to a wide range of research. It can describe making a bacterium glow so that scientists can follow it under a microscope or building a virus that spreads more easily in a crowd. It is the experiments that can make a pathogen more lethal or contagious that require our attention.

Some scientists argue that such gain-of-function research could help us create medical countermeasures for viruses poised to infect humans. Others say that testing what a virus would need in order to spread can tell us which mutations to watch for in nature. Still others argue

that the work is necessary to keep pace with adversaries doing the same kinds of experiments. The pathogen-enhancing experiments at the center of this debate have produced scientific papers, but I am not aware of them being necessary for the development of a single vaccine or treatment in use today.

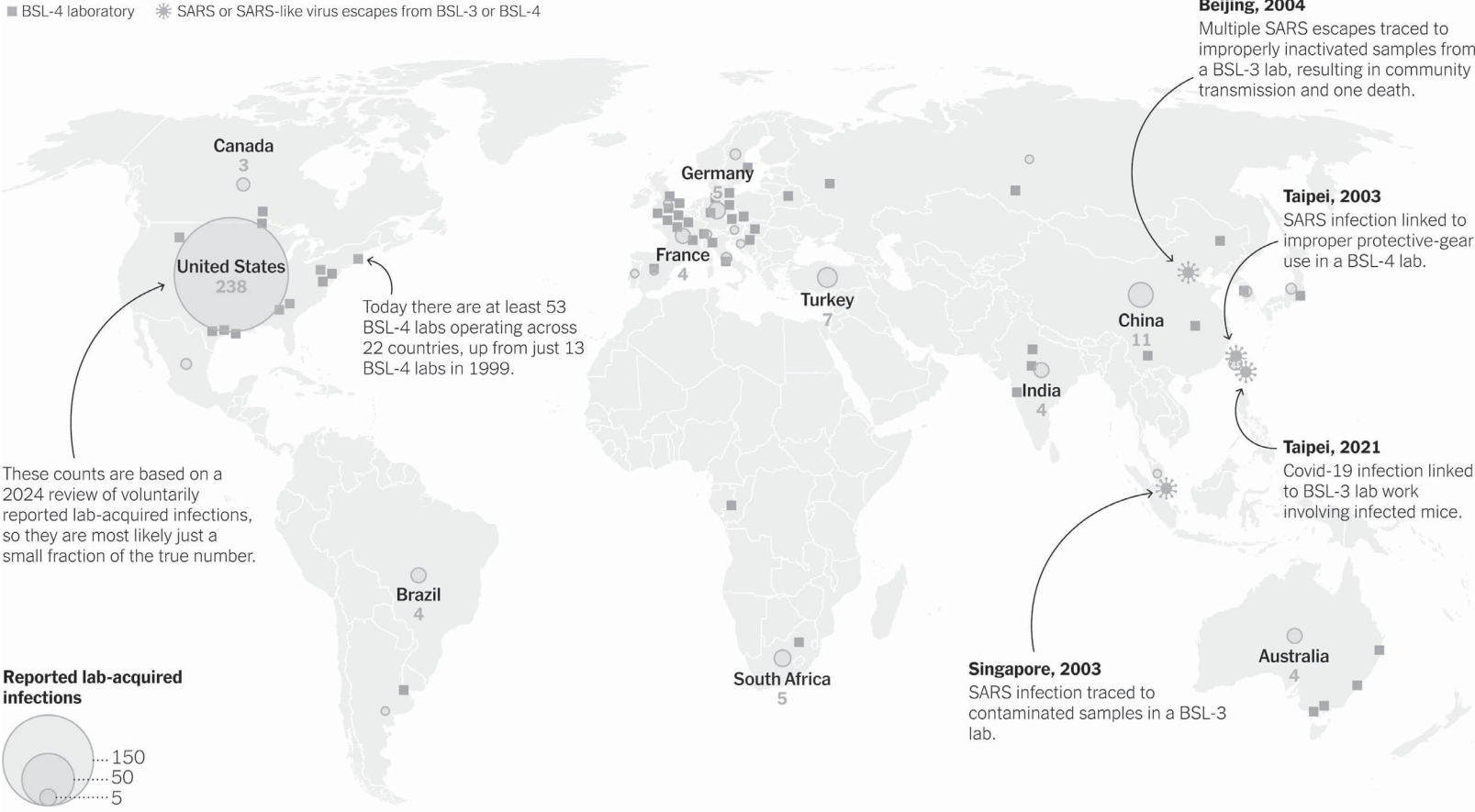
The incentives for risky virus research push in the wrong direction. In a 2011 Washington Post essay headlined "A Flu Virus Risk Worth Taking," Dr. Francis Collins and Dr. Anthony Fauci — then the directors of the National Institutes of Health and its infectious-diseases institute — defended gain-of-function experiments that made a deadly bird flu more contagious in mammals.

When funders controlling hundreds of millions of dollars in research grants endorse such experiments, scientists have a powerful reason to pursue them.

CHAN, PAGE 10

The global spread of research on dangerous pathogens

Between 2000 and 2021 there were some 300 cases of lab workers becoming infected by the pathogens they were studying, many of them in laboratories a step or two below the maximum-containment facilities known as BSL-4 labs. SARS and SARS-like viruses have escaped from BSL-3 and BSL-4 labs repeatedly.



OPINION

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An old Sumerian solution to that \$40 trillion deficit

Paul Vigna

The U.S. federal debt has hit \$40 trillion. Add the debt owed by U.S. states, corporations and consumers and the figure rises to about \$77 trillion in debt, set against an annual G.D.P. of about \$32 trillion. The interest on all of it is compounding constantly. It's not just the U.S., either. Globally, there is \$350 trillion in debt, roughly treble global G.D.P. It's like snowpack on a mountainside. It may look stable right now, but it's creating the conditions for an avalanche. We are past the point where we can deal with current debts in normal ways. The options open to America are extremely unlikely or highly destructive: Grow our way out of it, raise taxes, inflate the debt away or wait for the economic fallout.

Ancient societies had another method to deal with debt. It was called an amargi — a blanket declaration of public debt cancellation. All public debts written off. Disappeared. It sounds laughable. But that's just because the idea has been buried so deeply in history you've probably never heard of it. In the ancient world, it presented a pragmatic solution to an intractable problem. And now, faced with impossible-to-repay debts that are weighing down the U.S.

In the ancient world, debt forgiveness was a regular tool to control the economy. Why have we forgotten it?

economy, is the time to look at the amargi and the lessons it offers about how to think about finance. The ancient Mesopotamians are credited with inventing money. They invented loans and compound interest. They understood this system and its

propensity for breakdowns when debts spiraled. That's why they invented something else, too. About 4,400 years ago, a Mesopotamian king named Enmetena issued an edict. Essentially all public debts, he declared, were canceled. (Amargi typically left debts between merchants in place.) People who had been sold into bondage were freed. Similar edicts gave back land to farmers who had lost it to creditors. The campaign itself was called "return to mother," the origin of the Sumerian word "amargi." The word loses something in the translation across eons and languages, but essentially it's a synonym for "freedom." The concept was codified in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, which decreed a "year of the Lord's favor" every 50 years.

The amargi was a response to a persistent problem that was recognized in the ancient world: Debt compounded until it destabilized society. Get enough citizens sold into slavery and enough abandoned farms and society crumbles. Nobody to grow the crops. Nobody to serve in the armies. The amargi was a relief valve, a final rebalancing tool. It was declared in the ancient Near East regularly when new rulers came to power. These actions were magnanimous but also practical. They allowed society to reset rather than being forced into monetary collapse.

People who were owed money were, predictably, not always happy about the

amargi. In Athens, the ruler Solon instituted a series of reforms around 594 B.C. that canceled debts. The changes were bitterly opposed by the ruling elite. Solon managed to make the reforms stick, but only after leaving town for a decade and making his people promise not to change the new laws in his absence. Three centuries later, a Spartan king wiped out debt by dragging all the city's records into the public square and burning them. The city's elite, aghast, had him arrested and hanged — along with his mother and grandmother. Another two centuries later, the Roman Gracchi brothers were both killed, largely in response to their proposed social reforms. After centuries of elite opposition, the amargi disappeared into obscurity.

The reason the practice often worked in the first place was because the ancient world understood something about the monetary system we have mostly forgotten: Money is an invented social construct. It isn't real, not in the way a tree or a stone is real. The system of money and credit is a thing humans made up. It's a record-keeping device for distributing resources. And since money is a human creation, we can alter it when needed.

Governments can borrow to cover up other problems only for so long. Sometimes what comes next is a hyperinflationary spiral and economic collapse, as in Zimbabwe or Weimar Germany. Sometimes it's a national default that rocks financial markets, such as in Egypt and Anatolia under the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s. And sometimes it's just a steadily slipping quality of life as debt saps people's ability to build their own wealth.

Money represents resources, or at least access to resources. When so much of it is going to debt repayment, it means money that could be spent on goods or services is diverted. The federal government now spends over \$1 trillion a year on debt interest — money that could otherwise be spent on roads, schools or health care. Rising debts also result in investors demanding higher interest rates to buy that debt; higher government debt rates push up rates across credit markets, including for mortgages. Public debt financing contributes to inflationary pressure, too.

Widespread public debt forgiveness should be taken seriously, at least as a mechanism to reframe economic thinking. While its recent track record is patchy — including both failed debt relief for developing countries and the extremely positive debt relief for the defeated Axis powers — it is an important tool for policymakers to consider.

Our debts aren't going to just disappear. Absent a conscious effort, we are just waiting for an increasingly likely economic meltdown. The ancient world had a different understanding of the nature of money, which is why debt forgiveness became a standard feature of their cultures. We need to start seeing money and debt the way people saw it back then: As a system to distribute resources that, like any system, can be periodically reset.

PAUL VIGNA is the author of "The Almighty: How Money Became God, Greed Became Virtue, and Debt Became Sin" and the managing editor of American Banker.



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

Trump came for Canada. We said no.

MARCHE, FROM PAGE 1 are the primary virtues. In Canada, the defining virtue is toughness, the capacity to endure.

The difference is subtle but profound. Margaret Atwood's work of literary criticism that defined 1970s Canadian nationalism is entitled "Survival." The coureurs des bois, the great New French traders who went into the impossible North on canoes looking for pelts, measured themselves by their ability to survive on the bare minimum in the midst of a vast indifferent wilderness.

These deep-running values, rarely openly expressed, are the undercurrent of Canada's rejection of America last week. The offered deal, or at least the details that have emerged, veered significantly from purely economic matters. Apparently, one of the final sticking points was an American demand that Quebec undo its French language laws and French language cultural protections. French, in Canada, is not a business matter. Its place in our nation transcends absolutely any market-based consideration. It is not something that gets "put on the table."

While the decision to tough it out is iconically Canadian, Mr. Carney's gesture will resonate far beyond Canada's border. A gray banker, and not just any

banker, but one of the leading bankers in the world, has stood up and said that there's more to life than a little bit of money. The power of that recognition alone, at this moment in history, cannot be overstated. Mr. Trump's world — a world of transaction and submission — is not the only world we all have to live in.

The economic impacts of Trump's tariff regime remain to be seen, especially given his history of reversing tariff policies on a whim. But we will suffer. America remains Canada's leading trading partner. Mr. Carney has chosen suffering, but he did what Canadians elected him to do: stand up for Canada. It's funny to wake up relieved that you're about to take a beating. We will not go along to get along.

The American president clearly did not know whom he was dealing with. He is following in the grand tradition of American leaders starting wars with people they don't understand, then wondering what went wrong. America today is at risk of becoming one big Epstein Island. Maybe that's all it ever was.

Canada has decided not to get on the plane.

STEPHEN MARCHE is host of the Gloves Off Podcast.



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS TANOUYE/REUTERS

Risky virus research needs a global referee

CHAN, FROM PAGE 9 Researchers seeking publication, grants and promotions are often rewarded for speed and novelty rather than caution. Some cut corners and work under less stringent biosafety to save on costs and time. One virologist created what he called "probably one of the most dangerous viruses you can make" to prove a point to colleagues who doubted it could be done.

Conversations about gain-of-function research have become so politicized that calls for greater oversight are painted as attacks on science itself. But nothing would cost science more than another pandemic traced to a laboratory or merely suspected of coming from one.

A public convinced that scientists had caused the disaster would be slower to accept the next vaccine and less willing to support pathogen research. After hard-earned lessons from meltdowns and close calls, work with nuclear materials is among the most heavily regulated activities on earth. No one considers that an insult to physicists.

Every administration since President Barack Obama's has tried to set up guardrails for high-risk pathogen research, undoing or rewriting policies that came before.

The rules issued in July replaced a Biden-era policy that President Trump scrapped the day before it would have taken effect. In several important ways, the new policy is more rigorous on paper than what it replaced. Whereas the Biden administration's policy would have sent the most dangerous experiments for review, this one bars them outright. It establishes an independent body to weigh the ambiguous cases, and it threatens institutions that fail to report such work with up to five years of ineligibility for federal funds.

What is missing is a binding standard for regulating pathogen research with catastrophic potential. No country has one. No international body has the power to establish one.

THREE IMPORTANT GAPS REMAIN. The first is private research. There have been four major attempts to restrict gain-of-function research since 2014, and all have applied only to government-funded research. Even under the new rules, institutions that take no federal money are only, in the policy's words, "strongly encouraged" to adopt equivalent procedures and warned that refusing could cost them future federal funding.

That approach may work on universities with federal grant portfolios, but it does not bind privately funded groups, as the policy itself acknowledges. Mr. Trump's 2025 executive order requested a legislative proposal to address this gap within 180 days, but that deadline has been blown, and the policy now delegates this task to a future working group.

The second gap is authority. Much of the regulatory machinery has yet to be established, with the policy leaving it up to the funding agencies to create implementation guidance as well as the new independent review body.

The policy cannot require agencies to follow the review body's recommendations, which are meant to "inform the funding agency's decisions." Scientists and their institutions will still decide for themselves whether their work needs review, and the agencies must catch what falls through the cracks and decide whether to take the body's advice. It is like asking the big banks to create the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and then letting them overrule it.

Discretion like that has already let risky proposals slip past the review they were supposed to get, sometimes because scientists and agency staff members simply disagree about which experiments are dangerous and which risks are worth taking and sometimes because a researcher might not have been forthcoming. A better design would screen every proposal against one standard when it is submitted and send anything flagged to the review body, regardless of whether the scientist or the funder agrees.

The third is scope. The hunt for new viruses in the wild — where the Cell study and the Wuhan bat coronavirus research began — is omitted by the policy from the category of dangerous research subject to independent review. American money has helped fund that hunt abroad for more than a decade,

under the reasonable theory that emerging pathogens do not respect borders. But U.S. funders have little access to and no control over what foreign scientists do with the viruses they find, including dangerous gain-of-function experiments at low biosafety levels.

Even under the new policy, nothing requires an agency to systematically look back through the grants it has already made, and the review body is allowed to audit only a small fraction of the proposals that have not been flagged as dangerous gain-of-function work. The National Institutes of Health spends nearly \$8 billion a year on infectious disease research and has no dedicated resources to systematically identify all of the risks in its own portfolio. In 2024 an inspector general found that the U.S. Defense Department did not track funding in sufficient detail to determine

how much it had given to Chinese laboratories for pathogen-enhancing research.

Each of these gaps exists because no government entity has been made responsible for closing it and because none of these policies are durable. The July policy rests on an executive order, meaning that a new administration could easily revoke it, as happened with the rules that preceded it.

Only Congress can give that authority to an independent body. The most promising option on the table is a bill called the Risky Research Review Act, which would establish an independent agency with \$30 million a year in funding. The bill cleared the Senate Homeland Security Committee with bipartisan support in an 11-to-2 vote more than a year ago, but no full Senate vote has been scheduled. The bill's lead sponsor, Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, has spent years in conflict with Dr. Fauci, and the legislation has become entangled in that fight. I think it should instead be judged on what it would do.

The bill would be a start. But like the July policy, its authority would stop where federal money does. What high-risk research needs is a regulator, and Congress should create one, as experts have urged for years. Modeled on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, its primary mandate would be safety. It would know what each laboratory is working on, who pays for it, what its safety record is and how many people live nearby. It would collect data needed for effective policymaking and provide training and resources to the labs it oversees.

CONGRESS HAS CREATED DOZENS of regulatory agencies, addressing risks to the public from food and drugs, consumer products, workplaces, financial institutions and nuclear power. There is no reason a similar agency could not be created to regulate research capable of harming billions of people.

While such an entity is being established, several steps could be taken now. Congress should fund a systematic sweep of research anywhere in the world that could ignite a pandemic. (This goal is related to the mission of a nonprofit I founded, which aims to track pathogen research.)

One risk is that tougher American rules could push dangerous work into countries with weaker oversight. The National Institutes of Health and other arms of the federal government can use their considerable leverage over the institutions that international pathogen research depends on — the journals that publish it, the commercial suppliers that sell essential materials and equipment and the private funders who pay for it — to tighten screening of risky research wherever the work occurs.

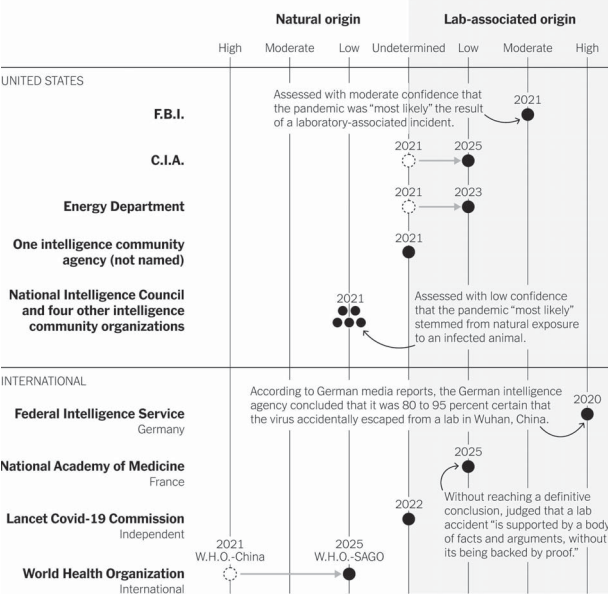
None of this argument depends on where Covid-19 came from. If the virus emerged from an animal market, all of the hazards described here remain in play in pathogen research labs, in more countries than ever before. If it came out of a laboratory, we already know the price. Either way, unless this research is brought under real supervision, I do not expect the rest of the 21st century to pass without a catastrophic lab leak.

What no one will be able to say next time is that we had no warning. We know that dangerous gain-of-function pathogen research continues, and we know what can happen when it goes wrong. Whether we do anything about it is a decision we can make. For now, we are leaving that decision in the hands of the people who want to run the experiments.

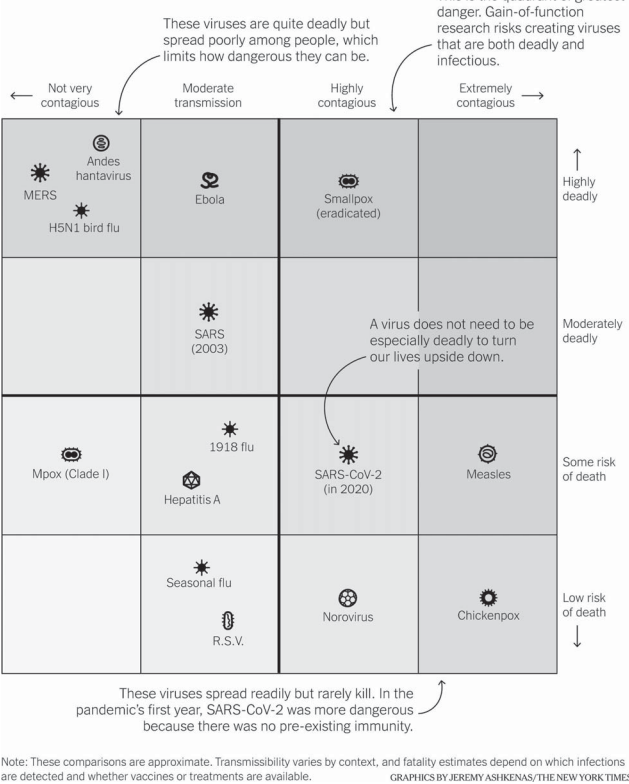
ALINA CHAN is a molecular biologist, an author of "Viral: The Search for the Origin of Covid-19" and the founder of a nonprofit that tracks pathogen research.

Changing assessments of the pandemic's origin

Intelligence services and scientific bodies still disagree about the pandemic's origin, but several have updated their positions.



Virus infectiousness vs. deadliness



Have Harry and Meghan learned their lesson?

Roxane Gay
Contributing Writer

I enjoy celebrity gossip as much as the next person. At first, the story of Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, was a charming one: two people from very different worlds finding each other and forging a path forward. I enjoyed the sweet notes of their courtship and commitment to each other. And I understood that, however much we wanted to frame their relationship as a fairy tale, it would not be one, at least not one of the more sanitized versions.

For a time, though, we did imagine a remarkable change in the largely obdurate institution of the monarchy. Their relationship made the monarchy seem more accessible, more connected to the real world beyond the high walls of Buckingham Palace. Meghan and Harry's wedding ceremony, which included a gospel choir as well as the black bishop Michael Bruce Curry offering a sermon about the power of love, gave the impression that a shift, however subtle, was on the horizon. In his sermon, Bishop Curry referenced Martin Luther King Jr., and how, with love, we can "make of this old world a new world."

I'm sure the couple thought that's exactly what they were doing.

As endearing as Meghan and Harry's story was, reality was never far behind. The biggest crisis, of course, was that a woman of color was infiltrating the royal family and, more important, the royal bloodline, however diluted it may be at this point. What should have been merely fraught, but manageable, quickly became untenable.

There was nothing Meghan could do that would have ever been good enough and, as she has detailed in the years since, the pressures from within and outside the royal family had a detrimental effect on her mental health. It's kind of miraculous that their relationship has, to this point, endured.

And now, they have announced their imminent return to the U.K. I'm sure there are a lot of reasons prompting such a seemingly unexpected move, including, according to conflicting accounts, the potential for Meghan to return to her acting career. She's a

talented performer, so this move could be a homecoming for both of them.

But given their past, what does a future in England hold for them?

In January 2020, 20 months after their wedding, Harry and Meghan announced that they would no longer serve as senior royals, but would take on less demanding positions as they split their time between the U.S. and the U.K. They were seeking a break, not a formal rupture, from the demands of royalty. Alas. A mere 10 days later, Queen Elizabeth II made a statement that the couple would no longer be His or Her Royal Highness and they wouldn't be working for the family business in any capacity. It was kind of astonishing to see how quickly the royal family clarified their opinion of the Sussexes' decision.

Relations between Harry and his family only worsened and, amid this deep public rift, they came to the states, eventually making their home in Montecito, Calif. They were trying, perhaps, to rewrite their fairy tale and figure out their place in their radically changed world. They occasionally took international trips that would, in other

circumstances, be official overseas visits. The royal family moved on with their lives, leaking to the press versions of their side of the story. Charles became king and William took his father's long-inhabited role of next in line.

The story was dramatic and enthralling and imbued with so much loss — of position, of family, of self — in service of a once-in-a-lifetime love. For the most part, people don't voluntarily step away from power and privilege.

The Sussexes set about the business of raising their young family. They also settled some scores in a rather scorched-earth set of moves. There was "Harry & Meghan," a Netflix documentary series that offered viewers a very curated look at their lives. It was all very bland, not particularly revealing, but somehow watchable. The couple also sat down with Oprah Winfrey, a consummate interviewer, and bared, if not all, then quite a lot.

In that 2021 prime-time special, they both detailed the blatant racism, double standards and naked indifference, even cruelty, of the royal family. As



TOLGA AKMEN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Meghan, in particular, shared her story, you couldn't help but wonder how she withstood it all. Theirs was a compelling performance, a closing argument in the matter of what precipitated such a drastic move toward respite and reinvention.

In 2023, Harry published "Spare," a lengthy memoir about growing up as the boy who always knew he would never be king. The prose was utilitarian and occasionally funny. Early in the memoir, he has a line about Prince William's "alarming baldness, more advanced than my own," that makes me laugh every time I think of it. But mostly, Harry's was a hollow story of knowing your place in life and being unduly constrained by it.

In their new fairy tale, the Sussexes launched, with varying degrees of success, business endeavors and media partnerships. They tried to demon-

strate that they could not only survive but thrive without the support of the royal family. Prior to marriage, Meghan made her own way in the world. She did it once and she could do it again. Harry, on the other hand, had never known a civilian life where he truly had to prove himself, where he wasn't lavishly celebrated by birth-right.

Little came of Harry's attempts at media work. Most of the podcast ideas he proposed, for instance, were silly at best, and nothing happened with his one good idea — a series about fatherhood. Harry and Meghan must have both hoped that distance and time would help him find his footing, but the most successful endeavors he had stateside were all connected to the very thing he was trying to escape, his royal lineage. He had to learn that when people aren't by custom ex-

pected to like or pretend to like you, you have to bring something substantive to the table, and when you don't, the opportunities disappear. Making of this old world a new world remained elusive.

There was also the challenge of public opinion, which was mixed. In some corners, Harry and Meghan were lauded for fighting for gilded independence (because Harry holds an amount of privilege from which he can never truly escape). Others said they were abandoning the royal family, being selfish, especially when the palace announced more than two years ago that King Charles had cancer. A lot of people blamed Meghan for being too much of a diva, too difficult to work with, too American and, of course, too Black.

No matter what you think about Harry and Meghan, race is the prover-

bial elephant in the room. The British monarchy has long been littered with deeply flawed people: Henry VIII married women who caught his eye — two of whom he later beheaded — and killed political advisers and adversaries; before abdicating the throne, Edward VIII sought to marry a divorcée who shared his sympathy for Adolf Hitler; Charles, of course, treated Diana terribly. Prince Andrew is alleged to be a sexual predator and was friends with the prolific sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, even after Mr. Epstein was convicted in 2010.

This is the power of bigotry — the monarchy has tolerated a breathtaking range of despicable behavior from assorted royals, but what they could not abide is a Black woman. People can attribute all of this royal family tension to ego or pettiness or a would-be king asserting his will over the never-will-be king, but that won't change the painful reality that the king wears the heavy crown of racism and most of those in the current line of succession will, too.

Given this state of affairs, it was quite surprising when news broke that Harry, Meghan and their two children are returning to live in the U.K. They know better, this time around, about what to expect and how to navigate it. But they also have to, once more, figure out who they are, without the position or the power to which they were once adjacent.

They will have to endure the notoriously cruel British press that has hounded them incessantly. They will have to figure out if they can, finally, make a home for themselves, one where they are welcomed and embraced without having to contort themselves into the shape the monarchy prefers. They will have to see if their relationship can continue to endure.

In this next chapter of their not quite fairy tale, the Sussexes are caught between two complicated worlds, neither of which is particularly hospitable to their unique circumstances. In the New Yorker essay "Letter From a Region in My Mind," James Baldwin asks, "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?" Baldwin asks that question in a very different context, but I suspect it is nonetheless one Harry and Meghan have been trying to answer for years.

ROXANE GAY is the editor of "The Portable Feminist Reader."

Natalie's magnificent obsession



Maureen Dowd

WASHINGTON I've spent my career watching officials maneuver and scheme, often in absurd ways, to get closer to presidents. But I'd never seen anything like the photo of Natalie Harp dashing after President Trump's golf cart in Scotland three years ago. I'd also never heard of a staffer jumping into the trunk of an S.U.V., as Harp did, when she was denied a seat in the motorcade.

The hit horror movie "Obsession," about a man who wishes for more adoration from a young woman, who falls under his spell and maniacally provides it, is playing out on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Like others, I winced when I first heard Senator Jon Ossoff, the Georgia Democrat, refer to how Trump liked to "travel with Natalie." Was he gratuitously turning a salacious spotlight onto a White House aide?

But as it turns out, with three little words, Ossoff pulled a string and unraveled something really dark and deranged at the innermost circle of Trump's White House.

The president's proclivity for surrounding himself with sycophants — and attractive young blondes — is well known. But this relationship is pathological, and a source of great irritation among other courtiers. It is Trump distilled to his essence: cult leader and his most rabid follower, narcissist and his most flattering mirror.

The daughter of a devoutly Christian real estate broker who died by suicide during the pandemic, Harp idolizes Trump with a rare fervor. As one of his social media facilitators, she is with him

most of the day and often evenings, and she never takes a day off. The Times's Maggie Haberman calls Harp the "binky" of the man-child president.

Harp is nicknamed — and refers to herself as — "the human printer" because she follows Trump around with a portable printer to provide him with paper copies of any positive stories or tweets. (When The Mirror published the picture on Friday of Harp dashing after the golf cart at Turnberry in Scotland, the story's author dubbed Harp "the human sprinter.") Haberman said foreign leaders also try to use Harp as a conduit to reach Trump.

As Haberman and Jonathan Swan reported in their blockbuster, "Regime Change," Trump told his staff that Harp was the only one who loved him as much as his wife and kids did. "She'll never

This human printer runs — but not out of ink.

leave me," he would tell other staffers.

Harp first came to his attention in 2019 when she spoke on Fox News about how Trump had helped save her life with the Right to Try Act, which she said had allowed her to get experimental treatment for bone cancer.

Before she began to work on Trump's restoration in 2022, Harp was an anchor at the far-right OAN and spread the gospel that the election was stolen. This winter, she was the one who posted the sickening video depicting Trump as the king of the jungle and the Obamas as apes.

The Harp saga reflects a truly weird fact about Trump. The 80-year-old president got elected, governs, provokes and seeks revenge using social media, and he was surrounded by bootlicking tech titans at his inaugural. But he still needs someone young and online to sit beside him and type his posts. Their online symbiosis raises the question of whether all those strange capitalizations are his or hers.

Ossoff impaled Trump with his Natalie Harp-oon recently during a speech in

Atlanta. The senator was lambasting the commander in chief for his erratic, pathetic handling of the Iran war: "While he fruitlessly drains our munitions and oil reserves, the president sleeps through his meetings. He golfs and trades stocks. See, he doesn't want to do the job. He wants to build his ballroom and travel with Natalie on their apparently defenseless flying palace gifted by the emir of Qatar."

But it was the MAGA megaphone that did in Natalie. The White House was clearly rattled by the allusion to the close relationship between Trump and his 35-year-old, \$150,000-a-year social media helper. Melania even made a rare appearance to show the conjugal flag.

Harp made headlines earlier when the president chose her and a few other close aides to accompany him when he sneaked into a catering truck and switched planes to fly back from Turkey to the District, after a threat of an Iranian assassination attack. Shockingly, Marco Rubio, Scott Bessent and the media were left on the other plane as decoys.

The vitriolic MAGA response to Ossoff, the usual risible caricature of macho bullying, had a suspicious "doth protest too much" aroma. The White House called Ossoff a "cringeworthy, feminine theatre kid" and Trump mocked him as Pee-wee Herman (showing that he has lost his touch for nasty but effective nicknames).

After Kristen Holmes, the CNN White House correspondent, asked Trump about Ossoff's critique, the White House tweeted a creepy warning: "Someday, your children will come across your disgusting and inhumane question. They will be sickened and embarrassed to have a parent be so callous and vindictive. It's quite troubling."

But the troubling thing was the tone of Harp's adoring letters to the man she addresses as "Mr. President," released by The Daily Beast, in which she talks about her fragile emotional state — forgetting to eat or sleep and getting hurt by others' critical remarks.

"I want things to always be right between us," she writes, adding, "I'm sorry I lost my focus. You are all that matters to me. I don't want to ever let you down. Thank you for being my Guardian and Protector in this Life."

She frets in another that she works so hard for him that she looks like "a hunchback who didn't have time to freshen up." She pleads, "We shouldn't have to talk about work all the time!!" and pines to "hear every conversation" he has.

Harp quotes a line from "Pride and Prejudice" to say that it would have been hard to lose her father if she had not had someone so "worthy" to turn to in Trump. "And, I will add," she signs off, "it is I who is unworthy."

It's a perfect (taxpayer-funded) relationship. She thinks he's amazing. And he agrees.



KEN CERENO/REUTERS

The New York Times

Games

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OPINION

El-Sayed Abandons the Middle



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

The election is coming! The election is coming! Just as Paul Revere warned colonists about the approach of the British, Mike Rogers is trying to rouse Michiganders to action by saying the election begins not in November but on Sept. 24, when early voting begins. Election Day is Nov. 3, just under six weeks later.

Mr. Rogers, the Republican candidate for Senate, is squaring off against Democrat Abdul El-Sayed, a 41-year-old Rhodes scholar and doctor who never practiced medicine.

Republican Mike Rogers has a chance to win Democratic votes in Michigan.

This tight race will determine not only who Michigan sends to Washington but possibly who controls the Senate. One August poll shows Mr. El-Sayed with an edge, though others show Mr. Rogers ahead.

“This is a battle between common-sense ideas and radical, extremist policies, peddled by a con man, that are out of place in our society,” Mr. Rogers says.

Mr. Rogers hopes his conservative record and moderate demeanor attract not only Republicans but disaffected Democrats too. Mr. El-Sayed

won his primary by 1 point and a majority of Democrats voted against him.

Mr. Rogers’s background should help. He is a former Army lieutenant who joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He then entered Michigan politics, serving two terms as a state senator and seven terms in the House, where he rose to become Intelligence Committee chairman.

In 2024, when Mr. Rogers ran for Michigan’s other Senate seat, he lost by only 19,000 votes, or less than half a percentage point. This time the GOP has its usual issues, mostly involving President Trump, but if Mr. Rogers can hold on to his base while attracting Democrats who think their party has gone too left, he will prevail.

Already the Muslim card is being played, for and against Mr. El-Sayed. This weekend the Washington Post carried this headline: “El-Sayed’s win triggered wave of anti-Muslim rhetoric online, Post analysis shows.” The subhead explained that after Mr. El-Sayed became the Democratic nominee, “conservative commentary about him shifted focus from socialism to his Muslim identity.” In Michigan, home to about 240,000 Muslims, these are fighting words. Thus the effort to cast Mr. Rogers as a bigot.

Earlier in the month Mr. Rogers released a video of himself tooling around Michigan in a cherry-red vintage



Senate nominee Abdul El-Sayed.

Ford pickup truck. A staffer for the El-Sayed campaign said on X: “Mike Rogers’ campaign has the aesthetics of a 1960s white flight suburb and a KKK cross burning.”

Nolan Finley, a columnist for the Detroit News, likens the crack to Hillary Clinton’s dismissing Trump voters as a “basket of deplorables.” Mr. Finley points out that the Ford F-150, which debuted in 1975, is “the nation’s bestselling truck line and is the symbol of working America,” making the staffer’s comment not a smart thing to say in Motor City. Mr. Finley’s larger point is that Mr. El-Sayed isn’t even trying to appeal to the middle.

Ask Eric Bronstein, a businessman who is circulating a letter by “Michigan Jews Against Extremism.” “Many of us have been fiercely supportive of Democratic candidates and principles,” it reads. “All of us have felt threatened and alienated by the politics and allies embraced by Abdul El-Sayed, which has included de-

monization of Jews, equivocation on terrorism, exclusion of Jewish Americans from public life, and expression of implacable hatred of the world’s only Jewish nation.”

Mr. Rogers is trying to take advantage of the situation with a special effort to court Jewish voters. He’s firmly pro-Israel, but he’s also said the American Israel Public Affairs Committee should stay out of the race.

AIPAC spent \$32 million in the Democratic primary in an unsuccessful effort to defeat Mr. El-Sayed and that has become an issue.

Mr. El-Sayed has denounced AIPAC and Israel, but he also claims he wants only equal rights for Muslims. He says his commitment “to Jewish safety is the same commitment that I have to the safety of my own daughters.” But Mr. El-Sayed calls Israel “bloodthirsty,” accuses it of “apartheid and genocide,” and likens American attempts to ban Shariah, or Islamic law, to white supremacy.

Where Mr. El-Sayed is doubling down, Mr. Rogers is reaching out. “Time is money in Michigan, and early votes are money in the bank,” he says. “People forget or get busy, a sudden trip pops up, there’s bad weather on Election Day. I need my voters to defeat Abdul by putting the vote in the bank as soon as the polls open in September.”

Write to mcgurn@wsj.com.

America Faces the Constraints of Democracy



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

“We don’t want to fight but by jingo if we do / We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, we’ve got the money too!”

That was the refrain to a music-hall hit from the 1870s. It warned Russia not to tangle with the British Lion and expressed imperial Britain’s self-confidence at the height of its power. The British haven’t had that swagger in a long time.

As the unholy alliance of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea escalates its strategic confrontation with the U.S., shortages of missiles and ships are beginning to make Americans worry about the limits of our military power. Worse, financial markets fret that with the national debt passing \$40 trillion and interest rates close to 20-year highs, Uncle Sam might just be maxing out his last credit card.

We are moving from the post-Cold War era of living as if American power was largely unlimited and unconstrained to one in which we have less freedom to choose our responses and threats grow more challenging. Domestically we are undergoing a similar shift, from an era when federal spending was largely unfettered to a new age in which, thanks to inflation and higher interest rates, the costs

of excessive spending become unbearably high.

None of it was unpredictable. The consequences are dire. Kyiv is in flames because politicians and military planners fooled themselves into believing we could safely squeeze defense spending and avoid the hard problems of Pentagon reform even as the geopolitical challenges intensified. In prosecuting the war with Iran, American strategists face the consequences of these same decisions in our inability to protect our own bases, much less the military assets and cities of our allies. And as the last American aircraft carrier leaves the Western Pacific, the empty storage facilities where defensive missiles once waited raise doubts about America’s ability to fulfill treaty commitments to South Korea and Japan. A new and darker era seems to be opening across the Pacific.

The economic news is hardly more reassuring, and the coming clash between the urgent need to accelerate defense spending dramatically and the chronic hunger for large domestic constituencies for federal largess could define an era of American politics.

Not since the earliest days of the Cold War have Americans had to live in a world of real limits—security threats that we lacked the weapons or the troops to counter right away, or urgent domestic priorities that we lacked the resources to address.

This is the new normal and,

for a while at least, we are going to have to get used to it. It isn’t the end of the world. America’s greatest Cold War historian, John Lewis Gaddis, makes the point that presidents like Dwight Eisenhower, who believed that America’s limited resources needed to be carefully husbanded, often proved to be wiser and more effective strategists than those like Lyndon B. Johnson,

Domestic spending crowded out defense, and the world is more dangerous as a result.

who thought we had the money and the power to accomplish virtually anything we could think of.

President Trump’s many critics and political enemies would like to put all blame for the current state of affairs on his shoulders, and certainly he and his team have made decisions, sometimes rashly, that have exacerbated the underlying problems. But lectures on prudence and virtue have a hollow ring when they come from those who neglected the urgent problems of our defense industrial base, temporized with our opponents, underfunded national defense and fecklessly accelerated the unsustainable course of federal spending.

For now, the nation faces two tasks. First, the adminis-

tration must find a way to get the most vital jobs done even if it lacks all the tools one would want for the task. Mr. Trump’s willingness to discard convention and business as usual can be an asset—though it’s an unforgiving environment, and undisciplined she-nanigans as opposed to creative innovation will carry heavy costs.

Second, the public needs to wake up and demand better from our elected politicians. It’s easy to criticize political elites for the generational failures of strategic and fiscal policy that got us into this mess, but those failures were popular.

Too many Americans wanted to hear that we could have a peaceful and democratic world without the costly inconvenience of maintaining an adequate defense industrial base, the trouble of making the Pentagon efficient, and the risks and costs of countering China’s record-breaking military buildup.

Too many more of us wanted to hear that we could indefinitely afford the unlimited expansion of poorly designed entitlement programs and cover our ever-escalating deficits with borrowed cash.

“Democracy,” H.L. Mencken wrote, “is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.” We are getting it good and hard now; the question is whether we can wise up fast enough to avoid the worst.

BOOKSHELF | By Clifford Krauss

A Killer In a Beret

The Jackal
By Joby Warrick
Scribner, 384 pages, \$30

On Dec. 21, 1975, six terrorists stormed a meeting of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries in Vienna. They killed two security guards and a Libyan economist named Yusuf al-Azmarly. The militants were led by Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, aka Carlos the Jackal, who paced back and forth past 62 hostages while telling stories, taking questions and toting a submachine gun.

Joby Warrick narrates the scene in “The Jackal: The Rise and Fall of Carlos, the World’s First Super-Terrorist.” The showboating Ramírez forced one of the hostages, Saudi Oil Minister Ahmed Zaki Yamani, into a side office. Yamani thought he was about to be executed, but Ramírez instead tried to humor him. “Yamani felt his anger rise,” Mr. Warrick writes. “He studied the face in front of him, this audacious and obviously talented twenty-six-year-old with the jarring ability to be vicious and charming in the same breath.”

Yamani and the other hostages were eventually released after Austrian authorities agreed to broadcast a manifesto denouncing the state of Israel. Ramírez secured a large ransom payment, but the death of al-Azmarly seems to have soured the terrorist’s relationship with Libya’s dictator, Moammar Gadhafi.

Mr. Warrick, a longtime journalist at the Washington Post and the author of “Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS” (2015), recounts the life of a flamboyant Marxist whose exploits riveted and terrified Europe and the Middle East in the 1970s and ’80s. Still jailed in France after being captured in 1994,

Ramírez has faded from collective memory. His campaign of hostage-takings and assassinations in the name of Palestinian and world liberation has been overshadowed by the acts of al Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas and Hezbollah. Mr. Warrick revisits the outlaw, fortifying the story with declassified Central Intelligence Agency cables, police depositions and his own interview with Ramírez.

Ramírez was an unlikely pioneer of Palestinian radicalism. He was born in 1949 in a small town in Venezuela. His Marxist father named him Ilich after Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Vladimir Lenin. The boy was a gang leader in a Caracas high school and a member of an outlawed Venezuelan Communist youth group. His father arranged for him to attend Moscow’s Lumumba University on scholarship. He was expelled for lax academic performance and troublemaking, but he met a classmate from Jerusalem who turned him onto the cause of Palestinian liberation.

As an upper-middle-class South American with a taste for berets, leather jackets, sex and partying, Ramírez, who was soon given the nickname “Carlos,” was an odd fit for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Despite his hedonism, Ramírez’s audaciousness and penchant for violence helped him rise through the group’s ranks. After Jordan’s King Hussein defeated Palestinian efforts to take over his country in 1970-71, Ramírez collected names of potential Jewish assassination targets in London and helped plan the 1974 occupation of the French embassy in the Netherlands with militants of the Japanese Red Army. In early 1975, some months before the OPEC siege in Vienna, he led a pair of failed attacks on an El Al aircraft at Paris’s Orly Airport.

Mr. Warrick reconsiders Ramírez’s historical significance, calling him “the first of a breed of international super-terrorists.” Always media-conscious, Ramírez created a blueprint for the globalization and marketing of terror. He also offered a model for mutual support between militants and state sponsors of terrorism such as Libya’s Gadhafi, Romania’s Nicolae Ceaușescu and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.

The Venezuelan-born Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, now jailed in France, was an unlikely pioneer of Palestinian radicalism and global terrorism.

Ramírez’s personal politics would be supplanted by crude criminality; beginning as a revolutionary, he ended up as a money-grubbing freelance mercenary. His original goal was to bring the skills he learned from Palestinian militants back to South America, but the financial opportunities were better outside the Western Hemisphere. In the early 1980s, he orchestrated multiple European bombings on city streets and in trains and railway stations, leaving scores dead or wounded. One attack was intended to assassinate Jacques Chirac, then the mayor of Paris.

Under Western pressure, the East German and Hungarian security services evicted him from Eastern Europe, and he turned to Syria for refuge. Ramírez finally landed in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1993. Disguised as a wealthy businessman, he lived luxuriously and drank heavily, breaking Islamic law with impunity. He was a sad figure adrift, a relic virtually alone until he was hunted down by the CIA and French intelligence. The Sudanese regime, eager to escape its international isolation, betrayed him.

Ramírez’s plots, as Mr. Warrick emphasizes, were too scattered and haphazard to force serious political change. But his asymmetrical tactics against far-superior military power set an example for modern terrorism. The Marxist ideology he extolled in the cause of Palestinian revolution has withered, but his rejection of any compromise with Israel to establish two states at peace remains a steadfast principle of radical forces.

In his 1951 book, “The Rebel,” Albert Camus wrote that “every revolutionary ends up as an oppressor or a heretic.” Mr. Warrick uses the passage as an epigraph for his engrossing biography. When the author interviewed Ramírez in prison in 2025, he encountered an unrepentant man who retained his lust for violence. “I killed eighty-three people by my own hand,” Ramírez bragged without being asked. “Another thousand were killed on my orders.” Mr. Warrick wonders if this was an empty boast: “His eyes, still dark and vibrant in his eighth decade, revealed nothing.” In the end, the bygone power to kill was all that was left for this self-absorbed, criminal narcissist.

Mr. Krauss was a longtime foreign correspondent for The Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. He writes the Substack newsletter The Mirror of History.

By Joseph Epstein

‘We haven’t seen the president on camera for a second straight day,” Fox News reporter Jacqui Heinrich said recently. Donald Trump’s predecessor was more likely to have been off camera for a second straight month. Say what you like about Mr. Trump, no one can accuse him of hiding.

Turn on your television set and lo, there he is. He tells a gathering of police officers that they are amazing, a group of soldiers that they are fantastic, a factory floor of auto workers that they are incredible. He loves the people of Wisconsin, Indiana, Tennessee and every other state he visits. But once he begins a speech, it is his own accomplishments that he says are truly amazing, fantastic, incredible, and himself

whom he loves above all.

Some speeches run to 90 minutes. He takes pride in delivering them without a teleprompter. But then why would he need a teleprompter when they are all essentially the same speech, inevitably larded with insults for the press and his opponents? Each time, Mr. Trump recounts how, owing to

I don’t wish to see him impeached or humiliated, just gone.

his efforts, the U.S. is the “hottest” country in the world and says that he has saved it from the ruinous policies of his predecessor, that we are living in the greatest of times with, owing to his tariffs and other policies, even greater times to come.

All in all, a remarkable,

even an astonishing, performance, one I haven’t seen equaled by any other president in my lifetime, which goes back to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Donald Trump fills the stage and behaves more like a monarch than a president, with that hirsute concoction on his head sometimes seeming like a crown.

For little more than a decade, Mr. Trump has used up all the oxygen not only in the room but in public life. He and our national politics have become all but coterminous. One can’t exist without having an opinion—usually vehement—about him. One can even argue that absent Mr. Trump, the socialist element in the Democratic Party might never have picked up steam.

What will be Mr. Trump’s legacy? Will the day come when we speak of a before and an after time, B.T. (Before Trump) and A.T. (After

Trump)? For the next two years or so, a single bold-face T—and no one ever had a bolder face than our president—will do.

No one can predict the remainder of this presidency. Much depends on the midterm elections. However they turn out, Mr. Trump figures to remain the main subject of political conversation. In the months to come we can count on Trump, Trump, Trump and more Trump.

I have no wish to see Mr. Trump impeached, sued for billions, in any way disgraced. I simply wish him gone, so that the country can carry on its political life in a less feverish, more rational manner. I can scarcely wait, in other words, for the period labeled A.T., or After Trump, to begin.

Mr. Epstein is author, most recently, of “Never Say You’ve Had a Lucky Life.”

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump Unleashes Bessent on Iran

On Monday Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced Operation Economic Outcast against Iran and its enablers, even comparing the action to D-Day. “Our objective is to sever every economic lifeline that sustains this tyrannical regime until Tehran stands alone,” he said.

President Trump is working the phones and “every country has a defined timeline to shut down activities we have identified,” Mr. Bessent said. “If they do not take action, we will do so unilaterally.” He declined to lay out the timelines, leaving Mr. Trump room to delay, but he said to expect “a major announcement of a financial institution being sanctioned by the end of this week.”

The D-Day analogy may be grandiose, but President Trump has waited nearly six months to take this economic step. Early in the war the U.S. even encouraged Iranian oil exports.

We’ve come a long way. Last week Iran’s central-bank governor admitted the U.S. blockade of Iran’s ports has driven the regime’s oil exports to zero. The United Arab Emirates also announced a halt to all trade with Iran. Mr. Bessent said that was “not a coincidence.”

On Sunday Iran’s currency plummeted past two million to the dollar, a new record. That’s down from 1.4 million to start the year, 750,000 in 2024 and 70,000 when Mr. Trump quit the Iran nuclear deal in 2018. Inflation is raging and the regime is preparing to slash fuel subsidies—always politically combustible.

Iranian politicians are suddenly worried. On Friday President Masoud Pezeshkian urged, “The war must come to an end at some point,” and acknowledged Iran’s economic shortages. On Thursday Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Iran’s parliamentary speaker and top negotiator, said, “No matter how much military power we have, if people are hungry and we don’t have financial circulation, economic growth and domestic production, we will not endure.”

This is the stuff regime fissures are made of. As if to underscore the point, the electricity went out as the parliament’s energy committee met Monday . . . to discuss Iran’s power outages.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) likely takes a harder line, though it also hurts for lack of oil revenue. Worse, it may be losing control of the Strait of Hormuz as the U.S. escorts increasing quantities of oil. With

the price of oil still below \$100, the U.S. may be able to maintain its blockade longer than Iran’s regime can bear.

The President redoubles the economic pressure amid signs it’s working.

U.A.E. is a good sign. But even halting direct trade leaves intact Dubai’s Iran-sanctions-evasion network, whose goal is to disguise any trading with Iran.

Mr. Bessent’s reference to Emirati exchange houses implies he knows this. “Iran’s enablers purchase and transport its petroleum. They facilitate the flow of its finances through exchange houses and free-trade zones,” he said. “They welcome Iran’s flights and maintain registries on its behalf. They turn a blind eye to seaborne fuel transfers and overland transits. They condone illicit use of their banks.”

His remarks suggest Treasury has identified the regime’s key cash spigots, maneuvers and enablers. The latter includes the U.A.E., Iraq, Turkey, Malaysia, Qatar, Pakistan and, above all, China. While purchases of Iranian oil by Chinese

“teapot” refineries are now thwarted by the U.S. blockade, the buyers remain willing.

Is the U.S. willing to climb the sanctions ladder, proceeding from those small refineries to target the Chinese state-owned banks and other institutions that sustain them? Treasury warned as much in April, but the Trump Administration hasn’t

followed through.

Now is its test. Asked Monday about breaking a trade truce with China, Mr. Bessent said, “If they facilitate transactions and are part of the ecosystem that turns Iranian oil into money into repression, they will be targeted.”

Yet when asked why he hadn’t imposed major sanctions today, and merely warned of them, Mr. Bessent replied, “Why would I want to blow up the global financial system?” If that’s what he thinks pressing China on Iranian oil purchases would do, Beijing may call his bluff.

Mr. Trump has belatedly found a pressure strategy with Iran that may give him the upper hand. But the IRGC is unlikely to give up its financing networks without a fight. Will Mr. Trump stick to this strategy when Iran next fires on Gulf energy and whispers a soothing word to mediators from Pakistan and Qatar?

South Carolina vs. the 26th Amendment

South Carolina’s Legislature might soon want to update the state’s law on absentee voting, after the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals held recently that it’s unconstitutional. This case is a notable legal sighting of the reclusive 26th Amendment, and it also could open up mail ballots far beyond what lawmakers intended.

The question is age. South Carolina residents who want to vote absentee must generally have an excuse. Those aged 65 and over, however, are exempt from that rule. “When a state offers a method for casting a ballot, the Constitution forbids restricting access to that voting method based on any prohibited ground, including age,” Judge Roger Gregory writes for a unanimous panel.

He points to the 26th Amendment, ratified in 1971 during the Vietnam War. Its purpose was to lower the voting age to 18 from 21, so that young men who were old enough to be drafted into the military and the war could also have a say in the country’s direction. The

amendment reads: “The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.”

In the Fourth Circuit’s interpretation, South Carolina’s law is an abridgment of that right to franchise. “Voting is harder for voters under age sixty-five than those age sixty-five and older,” Judge Gregory says. The panel leaves the remedy to the district court: extend the benefit of “no excuses” absentee voting to everybody, or else end it for seniors.

Two appeals courts have gone the other way and upheld age rules, including a Texas law on mail ballots for seniors that was challenged in 2020 amid the Covid pandemic. “Conferring a privilege on one category of voters,” the Fifth Circuit said, “does not alone violate the Twenty-Sixth Amendment.” Perhaps the Supreme Court will take this up next. But if state legislators in South Carolina, and elsewhere, think mail voting has gone too far, they need not wait.

Trump to Ford Motor: Drop Dead

There he goes again. President Trump on Monday raged against Canada on the social-media heath, threatening it with 50% tariffs on autos and auto parts. What does he have against U.S. car makers?

Mr. Trump is angry that Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney over the week-end vowed to retaliate dollar-for-dollar against his latest tariff barrage. “Canada has been ripping off the United States of America for years,” Mr. Trump wrote. “On January First, 2027, Tariffs on all Cars, Trucks, both large and small, Automotive Parts, and Steel, will be increased to 50%.”

The Jan. 1 date suggests that Mr. Trump probably isn’t serious. No doubt he understands that a 50% tariff would hurt U.S. auto makers more than it would Canada. Ford Motor CEO Jim Farley last year warned that Mr. Trump’s 25% emergency tariffs on Canada and Mexico would “blow a hole” in the U.S. auto industry, and he was right.

Thus the Administration exempted autos and other goods covered by the United States-Mexico-Canada trade agreement from his emergency tariffs. Mr. Trump’s 25% national-security tariffs on autos and parts also include carve-outs for U.S.-made parts and other emollients for U.S. auto makers with cross-border supply chains with Canada and Mexico. Canada exports about \$50.4 billion in vehi-

A 50% tariff on autos from Canada would punish U.S. companies.

cles and parts to the U.S. each year, notably to Michigan (\$22.1 billion) and Texas (\$14.8 billion). Mr. Trump’s 50% tariff would amount to a \$25 billion tax on U.S. auto makers, their suppliers and customers—namely, buyers of large pickups assembled in Canada.

Mr. Trump claimed “WE DON’T NEED CANADA, THEY NEED US!” Ontario Premier Doug Ford corrected him, noting that Canada sends electricity to the U.S. that keep the lights on, as well as nickel for defense and uranium for nuclear-power plants. “What would they do without the high-grade nickel that we ship down to the U.S.?” Mr. Ford mused.

Regardless of whether the President walks back from his tariff cliff, his whipsawing threats add uncertainty that chills investment. “I’ve basically gotten a Ph.D. over the last year in tariffs because I feel like that’s my sole job,” Mary Buchzeiger, CEO of the Michigan-based auto parts supplier Lucerne International, told a local radio station.

She added: “Everybody is paralyzed with fear right now because of these changing regulatory tides, because of the changing tariffs, and it’s impossible to make good plans and solid plans and be able to move forward and make those investments comfortably.”

As is so often the case, Mr. Trump on trade is his own worst enemy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Makings of a College Campus Socialist

In her wonderful op-ed, Kimberlee Josephson explains how four years in a “free” socialist campus environment can negatively affect young minds about basic economics (“How Colleges Produce Socialists,” Aug. 15).

Perhaps one of the experiences “America’s wealthiest and most selective colleges and universities” should offer is a trip to a socialist country to see how that system reduces the standard of living. Cuba is close by, but a look at rural China or Russia would open the eyes of these students.

Why has socialism failed in the real world? The answer is quite simple: If a hardworking, industrious person notices his lazy, couch-sitting neighbor has the same lifestyle he is enjoying, over time the hard worker will reduce his or her effort. Multiplied across the workforce, that means less economic activity and a lower standard of living.

CHARLES H. GESSNER
Marblehead, Mass.

I disagree with Ms. Josephson’s op-ed. She suggests students have no understanding or appreciation for costs due to elaborate menu plans and other campus “benefits” that are accessible without “ever reaching for a wallet.”

Today, more than 50% of students graduating with bachelor’s degrees have student loans averaging between \$29,000 to \$35,000. They are aware there is no such thing as a free lunch. The average U.S. college meal plan is estimated to cost \$5,656 per academic year, and recent food industry research indicates that 36% of college students aren’t using their campus meal plans, with roughly 60% of total student food spending occurring off campus.

College students are pursuing socialist ideals because they are concerned about the escalating costs of housing, food and health insurance, as well as the challenges of landing a job in a changing work environment while having to pay off their student loans.

BARBARA JO HOWARD
Montauk, N.Y.

Syria’s Nuclear Saga Needs a Clean Ending

Your editorial is right: The best outcome for Syria’s leftover nuclear material is its complete removal, not mere safeguards (“Ending the Syrian Nuclear Saga,” Aug. 20). Placing tons of natural-uranium metal under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) oversight is progress, yet Syria should not pursue a civil nuclear program.

Damascus has no technical need for the natural-uranium metal or related graphite it seeks to retain—its sole Chinese-supplied research reactor requires only small amounts of highly enriched uranium fuel, and Syria lacks the facilities to convert the material anyway. Amid ongoing instability, any new natural-uranium reactor would risk radioactive hazards or diversion of material into the wrong hands.

Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa’s past leadership of al-Qaeda

in Syria also leaves him untrustworthy to steward such technology. Israel would likely view any new Syrian nuclear program as an intolerable proliferation threat and act militarily, as it has against sites in Iraq and Iran. Damascus has only begun resolving decades of outstanding IAEA issues, including North Korean assistance; incomplete resolution risks leakage into a new program. Reports of Turkish interest in Syrian stocks further cloud intentions.

The U.S. should insist on full removal of the material, no further nuclear program and Syria’s signature to the IAEA’s Additional Protocol—the enhanced inspection agreement—to end the saga safely.

ANDREA STRICKER
Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Washington

Colorado and the Battle for Parental Authority

Regarding James Eller’s op-ed “Trump Should Act Against Colorado’s Transgender Subsidies” (Aug. 11): Colorado’s taxpayer-funded I Matter program goes further than subsidizing gender-affirming counseling. It systematically weakens parental authority under the banner of free mental-health care.

I Matter offers Colorado youth up to six free counseling sessions with no insurance required. State law and the program’s own rules allow any youth age 12 or older to enroll and consent independently without parental consent. I Matter’s marketing in public schools has reinforced the point that parental authority isn’t to be taken seriously. When the program was first rolled out, schools were encouraged to hang posters that read “I Can Count on My Family . . . for arguments and anger;” “My Family is Great . . . at pointing out my faults” and “My Family Never Fails . . . to cause frustration and stress.”

This isn’t neutral access. It positions the state as a preferred confidant for adolescents on sensitive matters, including those that can lead to irreversible medical pathways. When schools promote the program, the message is

clear: Parents can be an obstacle.

I filed a Colorado Open Records Act request asking how parental consent is obtained for children under 12 who seek I Matter services. Colorado’s Department of Human Services replied that it has “no records in response to this request.”

Free counseling isn’t free when it comes at the cost of the parent-child relationship. Colorado has chosen to elevate the state over the family.

LAUREN BOLL
Highlands Ranch, Colo.

Don’t Put Off Having Kids

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is having her eggs frozen for later (“AOC for President? Don’t Rule It Out,” op-ed by Douglas E. Schoen, Aug. 12). Comedian Ronny Chieng and his wife are taking the same approach. It’s discouraging to witness bright people coming to exactly the wrong conclusion. I had four children in my late 20s and early 30s. After they were tucked in bed at night, I had enough energy to do art, tackle sewing projects and rewire my house.

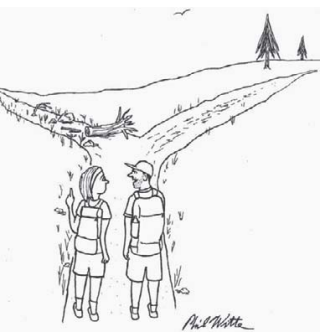
It was a whole different kettle of fish when I had another baby in my early forties. My husband and I went to bed when the baby did. We were worn out. It seems millennials, despite having so much information at their fingertips, lack insight. Humans are mammals with life cycles and imperatives.

If AOC has children in her mid-40s, and her children follow suit, has she given any thought to how little she will be able to help her daughters when she is 85? My own 90-year-old mother thankfully still has all her marbles, but she requires full-time care. She couldn’t possibly lift an infant from a crib or look after a 5-year-old. Her husband already passed away.

JANE HOWARD
New Orleans

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“But if we take the road more traveled, maybe we’ll find a place to get a coffee.”

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OPINION

Let the Bond Market Speak

By Stanley F. Druckenmiller

The Treasury Department announced on Aug. 19 that it would double the size of its long-dated bond buybacks, from \$2 billion to at least \$4 billion per operation, aimed at the 10- to 30-year sector and running from Sept. 9 through Nov. 4. The announcement came after the 30-year yield touched a 19-year high. Yields fell within minutes. By the next afternoon they had round-tripped to levels above where they started. The market’s verdict was swift and correct: This wasn’t liquidity management, it was price management—and a mistake far larger than \$4 billion suggests.

Treasury’s announcement gave the game away. It justified the larger operations as liquidity support in sectors with “consistent strong sponsorship from market participants,” but strong sponsorship is the definition of a healthy, working market. There

Rising interest rates are a signal of trouble ahead. Artificially suppressing them heightens the danger.

were no failed auctions, no dealer balance-sheet seizure, no forced unwinds, nothing resembling Treasurys in March 2020 or U.K. gilts in September 2022, the sort of genuine dysfunctional episodes that justify official action. Volatility was contained, and trading was orderly—not a malfunction but the machine doing its job.

Consider what the machine was pricing. Inflation is 3% to 4% and has been above the Fed’s target since 2021. Unemployment is 4.1%, full employment by any definition. The deficit is running near 6% of gross domestic product, a number America has never before produced in peacetime at full employment. The national debt crossed \$40 trillion the same week Treasury intervened. Net interest will exceed \$1.1 trillion this

fiscal year, more than the defense budget. The 10-year yield, even after the summer selloff, sits at or below the economy’s nominal growth rate. That means a borrower (federal government) running 6% deficits at full employment, with above-target inflation, still funds itself at roughly the rate its economy grows.

Historically, that configuration is accommodative, not restrictive, of financial conditions. The bond market wasn’t being a vigilante, as some would argue. It was being a pushover that had finally begun to clear its throat, and Treasury moved to quiet even that.

I have spent five decades trading on a simple premise: Markets aggregate information no committee possesses, and prices are how that information reaches decision makers. The long-term Treasury yield is the most important price in the world. It is also the only fiscal disciplinarian the U.S. has left. Neither party will run on entitlement reform. Both have spent the past decade expanding commitments while ignoring arithmetic. Democracies don’t repair their finances because a budget office publishes a table. They repair them only when the cost of inaction becomes visible and immediate, when mortgage rates bite, when auctions tail, when the political price of a rising long bond finally exceeds the political price of touching spending.

Every basis point of artificial yield suppression is a subsidy to procrastination. Suppressed long rates sugarcoat the interest-cost projections, shrink the apparent urgency, and let incumbents assure voters the debt is someone else’s problem. If Congress and the administration are unlikely to touch entitlements even with the market’s signal, they are certain not to touch them without one. Whatever this operation saves in basis points, it will cost multiples in delay.

Yield management always begins as a technical operation and ends as a policy commitment. From 1942 to 1951, the Federal Reserve capped long Treasury yields to finance World War II. The cap outlived the war, financed deficits with printed money, and fueled double-digit inflation. It took



Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent

the 1951 Treasury-Fed Accord to dismantle the cap, followed by years of financial repression that quietly taxed a generation of savers. U.S. policymakers built the wall between debt management and price management for a reason. This intervention starts dissolving it.

Within a day of the announcement, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent indicated the operations could grow beyond \$4 billion, and analysts observed that Treasury can double them again and again. When the bond market didn’t respond to this threat, senior Treasury officials told reporters that the department could use the Treasury General Account to intervene. Once markets believe Treasury is defending a price, every rise in yields becomes a test of official resolve, and the operations must grow to survive the tests.

There is a quieter cost, too. Buying back long bonds while funding the purchases with bills shifts duration, or long-term interest-rate risk, out of public hands—economically, a small dose of quantitative easing run out of the Treasury rather than the Fed, easing financial conditions while inflation sits above target. These enlarged operations happen to run through the final stretch of a mid-term campaign. Debt management that even appears to follow the political calendar spends the one asset that took two centuries to accumu-

late: the credibility of the Treasury market. That asset doesn’t regain its value so easily.

During the debt-ceiling fight in 2011, I said a brief technical delay in payments would be terrible, but less terrible than another decade of can-kicking without reform. In 2013, Geoffrey Canada and I toured college campuses calling the entitlement trajectory what it is: generational theft. Transfers that accounted for roughly a quarter of federal outlays in 1960 consume 70% today. I told students, “I love entitlements, but I want them for you guys,” when they turn 65, not merely for my generation at their expense. In 2023 I said Washington was spending like drunken sailors, with federal outlays up from 20% of GDP before Covid to 25% after, and I called Secretary Janet Yellen’s failure to term out the debt at generational-low rates the biggest blunder in Treasury history. Every household and corporation in America locked in low rates, and the one borrower that needed to most, didn’t.

At prevailing rates, interest expense reaches 4.5% of GDP by 2033 and 144% of all discretionary spending by 2043. We are tracking those markers early. Anyone who tells you entitlements won’t be cut is lying—not about the outcome but about who decides it. Either we restructure the promises deliberately, on our terms, protecting those who most

need them, or the bond market restructures them for us, all at once, on its terms.

The defense of the buybacks writes itself: It is a routine tool, introduced in 2024 for liquidity and cash management, trivial against a marketable debt stock approaching \$30 trillion. All true but beside the point. Routine operations aren’t announced off-cycle, at double size, on the heels of the long bond’s hitting a two-decade high, with a signal that they can grow without limit. Judge an intervention by what it responds to. This one responded to a price, not to plumbing, which is exactly how the market read it, and why the effect evaporated within a day. You can’t buy your way out of a solvency conversation with liquidity tools. You can only postpone the conversation and raise the eventual price.

What should happen instead is straightforward. Return buybacks to their stated purpose: small, scheduled, off-the-run liquidity operations announced at quarterly refundings, never off-cycle responses to yield levels. Term out the debt honestly and pay the price the market sets. If the 30-year must trade at 5.5% to clear, that isn’t a crisis. It is an invoice. Then do the only thing that durably lowers long-term yields: address the primary deficit. Reform entitlements gradually and honestly, through means testing, indexing changes, eligibility adjustments phased in over decades—so that the burden is shared across generations instead of dumped on the youngest.

The reward is enormous: A credible fiscal package would do more for the long end of the curve than a buyback program 1,000 times this size. Governments defending prices against fundamentals always lose. The only variable is how much they spend before conceding. The U.S. shouldn’t put itself on the wrong side of that trade, not with the most important price in the world, and not when that price is trying to say the one thing Washington most needs to hear: Let the bond market speak.

Mr. Druckenmiller is chairman and CEO of Duquesne Family Office LLC.

A Strong Yemen Can Overcome the Houthi Threat

By Jamila Ali Raja

When the Strait of Hormuz is closed, some of the global energy supply that passes through it is redirected to Bab al-Mandab, a roughly 20-mile-wide strait the Yemeni government strives to protect. Now, when the world most needs that route, an armed militia directed and supplied by Iran threatens to blockade it. Shipping lines reroute around the cape, war-risk premiums climb, and the costs show up in the price of nearly everything that reaches the U.S. by sea. Americans buying gasoline pay a premium, courtesy of the Houthi terrorists.

Yemeni government forces have been fighting the Houthis for more than a decade. As part of Iran’s rogue militant network, the Houthis have served Tehran in its pursuit of territorial control. The Houthis’ reach is increasingly dangerous. They are better armed than they were a decade ago and have access to a checkpoint of world trade.

Most Americans had never heard of the Houthis until they began firing missiles and drones at oil tankers. But the world should understand what they are: nonstate actors affiliated with Iran.

It’s also important to understand what they aren’t: a legitimate governing force. They hold territory without carrying the obligations that come with it, and they answer to no one. Yemeni safety and security and the future of the country don’t figure in their calculations.

Houthis recruit children and indoctrinate them in their fanatical creed. The United Nations has verified more than 1,800 cases of child recruitment, and Yemeni monitors have documented thousands more. The children they don’t conscript they leave defenseless. By obstructing vaccine deliveries and restricting immunization teams in the areas they control, they have left nearly five

million Yemeni children without routine vaccinations.

The Houthis terrorize the population. They keep people at the edge of hunger, place land mines on farmland and roads, and imprison anyone who resists. More than 70 U.N. employees sit in Houthi detention today, along with U.S. Embassy employees and dozens of people from aid organizations, civil-society groups and diplomatic missions.

The Houthis also terrorize international populations. In July 2025 they sank two commercial bulk carriers in the Red Sea, resulting in the deaths of four sailors. Houthi forces took as hostages 10 others—merchant sailors with no part in anyone’s war.

The terrorist organization’s escalation inside Yemen threatens a return to a wide-scale confrontation. The Houthis have attacked Marib, Hadramawt, Mocha and Shabwa out of fear of the Yemeni army’s success in unifying fronts and in an attempt to distract from worsening living conditions in areas they control.

Some argue that the Houthis thrive because Yemen’s government is ineffective and that the country is a near-failed state. This is wrong. That isn’t the Yemen of today.

Our finances have stabilized. Not long ago, the rial was in free fall. To turn this around, the government moved the banking system to Aden,

Our government is well-positioned to fight the terrorist group, but it will need support from the U.S.

unified the transfer network and took control of import financing. The currency recovered and has held, and billions of dollars have since moved through official channels into food, fuel and medicine.

Yemen has also consolidated its intelligence services and established a dedicated counterterrorism agency.

On July 30 in Riyadh, Yemen and 13 other nations issued a statement establishing a multinational maritime defense alliance to protect the waters off our shore. We didn’t ask to be defended. We asked to serve.

My years as a politician and a diplomat have taught me to distrust tidy narratives about our region. Yet the reality is clear: Iran’s regional influence is weakening, and its proxy in Yemen can be contained or crushed.

The Yemeni government is well positioned to fight the Houthis, but we can’t do it alone—so I am asking three things of the U.S.

First, to expand and strictly enforce its redesignation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization so that the new shipping networks, financial facilitators and arms transfers sustaining this group face consequences.

Second, to sustain and enhance support for Yemen’s armed forces and coast guard and to continue our counterterrorism cooperation. U.S. Coast Guard assistance has helped in the in-

terception of Iranian arms shipments to the Houthis. This U.S. support has been well received in Yemen.

Third, restore and increase humanitarian and development assistance, along with support for our economic reform program. A strong Yemen isn’t a burden on the U.S. Rather, it is part of the solution for Red Sea security and containment of Iranian influence.

I am in Washington as the first woman to represent my country here, after years spent negotiating Yemen through fragile moments, always toward the goal of becoming a country whole enough to stand on its own. That is my message: A stable Yemen, free of the Houthi threat, can be a strong, reliable partner to the U.S. There is no stable Middle East without a stable Yemen.

Ms. Raja is Yemen’s ambassador to the U.S.

Gerard Baker is away.

Can David Hume Save the Democratic Party?

By Ryan Streeter

Few past philosophers have as much present influence as David Hume, the pre-eminent Scottish Enlightenment thinker, who died on Aug. 25, 1776. Not long before, his local newspaper published the Declaration of Independence, which he supported. “I am an American in my principles,” he had written to a friend in 1775, “and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper.”

Hume wouldn’t be surprised that we are misgoverning ourselves today. He shaped disciplines such as economics, sociology and empirical inquiry, and his insights about ideological extremism, which influenced America’s Founders, can help us understand to-

day’s politics, especially what has happened to the Democratic Party.

In a popular book of essays that James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and other Founders admired, Hume criticizes “parties from principle,” those organized around ideology. “Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phaenomenon, that has yet appeared in human affairs.”

He contrasts them with parties “from interest,” which form around professional and geographical interests. The interests of farmers and sea merchants are different, which is reflected in their political allegiances. Parties of interest are alive and well on K Street in Washington.

Parties from principle produce fanatical behavior in a way that parties from interest don’t, Hume observed. Parties of interest compromise to get what they want, but ideological purists don’t. This was the root of religious wars and of present-day culture wars.

Hume explains that humans universally dislike ideas opposing their own, and when “superstition” (fear and ignorance) blends with “enthusiasm” (hope and ignorance), they do crazy things. Modern innovations—pamphleteering in Hume’s day, social media in ours—have made it easier to organize and motivate ideologues.

Viewed through Hume’s lens, Democrats’ intramural struggle with socialism is only the latest evidence that they are morphing from a party from interest into a party from principle. Coalitions consisting of orga-

nized labor, minority populations, immigrants, farmers and urban machines have given way to a party dominated by highly educated people driven by superstitions and enthusiasms about race, sex and class.

Unlike “The Communist Manifesto,” which is all about class struggle, the constitution of the Democratic Socialists of America is a jumble of collectivism and culture-war topics. It opens by rejecting “an economic order based on private

It is turning into what the philosopher called a ‘party from principle.’ That wasn’t a term of praise.

profit,” then quickly moves to include feminism, “gender identity,” sexual orientation and “brutality and violence in defense of the status quo” as mission-critical issues.

Progressive activists are much whiter, more urban, more educated, and much younger than the national average—which is to say, they are much more beholden to university orthodoxies than to workaday concerns. They become enraged about “oppression,” but they have no first-hand experience with it.

This detachment from reality leads them to see oppression where most people see merely challenges. Inflation is stubborn, and Americans are legitimately upset about it, but that doesn’t mean they support the “popular con-

trol of resources and production” the DSA constitution champions. Research shows that the middle class is hollowing out primarily because more Americans are moving up and out of it, and low-income people move up financially when they move into opportunity-rich places. Most people know this, but progressives, who are mostly from affluent backgrounds, are blind to their own experience.

The Democrats’ socialism problem didn’t appear in a vacuum. Its path was paved by elites who insisted on denying common sense and imposing esoteric ideas—“defund the police,” “all white people are racist,” “men can become pregnant” and so forth. Candidates are backing away from some of them, but that is merely an electoral strategy. As Joe Biden’s presidency demonstrated, Democrats who run as moderates don’t end up relenting on culture wars.

The Democratic Party needs to reckon, in Hume’s formulation, with the “superstition” about the market economy and “enthusiasm” about identity politics in its ranks if it is to find its way.

Democrats need present-day David Humes to help understand the root causes for their problems rather than the variety of bogeymen their leaders cite. Only then will enough among them decide to leave their party of principle and return to the more mundane, yet more sensible, party of interest their traditional voters want.

Mr. Streeter is executive director of the University of Texas at Austin’s Civitas Institute.

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EDITORIALS

An express train from the Loop to O’Hare in 15 minutes? We’re on board

City Hall must get behind the O’Hare Flyer

From Stockholm to Seoul, Beijing to Hong Kong and Oslo to London Heathrow, fast airport trains are a mark of a city that understands urgency and efficiency.

A traveler walks out of baggage claim and finds a nearby platform. A tap of the credit card and a debit of around \$25-\$35 and you are on board a train with ample space for your luggage and comfortable seats for your weary body. You don’t worry about departure times, because this train is leaving every 15 minutes on the quarter hour. You close your eyes for 15 or 20 minutes or so, sail past the traffic and, whoosh, you’ve been expressed downtown at a predictable time, ready for business, fun or sleep.

You can do the same in reverse. Instead of worrying about free-way traffic stressing your check-in time, you can pick your departure time (00, 15, 30 and 45 past the hour) from downtown and trust your precise moment of arrival. You get near-total predictability of your airport arrival; no need for contingencies for traffic delays.

These trains are not for everyone: most of these airports also serve cheaper (and slower) local trains better suited for airport workers on a budget or for those headed not downtown but to a neighborhood or suburb. But to say that the express trains are a desirable option for airport travelers is to understate.

For the past several months, a group of private investors has been working quietly on a \$2.25 billion



A Heathrow Express train at a platform at London Paddington station on Dec. 23, 2025. The high-speed rail link provides a direct service between central London and Heathrow Airport. **MICHAEL NGUYEN/AP**

project — dubbed the O’Hare Flyer — for Chicago’s O’Hare that would and should transform how Chicagoans get to our big airport as soon as 2030. They’ve been keeping us informed, and enthusiastic, for 11 months. Friday, they met with us again, with a Tribune reporter in the room. Friday, the crew also showed up in the mayor’s office. And, Tuesday, they went public.

“We are a private project and we are going to be able to execute this project,” O’Hare Flyer LLC CEO Dave Lundy told us. “We have been working quietly on this for years. We wanted to be the opposite of those developers who announce a project and say they will figure it out later.” Lundy said the project will be financed by private investors, although also utilizing a capital stack that includes federal Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing loans.

Mark Walbrun, a co-founder, the chief development officer and a longtime railroad and airport engineer, explained the route to us and said that right-of-way agreements with the partnering freight

railroads (including both Union Pacific and Canadian National) were close to being buttoned up.

In essence, the battery-powered train, seating up to 450 passengers, will leave Chicago’s old main post office, which will be converted into a dedicated station, and head west along existing, mostly grade-separated freight tracks and rights of way. Between Oak Park and Maywood, the train will turn to the north, again utilizing existing tracks. Only once the train arrives close to the O’Hare campus (about the last mile and a half) will the train need new trackage. Plans call for various concrete support piers to be built, allowing this train to swing into the main terminal loop, giving access to the existing Terminals 1 and 3, along with the new global terminal, what we now know as Terminal 2. The airport express will sit astride the existing people mover, although it will operate on different rails.

Conceptually, at least, this makes a whole lot more sense than the ill-fated Elon Musk

Boring Company idea to run a train from an underground station in Block 37 to the airport.

Key things about the O’Hare Flyer include the duration of the ride (15 minutes beats the pants off the Kennedy Expressway at any time of day), the clean electric trains, the private funding (no asks for public money beyond the federal construction zones), the use of existing unused or very lightly used freight tracks making things simpler and quicker (we hope), the choice of the old main post office building as the dedicated downtown terminus, the planned new, covered walkway not just from the airport train to Union Station but also including a connector between the CTA’s Blue Line and that historic depot, something the city long has needed.

This also is a chance for Chicago to one-up New York, which, despite rebuilding its airports, has no such direct train at any of the three airports controlled by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Heck, no U.S. city has a comparably speedy train (yet), although several have plans in the works. This will be a big new weapon in the arsenal of the convention and tourism agency Choose Chicago!

We don’t see any real threat to the CTA from this train, which will serve a different market, but we do see a chance to alleviate some of the traffic on the Kennedy Expressway. And, at the same time, bring more pedestrians to the southwest edge of the Loop.

Aside from the need to take it on faith that the O’Hare Flyer has its funding as secure as they insisted to us, key things we worry about include the inevitability of the city trying to tax the ride beyond what is reasonable, unions and aldermen gumming up the construc-

tion process with their inevitable demands for a piece of that \$2.25 billion, existing transportation boards getting in the way and all kinds of only-in-Chicago bureaucracy delaying a train we badly need. NIMBY forces might also start to whine, although the use of existing tracks should also alleviate that situation. And the Terminal 5 airlines might see this as a competitive disadvantage, although we’d hope they’d demure by understanding the ease of the people-mover connection to their home. And we all know the new Global Terminal should be the city’s top priority.

We’re serving notice here on aldermen that this is an express train, which means it does not stop in your ward. We can see an argument for a single suburban stop in a near west suburb, potentially allowing the train to serve communities like River Forest, Forest Park and beyond, but express should mean express. That is how these trains operate in Europe. Once the journey time increases, the value proposition diminishes and the project is less likely to succeed.

At this early juncture, the O’Hare Flyer needs a Chicago train daddy, to borrow the moniker famously given to the British transit executive Andy Byford, who now is leading the overhaul of New York’s Penn Station.

In fact, it probably will need two daddies, one sitting in City Hall now and the other taking over before the trains are running.

Let’s hope Mayor Brandon Johnson, whom we were pleased to hear was enthusiastic about the project, will appoint someone to streamline what needs to be done here, bat away the naysayers and give us a world-class train for our world-class city.

President Trump’s treatment of Canada is shameful

Memo to President Donald Trump: Canada is our friend.

A round of recent trade talks, necessitated in the first place by a series of American tariffs on our neighbor to the north early in Trump’s second term, collapsed late last week and now the U.S. is embroiled in the most foolish of trade wars with Canada. The Trump administration reacted by allowing 50% tariffs on billions of Canadian goods to take effect this weekend. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney declared the same day that Canada would match the Trump administration’s levies “dollar for dollar.”

Carney effectively labeled the U.S. as an enemy of Canada.

“You’re at war when you get attacked,” he said. “We got attacked.”

Think of that. Canada has been a staunch ally of the U.S. for more than two centuries. The last time the two nations were openly hostile was during the War of 1812, and Canada at that time wasn’t yet even its own country separate from Great Britain.

Trump responded Monday to Carney’s reaction in typical fashion, by threatening to double existing tariffs on Canadian steel, automobiles and auto parts, effective Jan. 1. The relatively long lead time at least gives both nations some time to work out a face-saving fallback.

Carney, a former investment banker and central banker, has proven himself a tough adversary, especially given the bizarre nature of what he’s faced. Trump since returning to office has repeatedly lobbed juvenile insults at Canada, referring to the proud sovereign nation as the 51st state of the U.S. Various tariff declarations have emanated from Washington, seemingly at a whim.

Carney, meanwhile, has been calm and determined. And he has made clear that the zero-sum approach Trump takes to the rest of the world, where win-win deals are anathema and the only accords acceptable to him are ones in which the U.S. gains and

the other party loses, won’t play in his country.

It’s an admirable stance but one that comes with risks. The U.S. economy is more than 10 times the size of Canada’s; a full-blown trade war no doubt will hurt more in Canada than it will here.

But hurt here it will, damaging sectors on both sides of the border, particularly the auto industry, which relies on supply chains integrated throughout North America. Automakers forged those arrangements under rules negotiated by Trump himself in 2020 with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

New cars already are so expensive that an embarrassingly large

swath of American consumers can’t afford one. This folly only will make that situation worse.

Still, the economic particulars underpinning this needless antagonism essentially are beside the point. Trump’s dealings with Carney and Canada are not how one relates to a friend.

And that’s what Canada is. A friend. Its soldiers have fought and died by our soldiers, from the beaches of Normandy to the rugged terrain of Afghanistan.

We can only hope that, as true lifelong friends often do after a break in their relationship, Canada will be open to extending its hand to us again after this sorry chapter is done.

ON THIS DAY 26 YEARS AGO SURVIVOR’S FIRST FINALE

That turned out to be an interesting little experiment in television Wednesday night, though perhaps not the one its makers intended. In the end, “Survivor” was not about pitting human against nature. It was about human against human nature.

The cultural phenomenon that has been the CBS series “Survivor” has been called everything from a revolution in television programming to an overblown version of “Beat the Clock.”

About the only thing that can’t be argued is that it has been watched by a whole lot of people. Wednesday night’s final episode on Cutthroat Island drew an estimated 51 million viewers, according to preliminary Nielsen ratings. That is more viewers for any show this year save the Super Bowl.

The slow-motion-train-wreck effect that an amateur cast of 16 characters created will soon be attempted all over network television.

“Survivor” was set up to be a game about surviving nature—and a very contrived game at that. But it became a game of surviving the traps and treacheries conceived by other humans, and on that score the participants were pretty much left to their own devices.

What resulted wasn’t very

pretty. In the end, there wasn’t one inspiring person in the show. Not one hero. Those who did best, members of the secret alliance, were those who were most adept at conspiracy and falsehood and manipulation.

One can question how close all this show was to reality. The process of selecting the participants may well have drawn in those people who yearn for a stage, and those who are naturally willing to scratch, claw and publicly embarrass themselves for a chance to win big money and get on TV.

That \$1 million, the cast members proved, was reason enough for lots of disreputable behavior.

Nevertheless, “Survivor” was close enough to reality to feed those who are most cynical about human nature.

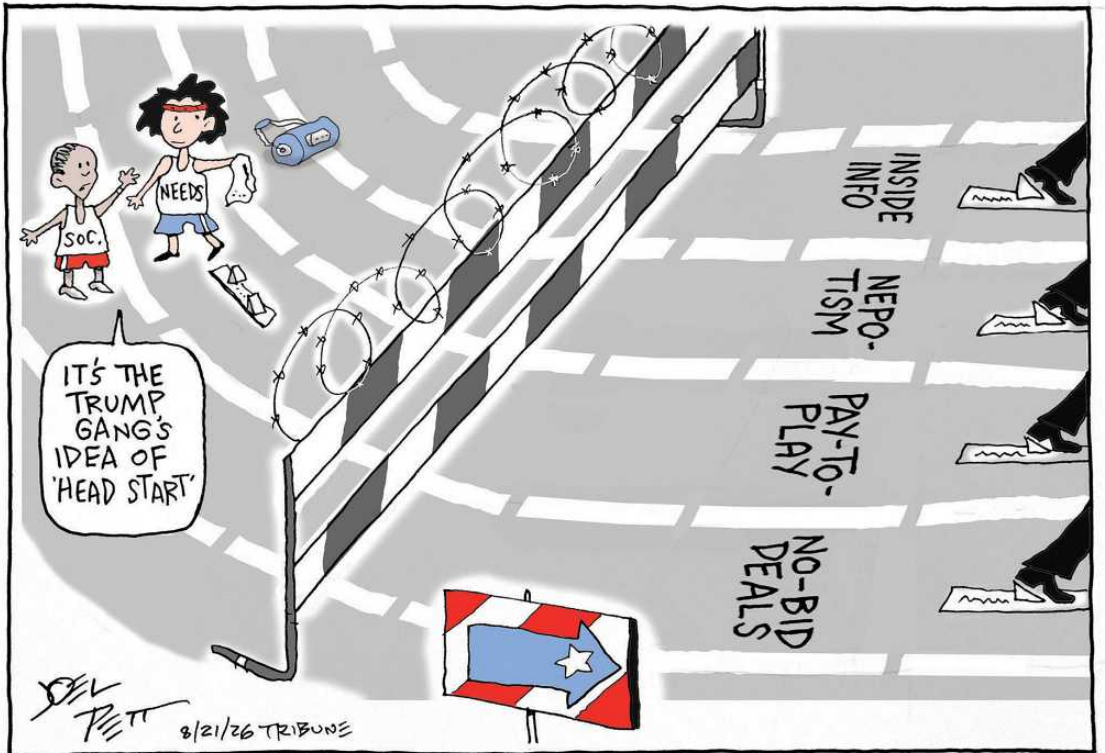
At least Kelly, one of those last two survivors, had serious doubts about the morality of the whole experience. Rich, the winner, was careful to defend his ethics, but not his morality.

Survivor was a TV game show with stated rules and edited contents. It was not the random, serendipitous chaos of real life.

But it was close enough to be unnerving.

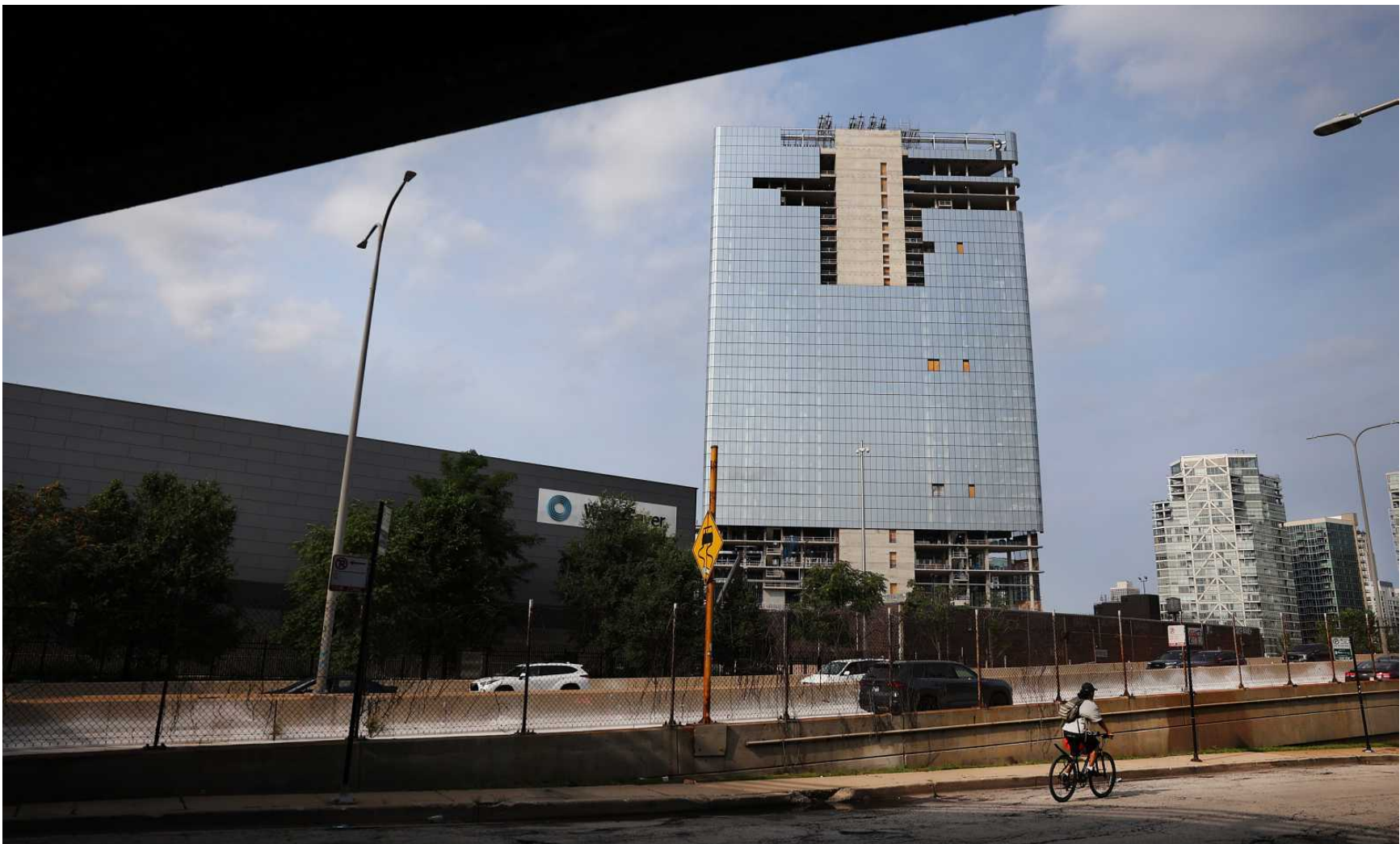
**Tribune editorial board,
Aug. 25, 2000**

EDITORIAL CARTOON



JOEL PETT

OPINION



The Bally's Chicago casino construction site is seen on Aug. 12. **CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Chicago’s debating over casinos, video gaming and sweepstakes — so what’s the difference?

By Joe Ferguson
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Gambling is nothing new in Chicago. Legal gambling is. City Hall’s handling of it still looks like the rackets of yore. With a suffocating debt and pension load, and another looming budget deficit, Chicago cannot afford incoherence on this important fiscal and social issue. We can do better. And because of our fiscal moment, we must.

Currently at issue are three forms of gambling — two legal, one questionable.

First comes casino gambling embodied in the city’s agreement with Bally’s to build and operate a casino and entertainment complex. The deal should have received detailed oversight vetting from the City Council in 2022. Instead, the fifth floor created a special committee of the mayor’s hand-picked allies, which held only one hearing with less than full information, and then approved Bally’s still-controversial competitive bid. So far, not so good. Bally’s temporary casino at the old Medinah Temple has grossly underperformed tax-revenue projections, and construction on the permanent River West complex has been bedeviled by a stream of complications and delays, culminating in the recent pronouncement that Bally’s was hitting pause on construction of key non-casino elements.

Second is video gaming, which the City Council legalized as part of the 2026 budget. Video gaming terminals, or VGTs, are licensed gambling machines located in bars and other venues, operated by city-licensed vendors after clearing screening and approval by the Illinois Gaming Board. VGTs were authorized last year by the City Council, despite the mayor’s objection. His administration has responded by slow-walking city licensing in defiance of the council’s legal mandate. Eight months after legal-

ization, there is still not a single active VGT machine in Chicago, even though 311 establishments have applied for and 42 have received state licenses.

Third are sweepstakes machines, which function much like VGTs, but use a legal loophole relating to how players pay and receive prizes to avoid classification as VGTs. Chicago has over 7,000 sweepstakes machines, yet not one VGT. Bizarrely, sweepstakes machines, unlike their VGT and casino slot cousins, are neither regulated nor taxed. No controls, no accountability and no tax revenues for either the state or the city.

These three have become fused into a nonsensical status quo rendered farcical by the fact it serves as a proxy for the still simmering battle between the mayor and the City Council during the 2026 budget cycle. This all can be resolved, but only with complete, public-facing information and analysis, that, thus far, has been missing.

Last year, the mayor’s office commissioned a report from Christiansen Capitol Advisors LLC on the potential fiscal impacts of legalizing VGT gambling in Chicago. Interestingly, this report is not public and appears to not even have been shared with the full City Council. Last fall, that left an under-empowered and under-resourced City Council able to make only rough (albeit prudently conservative) estimates for projected tax and license revenue from legalizing VGTs to close the city’s 2026 budget gap. Since then, mayoral defiance of the legal obligations to enforce the council’s budget has left the city financially short of that modest projection.

The council has its own independent contribution to make respecting the unregulated sweepstakes machines. Some aldermen sought to ban them, reasoning that businesses using them should switch to the legalized, and therefore regulated and taxed, VGTs.

The council rejected this proposal 33-15. It was an oddly composed majority that might consider where the sweepstakes machines proliferate in the city. The bottom line for now is that the city is allowing the unaccountable operation of thousands of untaxed machines while simultaneously counting on revenue from their VGT and casino competitors.

Bally’s, meanwhile, has vehemently argued that allowing VGTs will cannibalize revenue from its 4,000 permanent facility slot machines. They are using that claim to justify suspending a \$4 million annual payment due the city and pausing hotel and amenity construction, both contractually required. One may reasonably surmise that the city’s corporation counsel is weighing whether Bally’s contract interpretations need to be decided by a judge. Bally’s recent pronouncement does deliver on prior threats, but the timing was suspect, looking more like a naked bluff at the poker table. Just days later, Bally’s issued a “going concern” warning, raising serious questions about the company’s ability to pay its future debts. Bally’s certainly knew that warning was imminent when it played its payment-and-construction-halt gambit. And even if it has the funding to complete the Chicago casino complex, the warning still raises a specter of further delays, or, in the worst case, bankruptcy that could choke off the projected casino tax revenue pledged to bolster the city’s gravely underfunded police and fire pension funds.

Now what? With eight months of the fiscal year behind us, the concern should no longer be the marginal consequences on the 2026 budget. What matters more is what this mess means for the rapidly approaching 2027 budget cycle. The mayor and the council need a shared, coherent, comprehensive approach to gambling and reliable

revenue projections before the mayor’s proposed budget is introduced in October.

On the casino front, the City Council should promptly hold hearings to receive testimony from Bally’s, preceded by a demand for immediate, complete disclosure of information related to Bally’s ability to build and operate the permanent Chicago casino complex. In the event that Bally’s refuses to respond with full candor and information, the City Council may need to consider options up to and including suspending the Bally’s license. If Bally’s cannot deliver on its contractual commitment, the City Council needs to immediately begin contingency planning.

On video gambling, the question of whether VGTs provide meaningful revenue, generally and in relation to casino slots, needs responsible, fact-based public resolution. The Christiansen report should be made public immediately, and its analysis publicly vetted. If that analysis is incomplete, then additional published analysis should be secured and likewise vetted. Any analysis should also include the commercial and revenue relationship of sweepstakes to VGTs. The council will then be positioned to make a holistic, duly informed decision on whether and what scale to implement VGTs and whether to ban, or regulate and tax, sweepstakes machines.

These issues are not going away. VGT and sweepstakes devices both sit in limbo. Gambling tax revenue projections for 2027 remain cloudy at best. The future of Bally’s and the Chicago casino is uncertain. At this point, no outcome will have any legitimacy without full transparency and accountability. It’s time to call the bluffs and show all hands.

Joe Ferguson is president of the Civic Federation.

The missing chair at Chicago Public Schools’ bargaining table

By David Griffith
and Kennedy Sundberg
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

In April 2025, the Chicago Teachers Union ratified a \$1.5 billion contract that included a 16% raise for teachers and new class-size caps ranging from 25 to 31 students depending on the grade level.

That sounds great. And in a world of infinite resources, it would be. Yet last month, in a move that surprised nobody who was familiar with the district’s financial situation, Chicago Public Schools closed a \$732.5 million deficit that avoided layoffs by assuming additional revenue from the state.

To be clear, the problem isn’t that Chicago wants to pay its teachers well or ensure their working conditions are manageable. It’s the number of chairs at the bargaining table that are occupied by teacher unions and their allies.

According to a recent study by our organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Illinois has the country’s seventh strongest teachers unions. More specifically, it ranks sixth for “involvement in politics” (meaning its unions are among the most electorally



Karen Lewis, then-president of the Chicago Teachers Union, stands with then-CTU organizer Brandon Johnson at the union’s annual Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Peace Breakfast in 2016. **ANTHONY SOUFFLE/TRIBUNE**

active in the country) and fourth for “labor and bargaining policies” (meaning the resulting contracts constrain administrative decisions more than most).

In Chicago, some of those numbers have first and last names. For example, Mayor Brandon Johnson was a Chicago Teachers Union organizer before entering politics, and the union was a prominent backer of his 2023 mayoral campaign. Once he became mayor, Johnson had the

opportunity to appoint the majority of the school board that ratified the \$1.5 billion contract.

Although that number was inherently unsustainable, the biggest problem isn’t that a district that has experienced significant enrollment decline was planning to reduce its teaching force. It’s how those changes are likely to be implemented because of the constraints that are embedded in the most recent contract, prior contracts, and Illinois law.

For example, under both Illinois law and the 2024-2028 union contract, the most junior teachers in a given performance tier must be laid off first. Consequently, because high-poverty schools rely disproportionately on newer teachers, the classrooms that are most likely to be affected are those whose students can least afford the disruption.

Similarly, although benefits of smaller class sizes are real, at least for economically disadvantaged kids in early grades, uniform caps put high-poverty schools at a competitive disadvantage (because other working conditions are more difficult). In New York City, a nearly identical mandate is projected to generate three additional teaching vacancies at the highest-poverty schools for every vacancy at the lowest-poverty schools.

Finally, there’s the district’s slow-moving pension crisis, which is the root source of much of the current fiscal pressure, but which the 2024-2028 agreement does nothing to address. Thanks to “pension holidays” in the 1990s and 2000s that shifted the costs to future generations, the Chicago Teachers’ Pension Fund has \$14.2 billion in unfunded liabilities that it must somehow honor.

Yet rather than confronting that history, the 2024-2028 contract retains a provision that allows teachers to bank up to 244 unused sick days as pension credit at retirement, effectively compounding a preexisting liability that already pulls \$135 million annually from the same high-poverty classrooms that are about to lose their teachers.

So, what is to be done?

There’s no silver bullet for the current mess. Still, if it’s tired of making messes, Illinois could narrow the scope of what unions can bargain over. For example, in 2011 Wisconsin decided that decisions about layoff procedures, class sizes and teacher placements should belong to the employer.

Regardless, the state and the city must confront the outsized role of public sector unions, which inevitably put the interests of their members before those of taxpayers, future hires and the most vulnerable students.

Otherwise, the students who have lost the most will never have a seat at the table.

David Griffith is national research director and Kennedy Sundberg is research assistant at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a K-12 education think tank.

OPINION

What the US must learn from Canada’s ‘elbows up’ response to tariffs

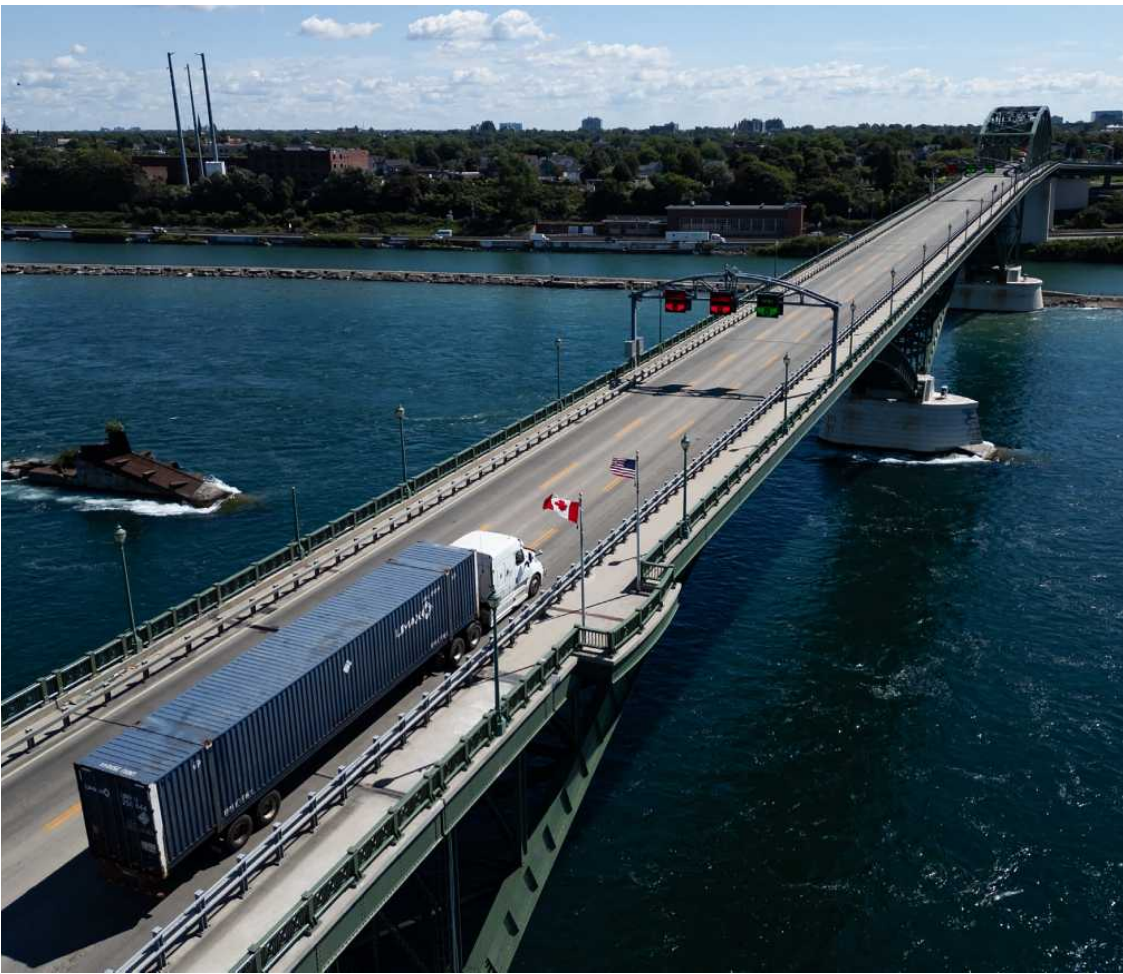


Daniel DePetris

As if U.S. officials didn’t have enough on their plate these days, they can now add a trade war with Canada to the mix — and with it, one more dent to a relationship that historically is one of the closest the United States has with another country. President Donald Trump has done the impossible by turning America’s pleasant neighbor up north into a combatant.

After Trump in July threatened to enact an additional 50% tariff on \$20 billion worth of Canadian exports to the United States, U.S. and Canadian officials hustled back to the negotiating table to craft a deal that would avert another dispute between the two allies. The Trump administration wanted to rebalance what it termed an unfair trading relationship by, among other things, pushing Canada into accepting more U.S. dairy products, getting U.S. alcohol back in Canadian stores and getting Ottawa to drop the tariffs it placed on U.S. exports in retaliation for earlier levies the White House imposed last year. Canada’s asks included Trump suspending the threatened 50% tariffs and lowering the import duties on Canadian raw materials. There was a deal to be had if cooler heads prevailed.

Yet at the last hour, the negotiations collapsed. U.S. officials blamed Canada for introducing last-minute demands. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, meanwhile, pointed the finger at the Trump administration for trying to handicap Canada’s sovereignty by restricting its ability to sign trade agreements with other countries. For Carney, Washington’s demands were simply unfathomable. The next day, the Canadian premier delivered a speech explaining why he ordered his negotiators to leave the table and all but stated that Canada



A truck passes over the Peace Bridge between Canada and the United States in Fort Erie, Ontario, on Aug. 18. COLE BURSTON/GETTY-APP

was now in a state of war with its southern neighbor.

Assuming both sides don’t find a way to de-escalate, Canada’s retaliatory tariffs on the United States will take effect on Sept. 8. The trade war will affect both economies, which are highly integrated. U.S. farmers who rely on Canadian fertilizer to sow their fields before planting season will see their costs rise, adding yet more strain on the bottom line and perhaps even forcing the Trump administration to give a bailout to the farming community across the country. Canada, whose gross domestic product is less than one-tenth the size of the U.S. economy, will be hit even harder as its car industry suffers from bottlenecks, if not outright disruption. Indeed, the round of tit-for-tat tariffs could result in 90,000 Canadians losing their jobs.

Despite all of this potential economic turmoil on the Canadian side, Carney still concluded that at the end of the day, the cost of acceding to Washington’s extravagant demands was higher than the cost of job losses and strain on a key industry. Miraculously, the Canadian population is making the same judgment: Trump is so reviled in Canada that groveling in front of him in the hope of winning tariff relief is a terrible choice for any Canadian politician to make. Carney’s “elbows up” approach, in which Canada resists U.S. bullying, is not only a political winner for Prime Minister Carney and his government but an unquestioned fact-of-life in the country nowadays. Even Carney’s political

adversaries, who waste no opportunity to criticize the Liberal Party leader, support his walking away from the table.

There’s a lesson in all of this for U.S. officials who care to learn it: While coercion is sometimes necessary to achieve a strategic goal in the realm of foreign policy, constant coercion over time will ultimately spark resistance from those on the receiving end of it. Other countries, in turns out, don’t like getting bossed around or dictated to — nor do they appreciate being hammered economically for not acting like a subservient stooge.

Unfortunately, this is a lesson Trump hasn’t yet learned or, just as worryingly, doesn’t care to learn. In fact, it’s increasingly clear that on matters of foreign

policy, Trump is a one-trick pony with a fairly elementary theory of the case: If you press a country long and hard enough, it will eventually have no choice but to come back to the table, hat-in-hand, ready to give away the store in exchange for some relief.

Trump has put this theory into practice numerous times during his second term. On Greenland, he threatened tariffs on multiple European countries if they didn’t support his claim of American ownership there. On Iran, Trump has combined military force and maximum economic pressure to squeeze the ayatollahs into reopening the Strait of Hormuz and handing over their enriched uranium stockpile. And in Brazil, tariffs were levied to push the country into dropping the criminal case against its former president, Jair Bolsonaro. Trump’s 50% levies on Canadian goods fit well into this narrative.

The problem is that none of those gambits worked to compel these countries into giving Trump what he wanted. The Europeans drew a line in the sand on Greenland’s sovereignty, and faced with a unified front, Trump ultimately dropped the tariffs. Iran is just as disinterested in ceding its de-facto ownership of the strait today as it was when the war started nearly six months ago — if anything, the Iranians are now demanding more concessions from Washington just to get back to the June memorandum of understanding that fell apart weeks after it was signed. And instead of cutting the prosecution of Bolsonaro short, the Brazilian government let the trial proceed (he was eventually sentenced to 27 years for plotting a coup) and responded to the U.S. tariffs by signing more economic deals with China, Washington’s principal competitor.

Much like the Iranians, Europeans and Brazilians, the Canadians don’t intend to be weaklings or pushovers. The United States may still be a global hegemon, but it’s power is not unlimited.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Tribune.

Voice of the People

How Head Start helps

The Aug. 10 article “Trump deregulation plan vexes Head Start providers” raises important questions about proposed changes to Head Start and what they could mean for children and families across Illinois and the country. I am particularly concerned about what these changes could mean for the health screenings that are a critical part of Head Start and its commitment to the health, development and school readiness of children from families with lower incomes.

Early childhood is a critical time for vision development. Identifying a problem and connecting a child to care can mean the difference between the child seeing clearly in the classroom and struggling to learn.

Research has found that approximately 1 in 5 Head Start preschoolers have a vision disorder. Current Head Start standards require evidence-based vision screening within 45 days of a child’s first day in the program, with appropriate referral for follow-up vision care when a potential vision problem is identified. The proposed changes would loosen those requirements, allowing greater variation in how and when children are screened.

That may sound like regulatory flexibility, but it risks creating even greater inconsistency among programs and could result in children receiving screenings that do not follow evidence-informed guidelines.

Through our National Center for Children’s Vision and Eye Health, we train the professionals at Head Start programs across the country. Through this work, we have seen the difference vision screening can make in a child’s life. One program shared the story of a toddler whose screening identified astigmatism in both eyes, leading to an eye exam and glasses. Another reported that eight children referred for eye care following vision screenings received no-cost exams and glasses, with families reporting improvements in their learning. These screenings are working.

Yes, states and communities should have flexibility to meet the needs of their children. But flexibility should not come at the expense of evidence-based stan-



Ambar Merlin picks up her son Uriel, age 2, at Brightpoint’s Mitzi Freidheim Child & Family Center at the end of the day on Aug. 7. BrightPoint operates six early learning centers in the state that provide Head Start services, including this Englewood location. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

dards that we know help children thrive. Illinois children — and children everywhere — deserve the same opportunity for a healthy start, regardless of their family’s income or where they happen to live.

— Jeff Todd, president and CEO, Prevent Blindness, Chicago

Making a dent in debt

Letter writer Larry Craig (“We can’t ignore national debt,” Aug. 11) does a great job pointing out that a major cause of our ever increasing debt is that we are now incurring about \$1 trillion of annual expense paying the interest on the debt that we have previously accumulated. But he loses it by saying that we can fix our enormous debt by reducing spending!

As always when talking about cutting spending, no one ever begins to detail enough spending cuts to make a dent in our deficits.

No, the obvious and only answer is to vastly increase revenues. And to get vast increases in revenue, it can only come from those who have vast wealth. There is nothing wrong with being wealthy. We all aspire to be wealthy. Our free enterprise economy works only because people pursue wealth. America has achieved incredible invention, innovation and wealth because of that, as well as offering every individual complete freedom to go where they want, do what they want and achieve what they want, limited only by their

own talents and ambitions.

I would propose a wealth tax on amounts of household wealth in excess of \$10 million. This only affects 1% of American households, but together, they have about \$55 trillion in wealth. A 5% tax on household wealth in excess of \$10 million would produce more than enough revenue to eliminate our deficit and eventually pay down the debt before it buries us.

This is not to punish people for being rich, but to preserve our nation for the benefit of all. Wealth in excess of \$10 million is invariably invested and should easily make more than a 5% return.

Wealthy people will continue to increase their wealth, just a little slower.

— David Rosenak, Highland Park

Raise taxes, cut spending

I believe our government is digging us a debt hole that we aren’t going to be able to crawl out of, and that scares the bejesus out of me. The national debt is over \$40 trillion, and we are borrowing at a high interest rate. The debt is increasing faster and faster.

Our government has passed on dealing with this for years and many administrations. We all know that this is easy to fix with one of three options: Bring in more revenue than we spend, keep revenue the same and spend less, or a combination of the two

by increasing revenue and spending less. It seems to me that the best of the three options is the third: Increase revenue and spend less.

The hard part is there are people who will feel some pain, and elected officials don’t want to cause pain since it may cost them votes. But isn’t their job to be looking out for all us and not themselves? U.S. revenue comes from taxes, so every time taxes are reduced, our debt increases faster. We must increase taxes to cover our spending. Reducing spending is actually much tougher, but with appropriate audits of our spending and looking at the return on our spending (wiser use of our money), I have faith a reasonable reduction can be found.

When you pick a candidate, find one who will work for you and do what must be done — reduce spending and increase taxes.

— Jim Shapiro, Kenosha, Wisconsin

Let’s reclaim community

For the last 20 years, we Americans have stumbled. We have increasingly used our time, talents and treasures to place the future hope of our republic in political activity and political parties rather than in each other as neighbors, citizens and community. We have been seeking to elect the next great political figure who will take us to the promised land.

Two decades on, not much has come from the exhausting, over-charged energy we have put into politics. We certainly cannot claim that as a people, nation or democracy, we are doing better.

We arrived here because we misunderstood something fundamental: that politics, while important, is not the most critical feature of our democracy. It was never intended to be. Politics itself cannot solve what needs to be resolved when we’re talking about the foundations of our nation.

If not politics, then what is the path forward? Starting now, we return to each other as neighbors, relearn our role as citizens and do the hard work of building community. Therefore, it’s time to live out

our complete role as citizens, not merely our political selves.

Creating community with neighbors is nearly the opposite of how politics works. Politics divides. Community unites. Here is how we begin making this change.

Community starts with being neighborly to all around you. Friendliness and hospitality matter. Citizens learn to move from self-interest to other-interest, from knowing those they want to help to helping those they know are their neighbors merely by virtue of geography.

Community then moves to do its own hard work. Building on social bonds, neighbors come together in their role as citizens to solve shared neighborhood problems and address challenges. These repeated experiences are how citizenship is found and learned, and how community is formed and modeled. Politics and parties cannot create authentic community, for they limit who is in the community. Politics is the easy proposition. Community is the hard demand. Politics asks that we find those like us and seek more of them, while leaving others aside. Community requires us to be all together and keep on keeping on.

This then is the modern “e pluribus unum”: more community. Less politics. More solutions. Less ideology.

Are you ready to be neighbors (again)? If yes, then the preservation of our republic is at hand and in good hands. Only in community will we find ourselves, each other and our democracy.

— Jac Charlier, Chicago

Note to readers

Construction on Chicago streets and bridges this summer has created headaches for many drivers. We’d like to hear from you about your frustrations with the delays and the city’s management of the closures and detours. Send a letter of no more than 400 words by Wednesday, Sept. 2 to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

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