



Concrete fever

India must mandate green cover and reflective materials for its cities

Sri Ganganagar, in Rajasthan touched 48°C Celsius this week, the hottest that India has been this year so far. Scorching summer heat in the run-up to the monsoon, which is delayed, is not unusual, but many Indians in the informal sector have to work directly under the sun in unprotected environments. Climate change is inextricably linked to heatwaves. India Meteorological Department data show that the frequency of heatwave spells has risen by 0.1 days per decade since 1961 over India's Core Heatwave Zone that includes the central, northwestern, and eastern coastal regions, or about 30% of India's total land area. Their maximum duration has increased by 0.55 days per decade, and the 2015-25 interval is, according to the World Meteorological Organization, the warmest 11-year stretch since records began. But the emissions that produced these numbers are only the proximate villain. What makes India's heat uniquely lethal is not the atmosphere alone. Urban heat islands across Indian cities now run 2°C to 10°C hotter than their surrounding rural areas, the difference manufactured by concrete, asphalt, the butchering of tree cover, and the waste heat exhaled by the thousands of air-conditioners cooling offices. Delhi's average humidity rose by eight percentage points between 2015-19 and 2020-24. This has a lot to do with an increasingly sealed urban surface than global warming alone. This is where the seduction of the technological fix becomes dangerous with the instinct being to reach for more, better and cheaper ACs. This might shield the privileged office worker at the expense of the vast majority, many of whom are outdoor workers and street vendors. Paradoxically, the machines are, in a thermodynamic sense, fuelling the problem.

What is called for instead is unglamorous, slow and politically difficult: urban design that mandates reflective materials and green cover, building codes calibrated to a climate that has already shifted; and, most urgently, the enforcement of labour laws that already exist but are honoured largely in the breach. These laws require employers to stop outdoor work when the heat index crosses thresholds that human physiology cannot safely absorb. India has not yet had a serious national conversation about budget heads for heat management.

Different directions

The Quad is unable to push toward its worthy objectives

The Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting this week, the third such engagement since U.S. President Donald Trump began his tenure, was meant to reassure all partners — India, Australia, Japan and the U.S. — that the grouping remains valid and viable, despite all the rapid geopolitical developments. To that end, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong and Japanese Foreign Affairs Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, who were hosted by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Delhi, agreed to firm up a number of initiatives. On the Indo-Pacific maritime security, they agreed on three initiatives including one for Maritime Surveillance Collaboration (IPMSC), a Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (PMDA), and a Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission. They also finalised a Quad Critical Mineral cooperation initiative, an energy security partnership, and the first ever Quad infrastructural project to build a port in Fiji. The joint statement reiterated their commitment to the Quad's geopolitical positions: a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP); respecting territorial integrity; countering cross-border terrorism; and upholding international law with a focus on UNCLOS. The statement expressed concern over the Pahalgalam attack, developments in the East and South China Seas, and the Strait of Hormuz blockade. Yet, there were also clear constraints on the language, which appeared to arise out of the U.S.'s new engagement with China and Russia. Quad partners decried Iranian actions in the conflict but made no mention of the U.S. Israel's initiation of the conflict with Iran, the U.S. torpedoing of an Iranian ship in the Indian Ocean, or Washington's talks with Tehran using Pakistan as mediator. Each of these newly developed vectors poses a challenge to Quad unity, while the lack of consultation before and during the West Asia conflict raises questions about the Quad's relevance.

The future of the Quad engagement emerged as another concern. The Quad began at an official-level in 2007, was reborn in 2017 at a higher official level, and was upgraded to leader-level engagement in 2021. India assumed the Quad chair in 2024, but has since faced difficulties in hosting the summit. In 2024, tensions with the U.S. over the Panmun-Nijjar case delayed the summit and the Biden administration insisted on holding it in Baltimore. In 2025, tensions over tariffs, sanctions, trade, and Operation Sindoor claims disrupted plans for Mr. Trump and other leaders to meet in Delhi. Mid-way through 2026, that meeting is yet to be scheduled, and if India demits the Chair to Australia without holding a Summit, it may indicate a downgrade in engagement. The Quad's regional initiatives on climate change, health, debt financing, infrastructure and maritime security remain a force for good in the Indo-Pacific. However, the grouping's internal contradictions, particularly in the face of the U.S.'s unilateral moves across the world, are a challenge. The Quad could benefit from some reflection on how to ensure that the grouping moves forward in tandem on its worthy objectives, not as one that plunders in different directions.

Voltaire's famous quip about the Holy Roman Empire — that it was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire — has often come to mind when I think about the contemporary state of public international law. For all its lofty aspirations, it is frequently neither truly public, nor reliably international, nor consistently law. It is public only in the sense that it concerns states rather than private actors; international only insofar as sovereigns consent to be bound; and law only to the extent that it can be enforced — an increasingly fragile proposition in a world where power, not principle, is again determining outcomes.

The erosion of an edifice of norms

Over the last century and a half, humanity painstakingly constructed an edifice of norms, treaties and institutions meant to restrain the worst impulses of states. From the Hague Conventions to the Geneva Conventions, from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), from human rights covenants to arms-control regimes, the international community sought to replace the anarchy of the past with a rules-based order. Yet, in recent years, that order has been fraying at an alarming pace. Across continents and conflicts, states have violated foundational principles with impunity, eroding the credibility of the very system meant to protect global peace and stability.

The most fundamental of these principles is the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force and its guarantee of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran in 2026 stand as the starkest breaches of this norm in decades: an unprovoked assault on a sovereign state, justified through dubious claims and enforced through overwhelming military might. Both invasions confirmed that the Charter's core promise could be shredded when a powerful state chose to do so.

The U.S. and Russian records are equally deplorable in disregarding the prohibition on force. The 2003 Iraq invasion, undertaken without Security Council authorisation and justified on grounds later proven baseless, remains one of the most consequential breaches of the Charter that set a precedent for Russia's conduct. More recently, the targeted killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran have raised serious questions about the erosion of the norm against unilateral force. Israel's repeated military operations in Gaza and Lebanon, including large-scale bombardments causing extensive civilian casualties, have also drawn widespread allegations of disproportionate force and violations of international humanitarian law.

The pattern is not confined to major powers. Turkey's incursions into northern Syria,



Shashi Tharoor

Fourth-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram (Congress party), the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 29 books, including 'Pax Indica' (2012) and 'The New World Disorder' (2020)

Brazen actions across the world

International humanitarian law has also suffered grievous violations. In Syria, the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, and siege tactics have been extensively documented. Non-state actors such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and various militias have committed atrocities on a massive scale. In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi rebels alike have been accused of targeting civilians, hospitals, and critical infrastructure. In Ethiopia's Tigray region, reports of mass killings, sexual violence, and starvation as a weapon of war have shocked the conscience of the world.

Human rights treaties, too, have been flouted with increasing brazenness. Israel's indiscriminate killing of civilians in Gaza and China's treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang — including mass detention, forced labour, and cultural erasure — have been described by several governments and scholars as crimes against humanity. Myanmar's military junta has carried out systematic abuses against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, prompting genocide allegations. In Iran, the violent suppression of protests following the death of Mahsa Amini revealed a pattern of extrajudicial killings and torture. Even democratic states have not been immune: the U.S.'s use of torture during the "war on terror", Australia's offshore detention of asylum seekers, and Europe's pushbacks of migrants in the Mediterranean have all raised serious legal and moral concerns. Arms-control regimes have also weakened. The collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the erosion of the Open Skies

Imperfect though it may be, the rules-based order remains humanity's strongest defence against chaos

Treaty, and the uncertain future of the New START agreement have revived fears of a new arms race. North Korea continues to defy UN resolutions with missile tests and nuclear development.

Iran's nuclear programme, once constrained by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has allegedly accelerated following the agreement's unravelling. These developments threaten to undo decades of painstaking progress in nuclear restraint.

Environmental law, too, has suffered. States have failed to meet their commitments under the Paris Agreement, with emissions rising and climate targets slipping out of reach. Illegal deforestation in the Amazon, often abetted by state actors, violates international norms on biodiversity and environmental protection. Deep-sea mining, pursued without adequate regulation, threatens fragile marine ecosystems.

There is a vacuum

What ties these disparate violations together is not merely their frequency but their impunity. International law depends on consent, reciprocity, and enforcement through collective mechanisms. Yet, the Security Council is paralysed by geopolitical rivalries; the International Criminal Court faces accusations of bias and lacks jurisdiction over major powers; and treaty bodies often rely on voluntary compliance. In this vacuum, states increasingly act as though power, not principle, determines legality. Thucydides' bleak observation — "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must" — resonates today with unsettling clarity. When powerful states violate international law without consequence, they signal to others that norms are optional and that might is right. The result is a world sliding back toward the law of the jungle.

This is not merely a philosophical concern. The erosion of international law has tangible consequences: conflicts become harder to resolve, civilians bear the brunt of violence, global commons are degraded, and trust between nations evaporates. The rules-based order, imperfect as it is, remains humanity's best defence against chaos.

The challenge in reaffirming the value of international law is that it requires strengthening multilateral institutions, enhancing accountability mechanisms, and cultivating a global political culture that prizes restraint over adventurism. It also requires recognising that international law is not a panacea but a framework — a set of shared expectations that guide behaviour even when perfect compliance is elusive. Without it, the world risks returning to a state where power alone determines outcomes. And in such a world, it is not only the weak who suffer; ultimately, everyone does.

'Off with their heads' — the purge of Republican dissenters

Foreign observers, including Indians often question why the Republicans do not question or stymie United States President Donald Trump's controversial policies. The answer lies in Indian-style "high command" politics, where legislators who cheer the party boss are routinely denied electoral tickets and sidelined.

For decades, the U.S. boasted a system allowing local grassroots voters, rather than central party elites, to choose candidates. Today, however, the American Republican Party is undergoing a radical transformation that mirrors this hierarchical structure. The transformation was on full display in Kentucky's fourth congressional district, where Mr. Trump has successfully orchestrated the political defeat of one of his own lawmakers, Congressman Thomas Massie, after a brutal \$32-million-proxy war that became a referendum on loyalty within the Republican Party.

The culture of fear

To comprehend this clash, one must understand why American Republicans fear crossing Mr. Trump. Defying him carries a career-ending penalty; just days ago, Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy, who voted to impeach Trump in 2021, was decisively ousted in his State's primary election. As Senator Lindsey Graham trailblazingly observed on American television, those who attempt to oppose Mr. Trump face certain political destruction. Mr. Trump commands an iron grip on the Republican base. For a U.S. lawmaker, a single angry tweet can instantly dry up campaign funding and turn lifelong supporters into vocal opponents.

Yet, Thomas Massie steadfastly refused to yield. An eccentric, 55-year-old MIT-trained engineer and libertarian, Mr. Massie has represented Kentucky in the House since 2012. A staunch conservative who entered politics through the Tea Party movement, he lives off-the-grid in a self-built solar-powered house



Anil Raman

Retired Brigadier and a research fellow in the Geopolitics Programme of Takshashila Institution

The Trumpian targeting of Republican dissenters, along with growing inner-party feuds, has consequences for America and India alike

and remains deeply popular locally. His defining trait is a stubborn, often contrarian, insistence on absolute constitutional consistency. He consistently votes independently of party leadership, earning a reputation as Washington's premier renegade.

During Trump's second administration, Mr. Massie has emerged as a persistent thorn in the executive's side. He voted against Mr. Trump's signature "One Big Beautiful Bill", arguing that it would explode the national debt and fuel inflation.

He further irritated the administration by successfully spearheading a bipartisan push to compel the government to release the unredacted Jeffrey Epstein files. Most critically, as a staunch anti-interventionist, Mr. Massie has vocalised fierce opposition to the escalating U.S.-backed military conflict with Iran, warning that foreign engagements drain American resources.

The Trumpian backlash

On Truth Social, the President branded Mr. Massie as a "Third Rate Congressman" and the "worst and most unreliable Republican Congressman in history." To orchestrate his defeat, Mr. Trump hand-picked Ed Gallrein, a retired Navy SEAL, to challenge Mr. Massie in the primary. The environment became so toxic that Mr. Trump even threatened to back primary challenges against other popular Republicans, such as Lauren Boebert, simply for travelling to Kentucky to campaign on Mr. Massie's behalf.

Mr. Trump's campaign was bolstered by powerful external allies. The race became a \$32-million blitzkrieg largely due to the pro-Israel lobby — specifically the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), alongside conservative billionaires Miriam Adelson and Paul Singer. Because Mr. Massie opposed U.S. military action against Iran and routinely voted against foreign aid packages, AIPAC flooded Kentucky with \$9 million in attack ads, framing him as an adversary of Israel. Mr. Massie retaliated by

introducing a bill to force AIPAC lobbyists to register as foreign agents under the Department of Justice, framing the election as a referendum on whether foreign lobbies can dictate terms to American lawmakers.

Why this matters for U.S. politics

Indians, from the IT parks of Bengaluru to the residents of Poonth on the Line of Control, must pay close attention to this development as its outcome has profound consequences for American governance and global stability.

Mr. Massie lost. His defeat demonstrates that even immense local popularity and principled conservatism may no longer be sufficient to shield a lawmaker from executive wrath. The result sends a clear message across the Republican Party: opposition to Mr. Trump carries potentially fatal political consequences. For aspiring lawmakers, loyalty increasingly matters more than independence.

The Republican Party's transformation into a more centralised political structure is therefore no longer a possibility but an observable reality. Mr. Massie's defeat suggests that ideological dissent, even from a conservative with impeccable Republican credentials, can trigger a coordinated campaign involving the White House, influential donors and powerful interest groups.

For India, which relies on a stable, predictable and democratic American foreign policy, a U.S. Congress stripped of robust internal checks and balances represents a dangerous prospect. As authority becomes increasingly concentrated, foreign and domestic policy alike become more dependent on the preferences of a narrower political circle.

The Massie case serves as a stark reminder that the principal challenge facing American democracy may lie not merely in partisan conflict between Republicans and Democrats, but in the shrinking space for disagreement within one of the country's two major political parties.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Power shift

Karnataka's citizens voted for a stable five-year government, not a game of musical chairs at Vidhana Soudha (Front page, "Power shift in Karnataka as Siddaramaiah resigns", May 29). The State is navigating crucial economic pressures and public infrastructure

demands. With a new Chief Minister at the helm, the administration must urgently move beyond internal party politics and focus on governance. For the Indian National Congress party to regain its past glory, its leadership must undertake rigorous and unsparring introspection. It should

begin with Karnataka. **Kshirasagara Balaji Rao,** Hyderabad

Crisis in education

The recurring turmoil around NEET leaks, glitches in the CBSE's online evaluation systems and the clumsy handling of the three-language formula expose a deeper malaise in

India's education governance: an archaic bureaucracy insulated from the anxieties of students. Policies affecting millions of impressionable young minds are drafted in administrative files, with little thought to psychological consequences or ground realities. India's education apparatus

remains excessively centralised, rule-bound and obsessed with compliance over empathy. A generation pitted in a hyper-competitive ecosystem cannot be managed through dated bureaucratic reflexes. Educational governance needs more academic leadership, technological

competence and emotional intelligence. When systems repeatedly fail students, the problem ceases to be technical. It becomes institutional indifference. **R. Narayanan,** Navi Mumbai

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

GROUND ZERO



Ningbo, a port city in southern Zhejiang province, around 200 kilometres south of Shanghai, is a key hub for China's booming Electric Vehicles industry. GETTY IMAGES

Inside China's green transition

Ningbo, in southern Zhejiang province of China, was once a historic maritime hub shaped by Buddhist culture and trade. It has now emerged as a key hub for showcasing China's green industrial push, where electric vehicles, advanced manufacturing, and tightly integrated supply chains are powering the country's bid for global leadership in the technologies of the future. **Ananth Krishnan** reports from the port city

Living at the foothills of the Mao mountains in southern China, the Temple of King Ashoka is one of the main attractions in Ningbo, a port city in southern Zhejiang province, around 200 kilometres south of Shanghai. Hymns fill the courtyards of the massive temple complex, which is largely empty on a busy weekday.

The temple's history goes back to more than 1,700 years, when it was built during the Western Jin Dynasty. It is one of the 19 Ashoka stupas constructed in China as Buddhism spread. In Ningbo, Buddhist culture, coupled with a long tradition of maritime commerce, has been an important part of the city's history since the 7th century Tang Dynasty, when it emerged as a major port.

Today, the city has emerged at the heart of a different kind of global commerce. It is a key hub for China's booming Electric Vehicles (EV) industry, where new energy automobiles are manufactured in sprawling, modern factories and then exported around the world.

'A future factory'

"The future is our history," reads the sign above the entrance to the factory of Zeekr, a high-end EV brand headquartered in Ningbo and part of Chinese automaker, the Geely Auto Group. Geely also manufactures Volvo Cars, having acquired the company from Ford in 2010, and luxury Lotus autos, after garnering a controlling stake in the British automaker in 2017. EVs have become central to Geely's future. The group sold close to 1.7 million EVs in 2025, a stunning 90% rise from the previous year.

In China, Zeekr is the group's flagship product in this space. Zeekr's cars that roll off the assembly line in Ningbo are transported across China and shipped to Europe and Southeast Asia, its two biggest overseas markets. The Ningbo plant, company representative Zhang Ting says, has been dubbed "a future factory".

It is not hard to see why. The factory floor is a scene out of Star Wars. Automated yellow robotic transports that look like toy cars whizz around the factory floor. One beeps in protest as it brushes up against my feet. Frames of yet-to-be-completed EV cars descend from massive yellow platforms onto the assembly line, where the only humans on site are inspectors checking them for flaws. "Around 60-70% of the work is done by robots," Zhang says. There are still some 2,300 people working in this factory, where the EVs are assembled into their final form. The welding factory, also in Zhejiang, is completely autonomous.

A dashboard notes that as of 4 p.m. on a recent afternoon, 366 cars had rolled off the production line, somewhat below the maximum daily capacity of 1,300. The reason, one Zeekr executive explains, is an intended nimbleness. The quick turnaround time allows the company to follow a model where it only manufactures cars for which it has already received a confirmed order.

Zeekr's "future factory" was the result of a 10 billion RMB (\$1.47 billion) investment. At every turn, the emphasis is on "green." One live dashboard measures the factory's carbon footprint at any given minute, including the electricity and water use per vehicle, and the savings from a



Meaningful competition lies in capabilities, technology, and systems. It is not only about price.

HE XIAOPENG
Founder, Xpeng Motors

waste heat recovery system designed to be energy-efficient. This year, the savings have so far amounted to the equivalent of the annual gas consumption of 736 Chinese households.

On top of the 'green charts'

Going green appears to have become an obsession in Zhejiang, a province in China's southern manufacturing heartland that played a key role in the country's reform and opening period starting in the 1980s.

Wang Hao, an official from the provincial government, reels off statistics showing the province at the top of China's 'green charts'. Zhejiang's PM 2.5 particulate air pollution fell last year to an average slightly under 25 — "like Europe," says another official. Last year, the province notched two other landmarks: renewables, for the first time, accounted for 50% of total installed energy capacity; and 100% of the surface water met national standards, following a massive campaign to crack down on industrial waste.

Across the city from the sleek Zeekr factory is a symbol of China's past — the towering smoke stacks of the Ningbo Iron and Steel Company, or Ningang, one of China's oldest and biggest steel producers. Local officials cite the company's story as a snapshot of China's green transition — and how Beijing spent billions in overhauling older polluting industries and holding them to stricter emission standards.

At Ningang, around 4 billion RMB (\$588 million) was spent on "more than 100 emission renovation projects," says Yang Zhenzhu, a representative of the company. Many of these were aimed at reducing emissions and more efficiently recycling the waste water from steel production. Today, the company hosts visitors from companies around China, who come to study it as a model of change.

The first stop on the Ningang tour for visitors, who are separated from burning hot furnaces carrying golden, molten iron by thin glass walls, is an elaborate water treatment arrangement. All of the water that is used is recycled, coming from the city's major wastewater treatment plant. This water is piped to Ningang's own treatment station for further treatment, and the excess is desalinated and reused. Zero solid waste is allowed to leave the factory. Waste containing iron and carbon is treated at another

treatment facility and reused.

Pollution remains a serious problem in China. Even in Beijing, despite the undeniable progress — "apocalypse" days that were regular in the winters of Beijing a decade ago are now far less common — maintaining clean skies is a continuing battle. One clear takeaway from Zhejiang is that the green transition neither came easily, nor for free. Indeed, it required serious and sustained investment on the one hand, and no-nonsense policing and enforcement on the other.

Corruption is rarely spoken of in the context of pollution. Yet, Chinese officials often point to how, in the past, lax enforcement was a huge challenge. Bribes to local officials to look the other way were a common phenomenon. But a crackdown on corruption over the past decade has changed that. It is much harder for polluting factories to pay their way out of punishments for violating standards, while "big data" is being deployed to track factories in real time.

If investment and enforcement have been two key pillars of China's green transformation, technology is a third. Chinese companies making EVs, batteries, and solar panels are in an apparent unending race to come up with technologies that are more efficient and cheaper. Technology, more than cost, explains China's dominance of the global EV market, says He Xiaopeng, who is the founder of another Chinese EV player, Xpeng Motors, a competitor of Zeekr's. "Meaningful competition lies in capabilities, technology and systems. It is not only about price," he says.

China accounted for around 60% of all global EV sales, according to the International Energy Agency's (IEA) Global EV Outlook 2024. Its dominance in batteries is starker, with China controlling 76% of global lithium-ion battery cell manufacturing, giving its firms a major cost advantage, according to Bloomberg data. Solar photovoltaics are a similar story. To give a sense of the scale, China in 2023 commissioned as many PVs as the rest of the world did, estimated the IEA. China's overwhelming presence in the critical minerals industry underpins its dominance of supply chains, with the country processing 90% of rare earth elements, and 60-70% of lithium and cobalt, which are key for manufacturing batteries.

Indeed, China's proposition to the world is "a complete supply chain", says Qian Zhimin, who is Deputy Director of China's Committee on Pop-



The fact is that energy security and green transition is not a binary choice for us but a strategic pathway on which both complement each other.

QIAN ZHIMIN
Deputy Director of China's Committee on Population, Resources and Environment.

ulation, Resources and Environment.

For Chinese policymakers, the ongoing crisis in West Asia has only further driven home the urgency of green transformation and the advantages of diversifying energy sources. "Today, energy security and green transition are converging," Qian says. "The recent tensions [in West Asia], and the tensions we are seeing in maritime routes like the Strait of Hormuz, mean traditional energy systems continue to face strong external shocks. So green transition is now a practical choice to enhance energy security and self-reliance in a complex external environment. And China offers a complete supply chain."

Impact on the world

If China sees its "complete" supply chain as a strategic advantage, for the rest of the world, dependence on China in these industries of the future is a cause for concern. China's cost competitiveness and technological edge may be enablers of green transformations, but the other side of the equation is the enormous impact of Chinese imports on companies in these sectors around the world that are struggling to stay afloat. The European Union (EU) is a case in point.

The EU, along with Southeast Asia, has more than any other region opened up to Chinese EV and renewable energy companies. China's exports, warned a February 2026 report from an advisory body to the French government, were "affecting the core of Europe's industrial strongholds: automotive, batteries, industrial equipment, chemicals, and others."

"On average, nearly a quarter of European exports is currently exposed to Chinese competition that we deem critical," it said. "On the domestic market, up to 55% of European manufacturing output could be threatened over the medium term if current trends persist. This proportion varies significantly across countries: it reaches around 70% in Germany, 60% in Italy, 50% in Spain and 36% in France," the report added, noting that in 2024, the EU imported €11.1 billion worth of solar panels, €2.9 billion of liquid biofuels, and €0.5 billion worth of wind turbines from extra-EU countries, totalling about €14.5 billion in imports of green energy products. China accounted for 98% of these imports.

Fearing the prospect of "accelerated deindustrialisation", the report said the cost gap estimated by European companies with regard to China was 30-40%. It cited PVs as an early indicator of what may come in other sectors. Since the mid-2000s, when China began massive investments in solar, its growth had led to "a near-monopoly situation for China in photovoltaics" with market share "exceeding 80% across all segments of the value chain."

Leadership on climate change

For much of the Global South, however, China is seen as offering the prospect of an affordable green transformation — a proposition that, many countries note, the West has been unable to compete with, even as the U.S. withdraws from global leadership on climate change. "China is a leader in this area not for no reason," said Fazle Najeeb, who is the Maldives Ambassador in Beijing and was recently in Ningbo along with the country's Minister of State for Climate Change, Environment and Energy, Mohamed Faiz, at a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation green forum convened by China, reflecting its global ambitions in the sector. "China's leadership is undeniable, whether or not others are withdrawing from issues such as climate change that have a huge bearing on countries like us."

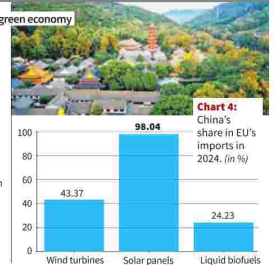
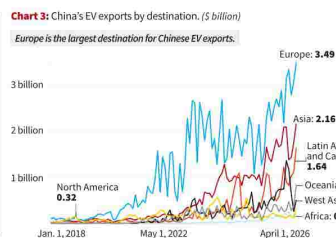
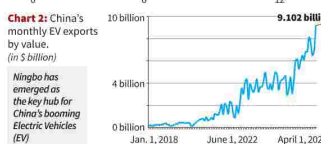
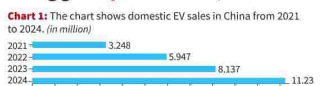
The Maldives, for instance, is clear about seeking opportunities from China, including for its landmark RasMale project, an initiative pushed by President Mohamed Muizzu, which envisages building a zero-carbon safe island on 1,153 hectares of reclaimed land.

Najeeb says, "We are requesting China to work with us to make this island a future city powered by renewable energy entirely, with electric cars and no fossil fuels. Right now, we spend around 33% of our GDP on fossil fuels. We would like to change this."

Maldives is among the many countries in the midst of energy shortages. The Iran crisis, Qian notes, has driven home the lesson that renewable energy "reduces vulnerability to fluctuations in international oil price and enhances economic resilience." He points out that coal still accounts for 52% of primary energy consumption in China and 56% in India. "The fact is that energy security and green transition is not a binary choice for us," he says, "but a strategic pathway on which both complement each other."

ananth.krishnan@thehindu.co.in

Rising green powerhouse | China's EV sales, exports and clean energy trade have soared, making it a dominant force in the global green economy



SOURCE: EMBER'S DATA EXPLORER, EUROSTAT AND THE INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

On fertiliser, Centre and states must align policy

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi wants Indian farmers to cut consumption of chemical fertilisers by 25-50 per cent, in order to conserve precious foreign exchange as well as protect the long-term fertility of Indian soils. However, the governments in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are doing the opposite. All three — many more may follow — have decreed that manufacturers and suppliers of subsidised fertilisers such as urea and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) cannot sell nutrient products where no government subsidy or price controls are in place. In other words, fertiliser companies can sell only those products whose usage is being discouraged by the Modi government. They have been banned from selling any bio, nano, water-soluble and liquid specialty fertilisers or micronutrients and bio-stimulants.

The ban orders are not only an example of the Centre and states working at cross purposes, but also of doing business going into reverse. Most of the non-subsidised nutrient products being marketed by the likes of Ifco, Coromandel International and Yara Fertilisers are applied in low doses for high-value crops such as grapes, apple and pomegranate. Moreover, they are notified under the Centre's Fertiliser Control Order after field trials for bio-efficacy and toxicology conducted by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. What incentive would companies have now to innovate and introduce such products that can deliver nutrients more efficiently either straight into the plant's root zone via drip irrigation or onto leaves by foliar application? If the Modi government is serious about weaning away farmers from urea and DAP — whose applied nutrients are more prone to volatilisation, leaching or locking in soils than being available for uptake by crops — it should crack down on states that are sending contrary signals to the industry and farmers alike.

India has enough land, water and sunshine for growing crops. But that's not the case with fertilisers, where it is overwhelmingly import-dependent. In 2025-26, the country's imports of fertiliser inputs and products were valued at about \$272 billion. The unresolved West Asia conflict and closure of the Strait of Hormuz could result in that bill even surpassing the 2022-23 high of \$334 billion post Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The current crisis is both a moment of reckoning and an opportunity to transform the existing product-specific fertiliser subsidy regime into an expanded PM-Kisan 2.0 direct income support programme. When fertiliser prices are market-determined, farmers will start using the right nutrients in the required quantities for their crops. And they will be enabled even more when guaranteed a minimum income per acre per crop.

Meanwhile, Israel goes on with its wrecking ball

IN a clear violation of the October 2025 Donald Trump-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday that he had ordered the military to take control of 70 per cent of Gaza, where the population is crammed into the little territory that remains habitable. That Israel was not abiding by the ceasefire had been evident from its continued strikes on Gaza even as West Asia was engulfed by the Iran war. Yet it is difficult not to wonder if Netanyahu's decision to escalate further at this particular moment, serves his political objectives ahead of the country's first elections since Hamas's horrific October 7, 2023 terror attack.

The past few weeks have not gone Netanyahu's way. Tel Aviv has largely been sidelined in the talks between Tehran and Washington aimed at ending a war that the US and Israel jointly endorsed. Trump and Netanyahu's tense phone call a few days ago underscored their differing approaches to Iran, an inevitable divergence given the war's growing unpopularity in the US and the mounting political costs for Netanyahu's administration. Netanyahu's apparent pursuit of eternal war follows a familiar script: Prolong conflict for political self-preservation and to defer domestic accountability for the October 7 security failure. In more than two years, Israel has failed to achieve its stated objective of destroying Hamas, even as it has killed at least 75,000 civilians and reduced Gaza to dust and ashes.

When Trump emerged as the unlikely peacemaker in Gaza, there was a sense of optimism about resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. Announcing his 20-point plan and the "Board of Peace", the US president had declared, "The people of Gaza have suffered long enough. The time is NOW." Since then, however, Israel's repeated violations of the ceasefire have effectively shredded the plan, while the peace board is yet to receive any of the billions of dollars pledged by donors. Peace in Gaza requires Israeli restraint and an institutional credibility capable of assuaging Palestinian fears. Netanyahu's latest order does precisely the opposite. And the one man who claims he can make the Israel-PM do "whatever I want him to do" has turned a blind eye.

With a little help from Paul McCartney

AT THE AGE of 83, Paul McCartney has produced his 18th solo LP. Is this what human striving looks like in the age of the algorithm? No doubt McCartney's creative energy has always been close to superhuman. It is evident in the sheer depth, volume and imaginative leaps of the Lennon-McCartney songbook as well as the prodigiousness of the musician's post-Beatles output. But long before AI-generated music started sneaking onto Spotify playlists, McCartney was combining this immense talent with hard work to create an important chunk of the music on which the technology was trained. The lesson here is twofold. The first applies specifically to this moment in history when the machine is being used to take over every creative bastion — witness the fear whipped up by the allegations that a Commonwealth Prize recipient this year used AI. The anxiety is understandable: Technology can now "write" books, "compose" music, "paint" pictures and "make" films. As it gets more sophisticated, what was once passable may even become genuinely interesting. Yet, McCartney's persistence in doing what he has always done reminds us that creativity is not so much about the outcome as it is about the process itself.

The second lesson is that persistence matters as much as ability. In Peter Jackson's documentary *The Beatles: Get Back*, which covers the making of *Let It Be*, the Fab Four's final studio album, the viewer watches the band almost break up. In the end, it's not just chemistry that keeps them together; it's also McCartney's stubborn belief in the work itself, in the insistence that they show up, regardless of personal and creative differences to "go through the bad bit and get to the good bit".

India, US: From estranged to engaged to restrained democracies

IT WAS AN American diplomat, Dennis Kux, who famously termed the United States and India "estranged democracies" during the Cold War era. The historic India-US civil nuclear energy agreement, authored by President George Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was seen as converting them into "engaged democracies". That honeymoon is not viewed any longer as having lasted more than a decade. President Donald Trump, it is widely believed, has downgraded a "strategic partnership", what President Barack Obama called the "defining partnership of the 21st century", to a purely transactional relationship.

The recent visit of US Secretary of State Marco Rubio is being interpreted as an attempt to reduce the transactionalism and return to a more "strategic" relationship based on "geopolitical" convergence. However, it bears mentioning that even this "convergence" of interests is defined by transactionalism.

The fact is that the so-called India-US strategic partnership was always based on a transactional foundation. Several quid pro quos defined the terms of negotiations of the nuclear deal. India's willingness to sign on to "A New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship" in June 2005 was the key that opened the door to negotiations on a nuclear deal.

The framework established a Defence Policy Group that would, as the agreement stated, "expand two-way defence trade between our countries. The United States and India will work to conclude defence transactions, not solely as ends in and of themselves, but as a means to strengthen our countries' security, reinforce our strategic partnership, achieve greater interaction between our armed forces, and build greater understand-

ing between our defence establishments."

The intention was to secure an opening-up of the Indian defence market to US business, reducing India's dependence on Russia. Going beyond this commitment, India was required to reduce dependence on oil imports from Iran and Venezuela. The US establishment drove a hard bargain that finally required a presidential veto to get the agreement signed. Credit must go to Bush for taking a long-term view of India's economic rise and restricting the element of transactionalism in the partnership.

Bush viewed India's rise as a global public good and in itself serving US strategic interests. Trump updated that perspective when he made the relationship mainly transactional. Whatever the rhetoric that now fills up new documents signed by the two governments, the fact is that the US establishment is no longer willing to give India a free pass.

This is itself disturbing. What has come to hurt the relationship is the fact that the US has taken steps unmindful of the consequences for India. The unilateral actions on the trade front, the support to Israel in destabilising the Gulf, pushing oil and gas prices up and reducing access to these, and the new relationship with Pakistan all have adverse geopolitical and geo-economic consequences for India.

The weaponisation of trade, finance and energy flows by the US, with its allies playing second fiddle, has deeply hurt Indian economic interests, impacting India's economic rise, and as a consequence, its national security and global standing. Barely two years ago, the New Delhi establishment was celebrating India's emergence as the world's third-largest econ-



SANJAYA BARU

Whatever the rhetoric that now fills up new documents signed by the two governments, the fact is that the US establishment is no longer willing to give India a free pass

omy. As a consequence of both domestic and global developments, India has slipped back to the sixth rank.

A naive hope is being expressed by some that the extensive people-to-people relationship between the two democracies will somehow help secure the relationship. It is time for a reality check with respect to the role of the so-called diaspora in the bilateral relationship. It is true that in the 1990s and early 2000s the Indian American community did play a facilitating role in strengthening the bilateral partnership. However, evidence today suggests that two aspects of the diaspora have come to limit its positive role.

As I have elaborated in my recent book, *Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India*, the Indian American community, especially second- and third-generation immigrants, have become an integral part of MAGA — making America great again. Their role in "making India great" is increasingly limited as elite emigration has come to define exit from India to the West.

While Indian political leadership and media celebrate the achievements of high-profile Indian Americans, it should be remembered that they are now increasingly American and less Indian. They have become an important part of the engine of American economic resurgence. As US Congressman Jim Himes put it candidly, Indian Americans are "a secret weapon for (American) economic growth".

Second, people-to-people contact means little when larger geopolitical and national interests are in play and define Trump's "America First" policy. Despite all the visible nationalism of overseas Indians, on display every time Prime Minister Narendra Modi

travels abroad, non-resident Indians (NRIs) have become "non-returning Indians". Moreover, the communalisation of the Indian diaspora and growing Western concerns about the direction of Indian domestic politics, with implications for minority rights, have also come to limit the so-called "soft power" of the diaspora.

It is time for Indian policymakers and analysts to come to terms with the reality of a fundamental shift away from the "strategic partnership", which defined the move from "estrangement" to "engagement" at the turn of the century and in the first decade-and-a-half, to the more "what is in for me" transactionalism that has come to define a restrained relationship.

It is just as well that External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar defined India's approach to the new realities of the world as "multi-alignment". The full meaning and implications of multi-alignment appear not to have sunk into the minds of analysts and media. If actions taken by both the US and China are hurting Indian economic interests, then Indian policy must be based on a recognition of this fact. Neither power is going to help build India as a third pole of the global economy.

Addressing the Constituent Assembly in December 1949, Jawaharlal Nehru famously said that India's foreign policy would have to be defined by her economic policy and interests. The Modi government's policy of *amanibharata* is defined by the same approach. India's external relationships must once again give precedence to our national economic interests and not be defined only by concerns about defence and security.

The writer is former editor, The Financial Express and was media advisor to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

Go gently into the night, Bashir sahab



RAKSHANDA JALIL

IKNEW Bashir Badr as a child. He was my grandfather's student and was unfailingly kind to us children when we visited our grandparents' home in Lahore, offering us lollipops in little tin boxes and chocolates in shiny wrappers, and on one memorable occasion, even taking us to watch a movie at the city's iconic Tasveer Mahal.

Writing this, I am reminded of another luminous memory from those halcyon days of Bashir Badr reciting his poetry at university *mushairas* at the Kennedy Hall. Long before I could fully understand the import of his words, it was his *tarannum*, the slightly nasal twang with which he recited his poetry, and the unfailingly cheerful look he seemed to sport on the dais as though he quite enjoyed being a poet, that made an impact on my young mind.

This shir in particular wafts through my mind redolent with the scents of summers past as childhood memories often are: *Meri muthhi mein hain kuchhi sookhe se phool/Jinki khushbunah hain chura le gayi* (In my hand I hold some dried flowers/Whose fragrance has been stolen by the breeze).

It might not be an exaggeration to say that Bashir Badr was the last of the great modern Urdu poets from India along with Shahjahan and Nida Fazli.

Modern in tone and sensibility, accessible in metaphors and images yet grounded in a rigorous classical tradition, he was equally popular on the *mushaira* circuit as he was admired through the beauty of the written word.

Born in Ayodhya in 1935, he had been suffering from a prolonged illness and hadn't been seen or heard in public for some time. Yet, such is the impact of his powerful yet simple words that his poetry has consistently remained relevant.

Honoured with the Padma Shri and awarded by the UP Urdu Academy four times and once by the Bihar Urdu Academy, he was also bestowed with the Meer Akbar Award.

A teacher of Urdu for 17 years at Meerut College, he was away from the limelight for many years yet remained a voice of our time. In a life marked by hardship where success was tardy and setbacks many, he once read that life had dealt him a poor hand: *Zindagi tu ne mujhe qabr se kum di hai/zameen/Paanv phalaatun to deewar mein sar lagta hai* (Life, you've given me even less space than a grave/When I stretch my legs my head strikes the wall).

When his house was looted and burnt down in the horrific communal riots of 1987 in Meerut, he left the city and built a new life in Bhopal.

He also found a wellspring of courage and compassion from deep within to tell his countrymen: *Saat sadaqun mein bharkar dafni kar do na/fratein/Aaj insaan ko mohabbat ki zarurat hai bahut* (Stuff all the hatred in seven boxes and bury it deep/Today, humans need love more than anything else).

And also: *Naye daur ke naye khaab hain naye musaamon ke gulaab hain/Ye mohabbaton ke charaagh hain thein nafrat ki hawa na de* (These are new dreams of a new age, new robes of a new season/These are lamps of love; don't stir them with the breeze of hatred).

Whether it was a political statement or a personal one, there was always a simplicity and a directness in his poetry as here: *Nam hosh mein ho na hum hosh mein hain/Chalo mai-kademein waheen baat hogi* (Neither are you in your senses, nor am I let's go to the tavern; we will talk there).

And then there is this shir, my personal favourite: *Ujalle aprni yaadon ke humare saath rahne do/Nu jaane kis gani mein zindagi ki shaam ho jae* (Leave the light of your memories with me/Who knows when the night might fall).

Go gently into the night, Bashir sahab, in the light of happy memories.

Jalalee is a Delhi-based writer, translator and literary historian

Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, the superhero Bihar never had



PRITISH RAJ

I GREW up in a very small town in Bihar. A town termed "rural" by English newspapers and "pichhda" by the Hindi ones. We had basic facilities, but to dream big, you had to leave home, sometimes as early as 10 years old. While one had a choice of sports, the other had to make the ultimate Bihar thirist trap — civil service. Sports was a distant dream, often killed in examination halls and coaching centres. There were several reasons, and a major one was the lack of a sporting hero. Maharashtra had cricketer god Sachin Tendulkar and hockey's magician Dhyanraj Pillay, Delhi had wrestling king Sushil Kumar, Haryana and Punjab had sporting heroes for every generation.

Neighbouring Bengal had the prince of cricket, Sourav Ganguly; UP had magical hockey striker Mohammed Shahid, Odisha had Dilip Tirkey, South India produced sporting heroes in bulk with the likes of Rahul Dravid, PT Usha, and Anil Kumar.

Bihar kids of the 2000s and 2010s were huge sports fans and claimed MS Dhoni, but in truth, they had no sporting hero of their own. By the early 2010s, Bihar had all kinds of heroes: Revolutionaries, civil service officers, poets, journalists, academics, criminals, scamsters, fraud politicians, but not a sporting one. Given the history of Bihar, especially the years rife with crime and corruption, a sporting hero would probably have been good for the youth.

In 2026, when the world had shrunk enough to fit on a smartphone screen, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi emerged. The 15-year-old isn't just the talk of the town but the global cricket conversation. And guess what? He is from Bihar. And he is selling jerseys and filling stadiums. A sports person who is Bihar's own, unlike others who had to move to different states to move up the ladder. Not that this makes them any less Bihar, but you get the gist. Now, a kid in Bihar can look up to Sooryavanshi and think, "I can get there". For parents, he can become a point of reference. Growing up, sporting excellence stories would happen in faraway lands. Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore won a silver medal at the Olympics. Abhinav Bindra won a gold, and Vijender Singh won a boxing medal. I tall looked out of reach. With the partition of Bihar and Jharkhand, the neighbouring state got all the sports centres; all that Bihar was left with was a broken ecosystem. When Shreyasi Singh, now a minister in the Bihar government, won a medal at the 2018 Commonwealth Games, there was a brief spark. When I started my career in sports journalism, I waited for when I would write a story about Bihar and lace it with local references and metaphors. With Sooryavanshi around, I believe the wait will soon be over. The beauty of having sporting heroes you can relate to is that they make greatness feel attainable, not aspirational. Sooryavanshi didn't just break records — he broke the ceiling. The superhero we never had is here, and he is just getting started.

The writer is senior sub-editor, The Indian Express. prithish.raja@expressindia.com

40 YEARS AGO May 30, 1986



Barnala rules out resignation

SURJIT SINGH Barnala said he had no intention of stepping down as Punjab CM and party president, as the two offices had been bestowed on him by the "party". Instead of demanding his ouster for the police action in the Golden Temple complex and exploiting a religious issue, the dissidents should have resigned from the Vaidhan Sabha if they felt hurt, Barnala said, addressing a huge conference organised by the Sangrur District Akali Dal.

PM on emigration from Punjab

PRIME MINISTER Rajiv Gandhi has assured Congress (I) legislators from Punjab that all possible steps would be taken to stop migration from the state. The Centre is fully

aware of the situation, he said. The Prime Minister heard the views of various groups of Punjab Congress (I) legislators and the Pradesh Congress (I) president, Beant Singh, on the situation in the state. Beant Singh and Gurinder Kaur Brar, leader of the Congress (I) group in the state assembly, met the PM separately.

Imbrogiolo in Congress-I

CONGRESS-I VICE president Arjun Singh said that the publication of the text of Congress-I working president Kamalpat Tripathi's April 22 letter to PM Rajiv Gandhi created a new situation and therefore the process of consultations on "action to be taken on the matter has been set in motion." Talking to reporters, Singh declined to elaborate on the proposed action. He refused to say whether

the consultations he had with other senior party colleagues were about the action to be taken against the working president or the contents of his letter to Gandhi. "I will not qualify action at this stage," he said.

Doctor shot as others quarrel

A YOUNG doctor from JP hospital was shot dead outside his house in Munirika in a dispute between other people. Dr Swarnendra Singh (22), an intern in the ENT department, came down after some people quarrelled with the woman living on the first floor below. As the doctor entered his car number, they shot him dead. He was murdered outside a 9-block almost opposite Jawaharlal Nehru University minutes after the ill-fated family had finished celebrating the success of his younger brother in the class X examination.

A democracy must worry about fake voters, but much more about excluded citizens



FAIZAN MUSTAFA AND MADHAV ANAND

IN *INDIRA Nehru Gandhi v Raj Narain* (1975), Chief Justice A N Ray made a strange distinction. Democracy, he held, may be part of the basic structure, but free and fair elections could not themselves be elevated to that status. But post-Emergency, in *Mohinder Singh Gill* (1978), the Court held that without periodic free and fair elections, democracy ends. In the *Gujarat Assembly Election Reference* (2002), it went further: Democracy and free and fair elections, the Court said, are "inseparable twins". Free and fair elections fundamentally depend on the independence and absolute neutrality of the Election Commission of India (ECI) as an umpire, and therefore the onus is on ECI to win over the trust of independent observers and the Opposition. Here, what matters is public perception, not law or court judgments.

A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Jaymalal Bagchi in their historic 124-page judgment has upheld the Special Intention Revision (SIR) of Bihar. No one can question the judgment's positivistic and legalistic interpretation of the black-letter laws. But in terms of consequences, which Justice Ray denied formally in 1975, the present judgment risks diluting in practice if ECI is not a neutral umpire. The problem with the SIR judgment is not that it values electoral integrity too highly but that the court did not examine the all-important issue of whether we have got such rolls or SIR. There are reports pointing to inconsistencies, and significant inaccuracies even in the revised rolls.

Justice Surya Kant correctly held that no constitutional democracy can function with duplicate, fictitious or fraudulent entries. But the judgment did not raise the equally important possibility of genuine citizens being pushed out of the democratic process in the name of so-called "purification". Did the petitioners not bring to the court some living persons who had been shown as dead? But the judgment simply stated that no rolls can be perfect

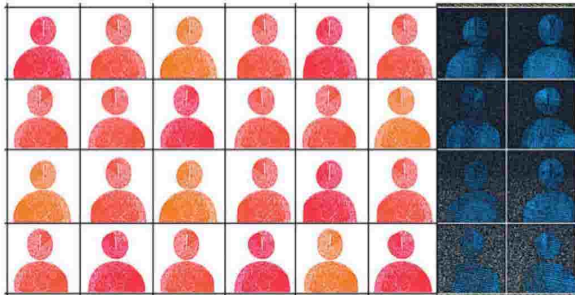


ILLUSTRATION: C P SAKSHAM

and that there was sufficient transparency in exclusion and opportunities of appeal.

Without asking the ECI to show concrete reasons, the Court accepted its justification for the statewide exercise. Section 2(3) of the Representation of the People Act contemplates special revision in "any constituency or part thereof" and Justice Surya Kant, applying the well-known rules of statutory interpretation, correctly held that "any" here would mean "all".

Justice Surya Kant's interpretation of Article 324 and 327, too, is absolutely correct as the ECI neither becomes powerless the moment Parliament enacts a law nor becomes so powerful as to go against the statute. The CJ rightly held that Parliament itself through Section 2(3) has preferred to give the ECI extremely wide powers as to SIRs through non-obstacle clauses by using the words "in such manner" and "as if [the ECI] may think fit".

The judgment upheld documentary compliance as though the burden is socially neutral. Marginalised citizens lacking documents and minorities facing heightened bureaucratic suspicion do not stand on equal footing with more privileged groups. The ECI's huge victory in the judgment was the Court upholding its list of 11 documents, but then the petitioners had argued that nearly 37 per cent of adults in Bihar lacked even one of the prescribed documents. For marginalised commu-

The CJ's assurance that exclusion from the electoral roll does not formally divest citizenship offers limited comfort as a few states have started denying benefits to the excluded people

nities, this is even more concerning. The judgment also did not seriously consider the ground realities of massive confusion, administrative inconsistency, rushed timelines, and the enormous discretion vested in low-level local officials. Evidence of BLOs filling forms themselves, missing acknowledgments, and lakhs of forms being submitted without documents find no mention in the judgment because issues were framed purely in legalistic terms and not in terms of the impact when such powers are exercised.

Ideally, the scale of exclusion itself should have invited deeper constitutional scrutiny. The final roll reportedly stood at around 742 crore electors. This was substantially lower than official population projections that suggest Bihar would have approximately 8.22 crore eligible voters. Yet, the judgment concluded that the "post-exercise data" did not reveal disenfranchisement so "widespread or systemic" as to establish constitutional infirmity.

If the citizenship concerns were so marginal in practical outcome, why did they become so central to the architecture of the exercise itself? But this approach reduced constitutional scrutiny to aggregate numbers alone. The deeper issue was not simply how many voters were excluded, but who was really excluded. The SIR was justified as necessary to identify illegal immigrants and preserve electoral integrity. The ECI did

not provide any figures of non-citizens found in the electoral rolls but reports suggest those numbers to be negligible.

Districts recording some of the highest deletions reportedly overlapped heavily with Bihar's poorest and most migration-affected regions. Muslims appeared disproportionately represented among excluded voters, especially in Seemanchal. According to one report, Muslims accounted for 32.1 per cent of exclusions across the state. Another report asserted that Muslim exclusion was not that disproportionate as it stood at 18.4 per cent. In contrast, the Hindi-majority districts recorded lower-than-average exclusions, reflecting a broader pattern where nine out of the 10 top Hindu-dominated districts were below the state average 6.05 per cent. How far there is truth in this alleged differential has not been examined by the Court. Women reportedly constituted nearly 60 per cent of exclusions.

Rule 21A in the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 regarding the ERO to form an opinion regarding deletion and provide affected electors with an opportunity of hearing. The Court held that these safeguards were "preserved in substance". Non-inclusion in the draft roll was treated merely as a temporary administrative stage rather than a substantive democratic injury.

Strictly in terms of law, the Court rightly distinguished between the formal "determination of citizenship" which belongs to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Election Commission's "administrative satisfaction regarding electoral eligibility". Justice Surya Kant's assurance that exclusion from the electoral roll does not formally divest citizenship offers only limited comfort as a few states have already started denying the benefits of welfare schemes to the excluded people. This reminds us of the havoc the Doubtful Voter category introduced by TN Seshan played in Assam. We now have millions of doubtful citizens.

The judgment is correct on questions of law as after all the SC is expected to decide cases in accordance with the law. It rarely invokes Article 142 to do "complete justice". A constitutional democracy must certainly worry about fraudulent voters. But it must worry much more about the frightened, excluded, genuine and eligible citizens.

Mustafa is an expert on constitutional law and Anand is a legal scholar at NUS, Kolkata. Views are personal

Delimitation can bring more female-urban participation



SHAMIKA RAVI

AFTER THE 2026 Census, the Lok Sabha could expand from 543 to 816 seats. Most of the discussion has focused on how the new seats will be distributed across states. We add a complementary question, drawing on our analysis of all the 2171 parliamentary constituency (PC) elections held in India since 2009: How will delimitation affect voter participation?

The 2024 general elections saw a turnout of 65.8 per cent — the second-highest of any Indian general election. However, urban turnout has been lagging. The fully built-up constituencies of Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and the NCR are touching turnout floors of 55 to 60 per cent, well below the national average. The rural-urban turnout gap, 4.4 percentage points in 2009, has gone up to 11.6 points in 2024.

Two changes have reshaped the geography of Indian voting. First, the long-observed pattern that big constituencies vote less than small ones — the "size penalty" — has vanished in the average data. In 2009, a 2-million-electors seat turned out 11 percentage points lower than a 1-million-electors one. By 2024, that gap is just 1.4 points.

Second, the divergence in Indian voting now runs along urban-rural lines, with a sharp gendered twist. The woman voter in a large rural constituency is the most engaged — turnout around 75 per cent at two-million-electors seats. The woman voter who lives in a large urban area is the least engaged — turnout falls to about 64 per cent. As constituencies grow toward 3 million electors — a frontier between Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru seats are approaching — our model projects the rural-urban gap to widen to 22 percentage points for women and 16 for men.

The polling station is the third piece of the picture. Booth crowding has always been more severe in urban constituencies than in rural ones. The EC's station expansion between 2019 and 2024 brought modest relief at the urban end. But between 2019 and 2024, the rationalisation slipped: Stations grew only 1.5 per cent against 7.2 per cent growth in electors, pushing up urban crowding. The resulting 1.28-percentage-point national turnout decline is fully accounted for by this renewed booth crowding. Booth crowding deters male voters strongly — it explains 19.5 per cent of the male size penalty in our data — but has little direct effect on women's turnout (3.4 per cent). For them, mobilisation works through different channels: Campaign, household and time-of-day flexibility, and direct engagement with collectives.

Why does all this matter for delimitation? Because the size penalty looks like it has disappeared on average, but at high urban shares, it has not. Our model predicts that a 2-million-electors constituency turns out at about 65 per cent; at 1 million electors, it predicts a turnout of about 74 per cent. Splitting a 2-million-electors urban PC into two 1-million-electors PCs would raise the turnout by roughly 9 percentage points per half. This is the strongest empirical case for the 543-to-816 expansion.

What should the delimitation agenda then look like? Put the new seats where they will actually raise turnout. The biggest gains are in the band of urban areas that runs through the suburbs of Bengaluru, Mumbai, NCR, Hyderabad, Pune, Ahmedabad and Chennai — constituencies that are 75 to 90 per cent urban, which have grown 46 per cent in electorate since 2009 (well above the 35 per cent national average) and where voters are turning out at the lowest rates. Targeted shrinkage of these large urban PCs is where the model predicts the largest turnout gains.

Build the polling station capacity ahead of a ratio of below 900 voters per booth — the level achieved after the 2018 rationalisation — has to be a goal.

Bring urban women into the participatory fold. The rural constituencies that have historically mobilised women — panchayat networks, anganwadis, self-help groups — do not extend to cities like Mumbai or Bengaluru. The right urban tools include women's canteen schemes, urban self-help-group networks under the National Urban Livelihoods Mission, women-only polling booths, and mobilisation by women councillors elected under the 74th Constitutional Amendment's reservation provision for urban local bodies.

The next delimitation will also be the moment at which the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinyam (the Women's Reservation Act) comes into force. Delimitation that creates smaller urban constituencies in the band where female turnout is currently the lowest, layered with women candidates on the ballot under the new reservation, and paired with the operational and engagement infrastructure that brings urban women to the polling station, can substantially close the urban turnout gap among women voters.

As India urbanises rapidly, the share of the electorate in metropolitan PCs will continue to rise. Whether that rising urban share translates into a falling national turnout, or into a renewed wave of female-urban participation, will be decided by what the Delimitation Commission chooses to do.

Srinivasaraju, a senior journalist, is author of *The Conscious Network: A Chronicle of Resistance to a Dictatorship*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Karnataka transition

CONGRESS RISKS repeating in Karnataka the very culture of drift that weakened it nationally ('A new Karnataka CM, a tired Congress script', *IE*, May 29). Leadership change alone cannot conceal deeper failures of governance. Bengaluru — India's technology capital — has gradually reeled under flooding, traffic paralysis, water scarcity and overstretched civic infrastructure despite the state's strong revenues. City planning remains hostage to bureaucratic fragmentation and factional politics.

Hovya Garg, Chandigarh

BY SUCCESSFULLY managing the change from Siddaramaiah to D K Shivakumar, the party leadership has shown greater maturity and decisiveness ('A new Karnataka CM, a tired Congress script', *IE*, May 29). Unlike the instability witnessed earlier in states like Punjab, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the Karnataka shift appears orderly and controlled. However, the challenge for Congress has only begun. Siddaramaiah remains a towering figure in state politics with a strong support base among backward classes, Dalits and minorities.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Athlete, administrator

THE EDITORIAL on Raja Randhir Singh fittingly highlighted his contribution to Indian sport as both athlete and administrator ('Consensus builder, and a bridge', *IE*, May 29). His role in strengthening shooting infrastructure and India's sporting presence globally laid the groundwork for future champions. It is impossible to discuss India's rise in shooting without recalling Olympic medallists like Rajyvardhan Singh Rathore and Abhinav Bindra, who emerged from an ecosystem gradually shaped by such pioneering efforts. Singh's legacy deserves recognition as part of India's larger sporting transformation.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak



RAM MADHAV

LAST SUNDAY, lakhs of tribal people from more than 500 different tribes travelled to the national capital. Their demand was for "de-listing", a constitutional process by which tribals who have converted to Christianity or Islam would be denied ST status and the benefits that accrue from it, and an amendment to Article 342 to that effect. In the 1960s, a tribal Congress MP, Kartik Oraon, first raised the issue. His contention was that those who adopted Christianity or Islam automatically cease to be tribals because they no longer follow tribal customs and traditions. He demanded the exclusion of converted tribals from the ST list. He presented a memorandum of JPC to PM Indira Gandhi, supported by 235 MPs, with a proposed amendment to Article 342. It read: "3. Notwithstanding anything contained in Paragraph 2, no person who has given up tribal faith or faiths and has embraced either Christianity or Islam shall be deemed to be a member of any Scheduled Tribes."

Indira Gandhi didn't pay much attention to the issue. In the past two decades, the Janati Suraksha Manch has championed the cause. Oraon, who served as a minister in Indira Gandhi's government, documented that barely 10 per cent of converted tribals were appropriately nearly 70 per cent of reservation

In matters relating to the ST converts, the vagueness in the constitutional provisions has led to courts taking suggestive positions rather than issuing definitive orders

benefits. As the number of converted tribals has grown — around 20 per cent today — resentment among the non-converted, too, is growing. Their argument is that converts are enjoying the benefits of both ST reservations and minority welfare programmes. At the root of this problem is a constitutional anomaly. In 1950, at the time of the enactment of the Constitution, two separate orders for SCs and STs were promulgated. The Scheduled Castes order, in paragraph 3, categorically stated that "Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste." Unfortunately, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 remained vague on the definition of tribe. Resenting this, in 2010, tribal leaders submitted a memorandum signed by 2767 lakh tribals from 26,253 villages to President Pratibha Patil, demanding the de-listing of converted tribals from the ST category.

Since there is constitutional clarity in the matter of the SCs, the courts have repeatedly said that the SC status cannot be extended to those not belonging to Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. In matters relating to the ST converts, the vagueness in the constitutional provisions has led courts to take

Who gets ST benefits, who shouldn't? Debate continues

suggestive positions rather than issue definitive orders. In 2004, the Supreme Court held that although it cannot be concluded that "merely by change of religion (a) person ceases to be a member of a Scheduled Tribe", it insisted that the matter needs to be examined case by case.

The core issue is whether, like SCs, STs can also have a clear definition. An advisory committee constituted in 1950 for the "revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" vaguely stated that STs are characterised as such "because of the life led by them". However, the Justice P B Lokur Committee, constituted in 1965-66, identified "primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness" as the basis for identifying STs.

The current demand rests on the reports of Oraon's JPC and the Lokur Committee, besides the Supreme Court's observations. This is not against any religion or conversion. The converted SCs and STs have full access to the welfare programmes available under the minority category. This demand is primarily to ensure that the traditional tribal population is not denied its legitimate rights under the Constitution's ST provisions.

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



SUGATA SRINIVASARAJU

APOWER transition is underway in the Congress government in Karnataka: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has tendered his resignation, and D K Shivakumar looks likely to take over. Whatever the rivalry between the two, the transition has taken place as smoothly as turning a page. That was quite unexpected at a quite uncharismatic Siddaramaiah.

Siddaramaiah has never responded well to losing power. He has demonstrated restlessness and recklessness when he has been denied power or lost it. This first became apparent in 1996 when he was part of the JD(S). This trait resurfaced in 2024, when he checked Shivakumar to wrest the CM's chair,

In Siddaramaiah exit, a transition and label-free politics

even though it was the latter who had led the party to a stellar victory.

Siddaramaiah seems less driven by ideology or principles, although his aggressive political branding tells a very different story. Every time he contested or led the JD(S) or Congress in an election, the claims of his wide social base were exposed by his vote share as a candidate or what he was able to get for his party. The BJP grew manifold despite Siddaramaiah's active presence in Karnataka politics. Even when Congress won big in 2023 with the novelty of "guaranteed" welfare, the BJP's vote share remained intact. A question that continues to circulate, therefore, is why he surrendered so meekly this time.

Beyond these power games and interpersonal rivalries, the transition signifies some other fundamental shifts in the larger political terrain. Congress cannot

settle for Shivakumar as the face of change, but he may lead the transition to a more universal game that the party is not entirely unfamiliar with. It is not a question of choice now; it is about the winds of political circumstance.

This universal game may not be about relying on anachronistic caste identity politics alone, but about building broader demographic coalitions, like the one we saw form suddenly and accidentally in neighbouring Tamil Nadu with Joseph Vijay's vic-

The imagination that a particular leader like Siddaramaiah or a party commands a bulk of caste votes has become a fallacy

tory. This is also a response to the broader coalition-building that the BJP has successfully done by foregrounding the Hindu vote and creating political capital around the majority community, but strategically dispensing welfare capital to all communities.

Mandal politics has suddenly become outmoded. The imagination that a particular leader like Siddaramaiah or a party commands a bulk of caste votes has become a fallacy, because the big castes have not stopped splintering as people have become more conscious of their sub-caste inheritances. In the age of sub-caste politics, caste as a category does not yield the same dividends as before. It can only be a contributing factor. Therefore, the exit of Siddaramaiah, the decline of Lulu Prasad and the dismantling of Lulu Prasad symbolise a new politics, which is

emerging as a new demographic is taking control of the political field. Shivakumar fits the transition perfectly because he is label-free, unlike Siddaramaiah.

As Shivakumar moves in, Congress may consider refining his pragmatic style into something more winnable by 2028, when Karnataka goes to the polls. Unlike Shivakumar, who has the image of an unabashed businessman, networker and money manager, Siddaramaiah branded himself as a roiled socialist, unflinchingly secular, and a saviour of backward communities. Those labels may now become glorious artefacts in an uncurated museum of politics, and wait in the margins to be fact-checked by history.

The writer is member, EAC-PM

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

TELECOM

The row over new Airtel priority tier for postpaid users

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, May 29

THIS MONTH, Bharti Airtel launched a new 'Priority Postpaid' service that will offer all its postpaid customers more consistent connectivity during periods of network congestion. This launch of this preferential service tier — using a technology called 5G 'network slicing' — has triggered debate. Should premium users (read postpaid users) be allowed preferential access to network resources? Here's a look at how 5G network slicing works and whether it violates the net neutrality principle.

What is 5G network slicing?

Network slicing is one of the defining features of standalone 5G networks. Instead of operating as a single network, where all users compete for the same pool of resources, a telecom operator can divide the network into multiple virtual 'slices', each configured for a specific purpose. Think of it as creating lanes on a highway. While the road remains the same, certain lanes can be reserved for vehicles with particular requirements.

In telecom networks, one slice can be optimised for ultra-low latency applications, another for industrial automation, another for customers seeking a more reliable consumer broadband experience, and so on.

Globally, operators in markets such as the US, UK, Singapore and South Korea have already deployed network slicing for enterprise and mission-critical applications.

So how is this different from, say, paying for a broadband plan that offers greater speed?

5G network slicing is different. A premium broadband plan usually gives users access to a higher maximum speed under normal conditions, but all customers still use the same underlying network.

Network slicing changes how the network itself allocates resources. During periods of congestion, a user on a dedicated 5G slice can be given preferential access to capacity, while others may experience slower speeds or higher latency. In effect, broadband plans sell more bandwidth, whereas network slicing can provide a higher quality of service even when the network is under strain.

So, does network slicing violate net neutrality?

Net neutrality is the principle that all internet traffic should be treated equally, without discrimination based on content, platform, service or user category. Around a decade ago, India adopted some of the world's strongest net neutrality protections.

"As per my understanding of current Net Neutrality regulations, creating plans with higher speeds does not violate Net Neutrality, as long as you don't prioritise speeds for specific apps, services or sectors, or price access to different apps, services or sectors differently," Nikhil Pathwa, founder of MediaNama, who played a key role in the successful campaign for net neutrality in 2015, said on social media platform X.

Critics argue that Airtel's plan creates a fast lane for customers willing to pay more, potentially undermining the principle of equal access. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on IT has begun examining whether the service breaches the non-discrimination principle embedded in India's telecom framework. Airtel, however, maintains that the service is fully compliant with net neutrality rules because it does not prioritise any specific application, website or content provider. Reliance Jio has also argued that network slicing can be compatible with net neutrality provided it remains application-agnostic and does not degrade service for other users.

Drishiti IAS

THE NEW SESSION SALE UPTO 50% OFF

27th - 30th May

On All Online, Pendrive Courses & Test Series

Call Us: 87501 87501

DIPLOMACY

Quad's struggle to find momentum, as members pursue disparate objectives

time behaviour, and technological dominance have created shared concerns among the Quad partners.

While the rationale behind the Quad has been compelling, it continues to grapple with a central question — is it a strategic force multiplier or merely a mechanism for consultative dialogue?

What is the Quad?

After the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, India, Japan, Australia, and the US came together in an informal arrangement to coordinate disaster relief operations. In 2007, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as the Quad, kicked off. However, it never really picked up momentum, and while it was revived in 2017, the Quad has, at best, sputtered along since.

The major reasons for this are that the four constituents don't always have the same aims, and China strenuously opposes the grouping. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi even compared the Quad to sea foam, saying it will simply dissipate over time.

ECONOMY

Why inflation rate is not the same as affordability



THE US and Israel's war on Iran and the resultant spike in prices of crude oil and other products critical to the smooth functioning of the global economy have made inflation the main worry for policymakers.

Between June 3 and 5, the Monetary Policy Committee of India's Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will deliberate on this matter. On its part, the Union government has as yet shielded average consumers in India from the full effect of the rise in international prices.

But while policymakers are focused on containing the inflation rate, average consumers in India focus more on affordability. The notion is best captured in the worries of several consumers, who bemoan that "once prices go up, they never come down."

In other words, consumers are often more worried about the cumulative effect of past price increases on their household budgets and overall affordability than just the inflation rate in a particular month. This difference between the two ideas is also at the heart of the so-called "affordability crisis" in the US and the cost-of-living crisis in the UK. In both countries, affordability, more than just the inflation rate, is also leading voters to change their political choices.

What's the difference between inflation and affordability?

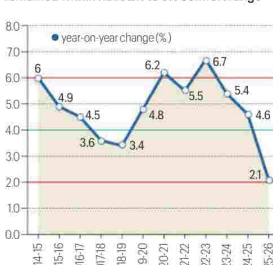
The inflation rate is the rate at which the general price level rises from one year to another.

Every country has chosen a representative basket of goods and services that its consumers use, and it tracks how the prices for this basket move. The year-on-year increase in this general price level is called the "headline" inflation rate, the one commonly referred to in policy debates.

As Chart 1 shows, since the RBI adopted a policy regime to target a specific level of inflation in 2016, India's inflation rate has been within the RBI's comfort zone of 2% to 6% (red lines), even if it stayed above the

Inflation within comfort zone

Chart 1: India's retail inflation rate has largely remained within RBI's 2% to 6% comfort range



SOURCE: CMI, INDIAN EXPRESS RESEARCH

target rate of 4% (green line). More importantly, over the past three years, the RBI has successfully brought down the inflation rate from almost 7% to around 2%.

The worry for policymakers now is that the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is likely to push up the inflation rate for the current financial year (2026-27) closer to 8%.

The consumers, on the other hand, are more bothered about affordability, which, in turn, depends on two broad factors:

- The cumulative effect of repeated inflation spikes on the general price level
- The growth in their incomes relative to the rise in the general price level

In other words, consumers effectively care more whether they are better-off or worse-off in "real" terms — that is, after the effect of inflation is neutralised both from prices and incomes.

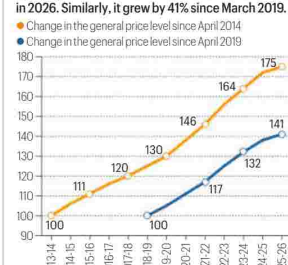
How to know where you stand in real terms

Did your income grow keep pace with the increase in the general price level? Chart 2 provides a simple test.

Let's assume the general price level as of March-end 2014 (the end date for finan-

Rise in general price level

Chart 2: Assuming price level was 100 in 2014, applying annual inflation rates shows it reached 175 in 2026. Similarly, it grew by 41% since March 2019.



Out of step

From the end of March 2018, growth in incomes of the salaried and self-employed lagged behind the rise in the price level.

One way to assess whether one is better-off or worse-off to compare incomes. If their income has gone up by 75%, then one is exactly where one was 12 years ago in "real" terms. If their income has grown by a lesser degree, then one is worse-off, and if the income has grown by a higher percentage, then one is better-off to that extent.

Similarly, the general price level has grown by 41% between March 2019 and March 2026. Calculations can accordingly be made for those who started working at the start of April 2019 (around the second NDA term), albeit the key number is 41% in this case.

What about the rest of India? The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) releases

While policymakers focus on containing inflation rate, consumers care more about whether their incomes grow faster than price rise

regular Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) that map employment, unemployment and income data. The PLFS divides the whole workforce into three categories of workers:

1. Salaried (regular wage earners)
2. Self-employed (e.g., small vendors)
3. Casual labour (e.g., those working on construction sites)

However, for reasons of data comparability, the only period for which one can get a representative picture is between 2017-18 and 2023-24. Still, it provides a broad sense of how India fared during this period in terms of affordability. The end of March 2018, data shows that the growth in incomes of the salaried and the self-employed lagged behind the rise in the price level. In other words, in real terms, they became worse-off during this period. The daily wages of casual labour, however, grew faster than the general price level.

It is noteworthy that casual labourers actually earn the lowest in absolute terms among the three categories. For instance, at a daily earning of Rs 453 in 2025-26, a casual labourer working all 30 days would have still earned only Rs 13,590 a month, while the self-employed earned Rs 14,861 per month and salaried workers earned Rs 22,699 per month.

Moreover, over this period, the share of self-employed — the category worst-off in terms of affordability — grew rapidly while the shares of the other two categories declined.

So, how can RBI help matters?

The RBI cannot directly do much about the income growth of different workers. That depends on a whole host of factors outside its scope.

On the inflation front, too, the RBI can't address the main reason for inflation: inadequate crude oil supply. Under the circumstances, all that the RBI can do is to constrain overall demand for goods and services, and consumers by raising interest rates. Higher interest rates would slow down economic activity by making loans (be it for cars, homes or factories) costlier.

In other words, if RBI wants to arrest inflation, it will have to drag down India's economic growth; an action that mirrors what the government is doing by raising fuel prices and urging people to consume less.

TECHNOLOGY

How ACs catch fire, and the role temperature plays in it

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, May 29

RETIREE IAS officer and the first chairman of the Competition Commission of India (CCI), Dhanendra Kumar, 80, died in a fire after a suspected air conditioner (AC) blast at his Delhi home on Thursday.

The incident is the latest in a series of AC-related fire accidents reported in the National Capital Region this summer.

Just this week, a split AC reportedly exploded and triggered a fire on the 15th floor of a residential tower in Ghaziabad's Indrapuram. And, earlier this month, nine people were killed in a blaze at a residential complex in East Delhi's Shahdara, where initial reports also pointed to an AC blast as a possible trigger.

The incidents call attention to a disturbing pattern in increasingly unfolding in Indian cities every summer. With higher average temperatures every year and rising AC sales nationwide, the likelihood of such incidents is increasing.

How do ACs catch fire?

Continuously running an AC, coupled with the high atmospheric temperatures during summer, can lead to overheating. This overheating can degrade an AC's insulation, melt internal components,

and ignite combustible materials inside the unit.

Another major reason is short-circuiting, which occurs when the flow of electric current in a circuit takes an unintended path. This is not always dangerous, but when a large amount of current is flowing, it can, in turn, generate a great amount of heat. This can melt wires and lead to a fire.

The Delhi government's Department of Fire Services states: "About 60% fires are of electric origin on account of electric short circuit, overheating, overloading, use or non-standard appliances."

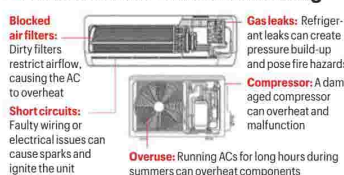
According to an official from the Delhi Power Department, house fires are commonly caused by short circuits in electricity meters, switchboards, or due to loose, poor-quality or faulty wiring.

"In AC units, fires usually occur due to gas leakage or overheating in the compressor, which is in the outdoor unit. However, in the Delhi incident, the suspected explosion occurred in the indoor unit of the AC, which is uncommon. Sometimes, if there is a spark caused by faulty wiring in a closed room along with a gas leak, it can ignite and lead to an explosion," the official said.

Is an inverter AC safer?

In an AC, a compressor (the external box unit with a fan in split ACs) performs

Common causes of ACs overheating



SIMPLE SAFETY PRACTICES

- Regular maintenance
- Clean dust on air filters, since it can hinder air flow and put pressure on the system
- Secure indoor/outdoor wiring connections, ensure that the circuit breaker and fuse are in good condition
- Set temperature between 24-26 degrees Celsius. Low temperature settings can stress the machine
- Install a stabiliser if electricity frequently fluctuates

a crucial function. It is responsible for circulating a substance called refrigerant gas through the unit. Refrigerants absorb heat from indoor spaces and then release it outdoors. A non-inverter AC uses a

fixed-speed compressor that runs at full speed until the room reaches the target temperature, then shuts off completely. When the temperature rises, it turns back on at full speed.

During extreme heat and prolonged use, this creates higher electrical and mechanical stress, which can overheat components such as the compressor, capacitor or wiring. If the unit is old, poorly maintained, or exposed to voltage fluctuations, it can lead to short circuits and fires — often referred to as "AC blasts".

On the other hand, an inverter AC regulates the compressor speed gradually instead of constantly switching on and off. While this variability reduces stress in the system, it's not foolproof. Fires can still occur due to overheating of electronic circuit boards, faulty wiring, refrigerant leakage, poor installation, voltage fluctuations or lack of maintenance.

What are some signs of a safety risk?

According to Haier, some common signs of a potential blast include unusual noises from the unit, frequent cycling on and off, inconsistent cooling of the room, and burning smells/smoke. Professional services should be called in to fix these issues.

WITH INPUTS FROM ALOK SINGH AND RISHIKA SINGH

operation on critical minerals, to reduce dependence on China and the consequent vulnerabilities of supply chains.

The grouping also announced its first joint project — the development of port infrastructure in Fiji — signalling forward movement from dialogue to concrete deliverables.

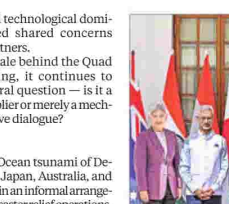
What is the way ahead?

The Quad's future lies in strategic clarity among all members. To ensure operational depth, the Quad needs to move towards permanent institutional architecture, alongside enhanced military operability, synergised technology partnerships and strengthened maritime capacity building in the Indo-Pacific.

The real test of Quad is not whether it becomes an Asian NATO, but whether the four democracies, with varying interests, can sustain strategic cooperation in the era of great power competition.

THE RECENT Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) held in New Delhi among the foreign ministers of Australia, India, Japan and the United States came as an assurance that the grouping remains relevant.

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the world's strategic and geo-economic centre of gravity today. It hosts critical sea lanes, carrying over 50% of global trade and energy flow. China's rise, its coercive mar-



(From left) Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio during the Quad meet.

Beijing argued that the Quad's purpose is mainly to target China. After the recent meeting on May 26, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said at a presser, "We do not support the formation of exclusive cliques or bloc confrontation. No cooperation should undermine mutual trust and cooperation among regional countries."

What do members want from it?

For Australia, Beijing's intimidating posturing means it has to expand strategic outreach and security partnerships, but it remains heavily dependent on China economically.

India needs to balance China in view of their shared border and the security calculus. It is also strongly opposed to China's design of carving out a unipolar Asia, but Delhi remains wary of compromising its strategic autonomy.

Tokyo views Quad as an essential security imperative, given the tensions in the South China Sea due to Beijing's apparently expansionist designs.

For the US, the Quad is perceived as the pillar of its Indo-Pacific strategy and the mechanism to balance out China without military confrontation. In fact, Washington perceives the Quad as a networked security architecture that substitutes American primacy in Asia. Under Donald Trump, however, the US seems to be leaning towards a bilateral deal with Beijing.

These different priorities explain why the Quad's progress has been incremental rather than decisive. The security cooperation remains constrained, lacking a NATO-like collective defence mechanism, and there is no binding treaty obligation.

What happened at this meeting?

The Quad Foreign Ministers meeting on May 26 attempted to break fresh ground. It focussed on maritime security, resilient supply chains, critical minerals and energy security amid geopolitical uncertainties.

Important initiatives were unveiled for enhanced maritime surveillance coordination, an energy security framework and co-

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

INDIA'S GROWTH OUTLOOK REMAINS POSITIVE: RBI'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR FY26

RBI: War could pose headwinds to growth & inflation in short run

'Elevated valuations in tech sectors may undergo reassessment, raising the risk of corrections in markets'

George Mathew
Mumbai, May 29

WITH THE monetary policy review a week away, the Reserve Bank of India on Friday said the West Asia conflict and risks such as higher energy prices, supply chain disruptions, financial market volatility, global trade uncertainty and weather disruptions could affect growth and inflation in the short term.

In a highly uncertain global environment, continuous assessment of the evolving developments is warranted to frame the appropriate policy response on an ongoing basis, the central bank said.

"Lingering geopolitical tensions and supply chain disruptions may pose near-term risks to corporate earnings and the performance of loan portfolios," the RBI said in its Annual Report for 2025-26.

However, India's growth outlook remains positive, it said. Considering various factors, and on the assumption that the adverse impact of the West Asia conflict would remain contained in the near-term, real GDP growth for 2026-27 is projected at 6.9% with risks tilted to the downside, the report said.

The RBI's Monetary Policy Committee kept the main repo rate unchanged at 5.25% in the April review.

However, the rupee remains volatile at 95 against the dollar and capital outflows continue unabated amid the US-Turkey conflict. The government's decision to hike fuel prices is likely to put upward pressure on inflation.

While the ongoing geopolitical tensions are likely to exert pressure on the availability and prices of key inputs, particularly fertilisers, the government's continued efforts in ensuring adequate availability of fertiliser and other key inputs through diversified sources and buffer management are expected to mitigate these potential concerns, the RBI said.

The central bank said geopolitical risk has re-emerged as the dominant drag on global growth in 2026. "The adverse impact of outbreak of the conflict in West Asia in end-February 2026 is reflected in the forecasts of global growth and inflation," the RBI said.

With continued geopolitical tensions, inflation faces upside risks globally, the RBI said. "The surging energy prices and disruptions in key shipping routes could intensify supply-side pressures." The RBI also said elevated valuations in technology sectors may undergo reassessment, raising the risk of corrections in equity markets.

WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM



The RBI has projected FY27 real GDP growth to be at 6.9%. REUTERS

RBI plans 'kill switch': How it can stop scams

ENS Economic Bureau
Mumbai, May 29

THE RESERVE BANK OF India is exploring the possibility of introducing a 'kill switch' mechanism that would allow users at the receiving end of a potential digital scam to immediately stop all financial transactions from their accounts.

Besides, it has also proposed a 'switch on' and 'switch off' facility for all digital payment modes. It would help bolster consumer confidence and contribute towards con-

trolling frauds in digital payment transactions, the RBI Annual Report said.

The proposal for a 'kill switch' — being examined by the government and the RBI — envisages, among other possibilities, an emergency button integrated into payment applications of lenders that could instantly freeze all banking operations when a user suspects they are being targeted by fraudsters.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Bank fraud nos down; amount up 46% in FY26

ENS Economic Bureau
Mumbai, May 29

THE AMOUNT involved in fraud cases reported by the banking sector shot up by 46% to Rs 48,021 crore during FY2026 as against Rs 32,803 crore in the previous year.

However, the number of fraud cases dipped to 10,114 from 23,722 a year ago, the Reserve Bank of India's Annual Report said.

Of this public sector banks accounted for Rs 35,709 crore in FY26 as against Rs 23,617 crore last year and private sector Rs 11,399 crore (Rs 8,927 crore), the RBI said.

Data pertaining to FY26 includes fraud classification in 314 cases amounting to Rs 30,199 crore, pertaining to previous financial years, reported fresh during the current financial year after re-examination and ensuring compliance with the judgement of the Supreme Court, dated March 27, 2023, the RBI said.

Amount involved in advances of banks shot up to Rs 40,774 crore in Rs 6,404 fraud cases as against Rs 30,367 crore (7924 cases) in the previous financial year.

"Frauds reported in a year could have occurred several years prior to the year of reporting," the central bank said.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Govt dials fund managers for gig workers' safety net

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, May 29

THE CENTRAL government is consulting fund managers to bring social security schemes for gig workers, a labour ministry official said on Friday, about a month after several parts of north India witnessed protests demanding a minimum wage while citing rapidly rising cost of living.

"A huge part of our workforce is now getting absorbed in the gig and platform economy, and the potential is immense. Today, around 1 crore workers are employed in this sector, and the potential is to reach around 2.5 crore workers by the end of the decade. The government is focusing more towards this sector," Ashutosh AT Pednekar, Joint Secretary and Director General (Labour Welfare), said. He said that the government is in the process of operationalising various social security schemes related to accident and maternity for platform workers.

"We are in the process of creating various schemes and engaging with several fund managers to ensure the schemes are operationalised," Pednekar said.

He also said that the Code on Social Security rules under the new labour code has already been notified on May 8. "We are in the process of operationalising the Code, based on the rules through various mechanisms like the National Social Security Board for gig and platform workers, which is being operationalised. The board will look at unorganised workers," he said.

According to ETERNAL's (Zomato and Blinkit's parent company) Q3FY25 shareholder

• UNCERTAIN WAGES

ETERNAL'S Q3FY25 shareholder letter says that average monthly earnings for delivery workers of Zomato and Blinkit — who logged in at least eight hours a day and 26 days a month — were Rs 27,726 in 2024, excluding fuel costs (which is a big expense for workers)



it reflects the gig-style nature of the job, workers say that those types of average earnings are only possible when they do 10-14-hour shifts

letter, average monthly earnings for delivery workers of Zomato and Blinkit who logged in at least eight hours a day and 26 days a month were Rs 27,726 in 2024, excluding fuel costs (which is a big expense for workers who drive hundreds of kilometres a day).

However, ETERNAL's then-CEO Deepinder Goyal had said that in 2025, the average delivery worker on Zomato worked just 38 days in the year and 7 hours per working day. Though he said that

letter, average monthly earnings for delivery workers of Zomato and Blinkit who logged in at least eight hours a day and 26 days a month were Rs 27,726 in 2024, excluding fuel costs (which is a big expense for workers who drive hundreds of kilometres a day).

About the e-Shram portal, Pednekar said that it already has the database of aggregators and "we can understand, on a real-time basis, the benefits which the worker can or has availed."

"Just like the UPI and Aadhaar changed the digital landscape in India, the e-Shram has the potential of changing the way the benefits are given to workers, along with the portability of benefits, which is a challenge worldwide, including India," he said. "Workers' protests in Noida turned violent in April with clashes with police and torching of vehicles.

Since the start of this year, workers' protests have been going across industrial hubs, even before the energy crisis deepened after the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

MSCI rebalancing sees markets slumping 1.5% in late trade

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, May 29

THE REBALANCING of the MSCI's Global Standard index, that came into effect on Friday, triggered a late sharp selloff in the Indian stock markets, causing the benchmark indices to slump around 1.5%.

India's weightage on the marquee global index fell marginally to 12.3% from 12.4% earlier as the changes took effect.

Despite the weightage being broadly stable, such index rebalancing trigger short-term pressure on the market as global investors rebalance their portfolios

The MSCI Global Standard index is a benchmark that is tracked by global investors, and thus inclusions and exclusions can lead to a sharp change in flows

are expected to trigger passive outflows between \$136 million and \$281 million, while the inclusions are seen attracting inflows of \$209 million and \$491 million.

According to IIFL Finance, 27 stocks are expected to see outflows of up to \$20 million, 16 stocks may witness outflows between \$30 million-\$50 million, and 8 stocks may see outflows between \$50 million-\$80 million.

"The MSCI rebalancing is expected to generate significant trading activity during the closing auction session. Invest-

ors should expect elevated volumes and sharp price movements in stocks affected by the index changes," the firm said.

As these changes came into effect, the BSE's Sensex index, which was down around 0.4% or 338.66 points, tanked 643 points during a 10-minute window to eventually end the session down 1,092.05 points or 1.4% at 74,775.74.

The NSE's Nifty 50 index also saw a similar slump, ending the session down 1.5% at 23,547.75.

"The pressure intensified during the final hours of trade after the MSCI Global Standard Index rebalancing came into effect, triggering heightened volatility in select stocks amid expected passive fund flow adjustments and portfolio rebalancing activity," said Siddharth Khemka, head of research of wealth management at Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

Among other changes, big names such as Hindustan Unilever, Bajaj Finance, and TCS saw their weightages trimmed on the Global Standard index. These stocks could see passive outflows between \$140 million and \$204 million, according to IIFL Capital.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

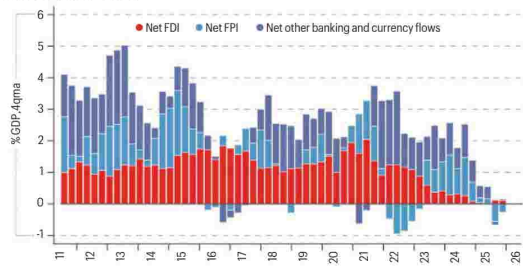
are expected to trigger passive outflows between \$136 million and \$281 million, while the inclusions are seen attracting inflows of \$209 million and \$491 million.

According to IIFL Finance, 27 stocks are expected to see outflows of up to \$20 million, 16 stocks may witness outflows between \$30 million-\$50 million, and 8 stocks may see outflows between \$50 million-\$80 million.

"The MSCI rebalancing is expected to generate significant trading activity during the closing auction session. Invest-

• DRYING FINANCIAL FLOWS INTO INDIA

Net financial account flows under FDI, FPI and other banking and currency categories have all dried up. And it started well before the war in West Asia disrupted the crude oil flow. According to ANZ Research, tight global financial conditions and concentrated global growth driven by the technology supercycle led to India's current balance of payments stress.



SOURCE: RBI, MESSI, BLOOMBERG, MACROBOND, ANZ RESEARCH

FPIs sell \$3.45 bn of equities in May

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, May 29

GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS and lingering uncertainty over a possible peace agreement between the US and Iran muted investor sentiment towards emerging markets, including India, even as crude oil prices continued to hover near the \$100-a-barrel mark.

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) sold Indian shares worth

around \$3.45 billion during the month of May, extending the trend of capital outflows, but the pace of share sales slowed compared to the previous two months.

According to National Securities Depository Ltd (NSDL) data, this was much lower than the \$6.47 billion and \$12.72 billion worth of Indian stocks they had dumped in the previous two months, with most of the challenges caused by the

West Asia war already largely factored into the markets by investors. Meanwhile, IT stocks gained on AI-related optimism.

The pace of the selloff by FPIs slowed down as the month progressed, with investors now increasingly getting used to the constant news flow out of West Asia, with the focus now also on corporate earnings.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

• BRIEFLY

Central Bank pays 6% interim dividend

Mumbai: Central Bank of India has paid the 4th interim dividend of 6% for FY2025-26. With this, the bank's cumulative interim dividends declared stands at 12% including interim dividends aggregating to 6% declared for the first three quarters. ENS

Govt amends CSR norms, provides more leeway for cos

New Delhi: In a significant move, the government has allowed companies to

invest up to 10% of their CSR budget to coupon zero principal instruments issued by not-for-profit organisations through a social stock exchange. PTI

IndiGo mulls hedging fuel costs after loss

New Delhi: IndiGo said it will consider hedging fuel costs to protect margins after posting a quarterly loss on Friday, as soaring crude prices driven by the Iran war have pushed up jet fuel prices and squeezed airlines globally. Jet fuel is typically the largest expense for airlines worldwide, and sharp price swings can erode profitability for carriers. REUTERS

• MARKETS

Sensex	74,775.74	NIFTY	23,547.75	Gold	₹1,56,463	US Dollar	₹95.00
Change	-1092.06	Change	-359.40	Silver	₹2,63,350	Oil	₹97.52
% Change	-1.44%	% Change	-1.50%				

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER INDIA BILLION AND JEWELLERS ASSOCIATION (BIA) DATA. GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1KG, CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF MAY 29, 2026

• THE SAN FRANCISCO-BASED COMPANY WAS VALUED AT \$380 BILLION AS RECENTLY AS FEBRUARY

How Anthropic leapfrogged arch rival OpenAI to \$1 trillion valuation

Soumyendra Barik
New Delhi, May 29

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) startup Anthropic has raised \$65 billion in funding, catapulting its valuation to within touching distance of the coveted \$1 trillion mark, and making it the world's most valuable AI start-up — leapfrogging arch rival OpenAI.

The funding marks a dramatic rise for the San Francisco-based company, which was valued at \$380 billion as recently as February. Anthropic's latest valuation now exceeds that of rival OpenAI, which was last valued at around \$852 billion post-money following its March fundraising.

While both companies develop frontier AI models, their

strategies have diverged. OpenAI has focused on consumer adoption, building a massive user base around ChatGPT and expanding into search, productivity and multi-modal AI.

Anthropic, founded by former OpenAI executives, has positioned Claude as an enterprise-first platform, with a strong emphasis on coding, business workflows and AI safety. Claude has gained traction among software developers and large corporations, helping Anthropic establish a lucrative foothold in the enterprise market.

The latest valuation suggests investors increasingly believe Anthropic has taken the lead in the commercial AI race. Rapid enterprise adoption, ex-



Anthropic, founded by former OpenAI executives, has positioned Claude as an enterprise-first platform. REUTERS

The OpenAI vs Anthropic rivalry

Like every era of technology has produced key protagonists — Apple vs Samsung, Boeing vs Airbus, Windows vs MacOS — OpenAI and Anthropic have emerged as the two key com-

panies in the AI space, amid competition from the likes of Google and Meta.

Much of the competition between the two companies is primarily a factor of the contrasting approach they have taken to AI development, and the relationship between founders — OpenAI's Sam Altman and Anthropic's Dario Amodei. Before starting Anthropic in 2021, Amodei spent years working at OpenAI, where he served as its Vice President of Research, and also led the development of large language models like GPT-2 and GPT-3. As he experienced AI's ability to scale exponentially, he began to feel that development of the technology had to be done more responsibly, with safety and se-

curity at its core. In 2020, he left OpenAI over differences about the company's approach to safety. He, along with his sister Daniela and a group of former OpenAI employees, started Anthropic a year later.

In a post in 2024, Amodei said that the real reason for leaving OpenAI was that "it is incredibly unproductive to try and argue with someone else's vision."

A small circle

The connections between the two companies are not unique. As *The Indian Express* recently explained, the world's most consequential artificial intelligence research is being conducted by a strikingly small circle of scientists who studied mostly

under the same mentors, taught in the same rooms and kept recruiting from each other's labs.

After the e-commerce website eBay acquired the fintech company PayPal in 2002, a close-knit group of former PayPal founders and employees — that included Peter Thiel, Elon Musk and Reid Hoffman — went on to found or fund many of Silicon Valley's most influential companies. Their ventures include YouTube, LinkedIn, Tesla, Yelp, SpaceX and Palantir. OpenAI was founded by Elon Musk (who later left the board), Altman, Ilya Sutskever, Greg Brockman, Wojciech Zarembka and John Schulman. Thiel was the main backer and mentor of Altman, providing a large part of the \$5 million that made up Altman's initial venture fund. When

OpenAI launched in 2015, Thiel was one of the founding investors pledging \$1 billion.

The most notable startups founded by OpenAI alumni include the San Francisco-based Anthropic. It has rapidly grown to become OpenAI's biggest rival. Additionally, the ties central to the divide between the companies have also appeared within OpenAI in the recent past. Itsco-founder and chief scientist, Ilya Sutskever, left OpenAI in May 2024 after he was reportedly part of a failed 2023 coup to replace Altman, stemming from concerns about safety in the development of AI. However, OpenAI employees rallied behind Altman, leading to his reinstatement.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

HISAR TO BERLIN

YOUR FOOD IS ON ITS WAY

On the streets of the German capital is a familiar gig: Indians, astride electric bikes, delivering food as they race against the clock. With Germany emerging as a favoured destination for young Indians, ADRIJA ROYCHOWDHURY on the journey they make — a life far away from home, with a career pitstop as a *fahrer* (driver) or *kurier* (courier)

At 11, Mihir hurriedly drinks his morning cup of *chai* and lines up three mobile phones in front of him. The first has the Uber Eats app open, the second Wolt and the third Lieferando, the only platform where he is legally employed as a food delivery worker. The sunlight, soft and unfiltered, bounces off his apartment walls, though a lingering chill remains. "Aajindahi banegi order (It is not the best day to get orders)," he says, looking out of the window.

The two years that he has spent in Germany hasn't softened the Haryanvi in his Hindi and he has been making do with rudimentary German, but he already considers himself a Berliner. "There is something about Berlin. I feel free...," says Mihir.

The 25-year-old, who arrived in Germany in May 2024, recently completed a Master's degree in tourism and hospitality from a private university in Berlin and is currently on a job-seeker visa. But that was simply a route he took. All he wanted was to work in Germany.

Since August 2024 last year, he has been working as a *fahrer* (driver) or *kurier* (courier), as delivery workers are called in Germany.

As Germany's platform economy expands, migrant workers have become its most visible workforce, with Indians and other South Asians prominent in food-delivery jobs in cities such as Berlin.

On a weekday afternoon, many of them turn up at the bustling Simon-Dach-Straße, the central Berlin street that's lined with cafés, bakeries and brunch spots. As they sit astride their electric bikes, waiting for orders, some thumb through their phones, others trade jokes and swap stories of their day on the road.

While there is no official data on Indians as gig workers in Germany, Aju John, a Berlin-based lawyer who researches migration and platform economies, says, "One can be certain that more than 90% of the food delivery workers in Berlin at least are recent migrants. Of that, 50% are Indians and another 25-30% Bangladeshis or Pakistanis," he says.

This way to Berlin

While the conservative Christian Democratic Union government under Friedrich Merz has steered Germany away from its traditional "open door" stance towards migration, it has simultaneously worked to promote legal immigration in a bid to address labour shortages in sectors such as logistics, hospitality, healthcare and engineering.

Programmes such as the Opportunity Card, or *ChancenKarte*, which allows non-European Union job seekers to live in Germany for up to a year while searching for employment, have made Germany accessible to young migrants from India.

The number of Indians in Germany has gone up from 86,000 in 2015 to 280,000 in the beginning of 2025. According to a statement by DAAD, the German organisation that supports academic exchange, as of 2025, Indian students (49,483 of them in 2024-25, up from 20,819 in 2018-19) were the largest international community in the country.

Like Mihir, many choose the student route to enter Germany's labour market. Unlike countries such as the US or UK, where international education often requires high tuition fees and expensive private universities, Germany's public universities charge little or no tuition fees even for foreign students. But they have stringent entry requirements and so, many enrol in the newer private universities, some of which operate in a loosely regulated space.

Germany's relatively easier post-study work options help too. International students are allowed to work part-time for up to 20 hours a weeks.

49,483
INDIAN STUDENTS IN GERMANY IN 2024-25, UP FROM 20,819 IN 2018-19

WHAT ATTRACTS INDIANS TO GERMANY

1 Easier and quicker visa processing when compared to Canada, USA, Australia and the UK

2 Requirements for German language proficiency are relaxed when compared to other non-English speaking countries

3 Stronger labour laws in Germany result in better labour regulations for gig workers. For example, a directly employed, full-time delivery rider in Lieferando is entitled to an hourly minimum wage of €13.90 per hour, employee benefits such as sick leaves, paid vacation etc. That, however, is changing as platforms move to the subcontractor model

4 Several provisions exist for paid jobs on a student visa. International students, entitled to work 20 hours per week, can do 'mini job', 'midi job', part-time employment, student or research assistant jobs, or paid internships. After completion of studies, the student can apply for a one-year job-seeker visa to look for jobs

5 Agreement spree of between India and Germany aims to increase the mobility of skilled migrants through legal mechanisms

As is apparent on the streets of Berlin, many of them start with gig work.

Patrick Feuerstein, co-principal investigator at Fairwork Germany, a global initiative studying the working conditions on digital labour platforms, says, "Most of the riders are young, tech savvy, need the money, and are flexible. There seems to be a lot of body referral going on, with people from the same communities referring their friends and family to the jobs."

"There are so many rules"

The son of a farmer, Mihir decided to move out of his village Chuli Khurd, in Hisar district, after the Agnipath scheme disrupted his dreams of joining the Army. "I thought, if I have to do *dehadi mazdoori* (daily-wage labour), I might as well do it abroad," he says, looking out of the window at the East Berlin street below. He shares the two-room apartment with four men from Hisar.

His initial choices were Australia, Canada and the UK, but his agent suggested Germany.

In February 2024, Mihir received his acceptance letter from Berlin School of Business and Innovation (BSBI), a private university in Berlin. He paid around Rs 25,000 to the agent and applied for a bank loan of Rs 15 lakh to pay the university fees. The agent, he says, convinced him there was no need to know German.

Within 15 days of arriving in Germany, he got his first job — as a cleaner with a Berlin-based online platform. Since classes were held only thrice a week, he would frequently head out in the middle of college hours to attend to his work shifts.

In August 2024, he applied to Lieferando to work as a delivery worker. Luckily for him, knowledge of German was not a requirement; he only needed to know how to ride a bike. A quick phone interview later, he had the job. He later picked up jobs with Uber Eats and Wolt, and now earns about €2,500 a month if he works for eight hours all seven days a week.

Like Mihir, Tajinder Singh, 30, from Chandigarh, came to Berlin to study Marketing at Arden University, the Berlin campus of a private UK university. Soon after reaching Berlin, he joined Amazon as a delivery worker to manage his living expenses. A year later, he joined Lieferando. He now has six months left on his job-seeker visa.

Tajinder says most Indian students prefer delivery jobs because they are "stress-free" and "flexible". "In most other jobs, you need to know German, but here, you just hand over the packet, not, at the most say *Bitte schön* (you are welcome) and leave," he says.

Soon after landing in Berlin in May 2024, Mihir moved into a student accommodation. Very quickly, he found himself overwhelmed by the sheer number of rules. "There are rules for walking, talking, living, and even breathing, I realised," he says. "It was especially tough to speak softly. 'India mein, apne ghar mein kuch bhi karo, no problem (Back home, you can do whatever). But here, especially after 10 pm, there must be pin drop silence. On most days, I come home late after work and can't even cook in a pressure cooker. The neighbours would call the police if the whistle went off at that hour,' Mihir says.

Sticking to the right-lane while on his bike to deliver orders was tricky, too. "It's just the opposite of what it is at home," he says. He would frequently slip into the wrong lane, inviting angry stares.

During the winter months, riding on the snow-covered streets of Berlin was tough and he would often slip. "Now I am used to it. I can get from one end of the city to



An estimated 90% of the food delivery workers are migrants, with Indians a significant part of the workforce. ADRIJA ROYCHOWDHURY

another in less than an hour," he says.

Mihir says he still trips over the German names of streets. "I only know the main roads that lead out from my home. For the rest, there's Google Maps."

A shorter route: Subcontractors

At 2.10 pm, Mihir's phone rings out sharply. He finally had the first order of the day from Wolt. These orders are critical. On Uber Eats and Wolt, where he works through subcontractors, he is paid per delivery.

Over the last few decades, a number of sectors in Germany, from construction to logistics and delivery, which rely largely on migrant labour, have adopted the subcontractor route to hire workers.

There have been allegations of hirings that circumvent German laws on minimum wages, with the subcontractors paying per delivery and demanding a payment from the workers to get them on board. Besides, there is little job security. Mihir says that a few months ago, when he visited India for 40 days, he lost his Uber Eats gig though he had paid the subcontractors €600 euros for the job. Since then, he has been using his friend's ID to work on Uber Eats.

A 38-year-old from Chandigarh says the

subcontractor he worked with mostly hired delivery workers through 'mini job' contracts — a part-time job provision that allows students to earn a tax-free income up to €603. "But the riders would often work full time, and the remaining income is paid in cash. It is a blatant misuse of the student visa," he says.

At Lieferando, where Mihir is a direct employee, he gets the minimum wage of €13.90 per hour, is not allowed to work for more than 20 hours a week as mandated by his student visa, and gets other employee benefits such as sick leaves, and medical aid. But the amount wasn't enough for him to pay off his student loan and he needed to send money back home, so he signed up with subcontractors of Wolt and Uber Eats, where he is paid per delivery.

Amrita Datta, a sociologist working on Indian migrants in Germany, says the problem is not as much with gig work as with the subcontracting model that often leaves migrants vulnerable to exploitation.

Last year, Lieferando, which was the only delivery app that had been hiring directly until then, announced that they too were exploring the subcontracting route, sparking protests from among its workers' collective.

Florian Anders, head of PR and communications at Wolt, Germany, however, said in an email interview that all delivery riders, "whether directly employed or engaged through partners... work under fair, lawful, and transparent conditions."

Anders insisted that subcontractors are expected to meet high standards and employ their couriers on a permanent basis, treat them responsibly, and comply with all legal requirements.

Uber's Mobility Communications Lead, DACH, Maja Rühbach, said all their deliveries are handled by third-party fleet partners. "While these fleet partners act as independent employers... we contractually obligate them to comply strictly with all German labor laws, including mandatory social security contributions and the payment of the statutory minimum wage."

Emails sent to *The Indian Express* to the press office at Lieferando and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs went unanswered.

A 38-year-old Indian working with Lieferando says workers exploring German labour regulations may have pushed firms to adopt the subcontracting route. "Riders would log in during their shift times but not step out to do the deliveries. Since the la-

bour rules ensured they would be paid on a per hour basis regardless of the number of deliveries, they made the most of the system. Ultimately, the platforms turned to hiring indirectly through subcontractors."

Between two worlds

It's 2.30 pm by the time Mihir reaches the restaurant to pick up his first order of the day. He is already behind schedule. He pedals hard for the next five or six kilometers, reaching the neighbourhood of Neukölln in southeast Berlin in 20 minutes.

He walks up to the apartment gate where the customer is waiting for the order. He is nearly half an hour late. Mihir apologises, the customer shrugs to say it's alright.

"This is the big difference between India and Germany," he says. "People are polite here. They say 'please', 'thank you'. They even apologise if I have to climb up too many stairs to deliver the order." In Hisar, where he worked with a food delivery platform for a week, "people would refuse to pay if the order reached them a bit late. I earned less than Rs 2,000 in an entire week, and ended up paying over Rs 500 from my pocket for fuel."

Mihir gets two more orders, both on the outskirts of West Berlin. By now, his bike's battery indicator is flashing low and he decides to go home to recharge it.

After a couple of hours, he steps out again. It's a sunny spring day and most people are out on the roads. "This is a bad season for food deliveries. Winters are the best," he says, talking about a bitterly cold January day, when he made his highest single-day earnings of €250, working for 12 hours straight.

Today is different. By 10 pm, he has completed six orders. After deductions, he is left with under €50. "Sometimes I don't get a single order," he says.

These days are the hardest. Yet, returning to India is not an option he considers. "The delivery work is just a temporary job. Someday, I'll be a chef at a restaurant," he says.

The next morning, at 11 am, Mihir is ready with his three phones, scanning for orders. Outside, the air is colder. "Perhaps today will be better," he says.

Names of delivery workers have been changed to protect their identities (The writer, Head of Research at indianexpress.com, is in Germany for a journalist-in-residence fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science)



By 10 pm, Mihir has completed six orders. After deductions, he is left with under €50. "Sometimes I don't get a single order"

Economy

SATURDAY, MAY 30, 2026

ROBUST FOREX BUFFERS GIVE RBI ROOM TO AVOID SPECIAL SCHEME

RBI unlikely to revive FCNR window

Strong forex buffers cushion rupee pressures

PRASANTA SAHU
New Delhi, May 29

EVERYTHING the rupee has approached a critical depreciation threshold, India is unlikely to reopen a special Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) [FCNR(B)] deposit window similar to the one introduced during the 2013 "taper tantrum", as the country's forex reserves remain strong and US dollar interest rates are now at record highs.

During the 2013 "taper tantrum", the US Federal Reserve's benchmark interest rate was near 0.25%, as the Fed was still following an ultra-loose post-global financial crisis monetary policy.

In contrast, the federal funds rate is currently around 4%, following an aggressive tightening cycle to combat inflation. US bond yields are also hovering around record highs of nearly 5%.

FCNR(B) deposit rates offered by public sector banks currently range between 5.5%

BUFFER ZONE

During the 2013 "taper tantrum", the US Federal Reserve's benchmark interest rate was near 0.25%

FCNR(B) deposit rates offered by public sector banks currently range between 5.5% and 6%



The rupee has depreciated about 6% so far in calendar year 2026

On Friday, the rupee closed at 95 per dollar, up 0.7% from the previous session, its best day since April 2

ARVIND PANAGARIYA,
CHAIRMAN, 16TH FINANCE COMMISSION

These are costly instruments that pay significantly higher interest than the rate India earns on its own foreign-currency reserves. It is largely a transfer to rich NRIs



and 6%. Any move to mobilise dollar deposits from NRIs would therefore be extremely costly for Indian banks and would likely require substantial subsidisation by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

In 2013, the RBI offered domestic banks a highly subsidised hedging window and mobilised around \$30 billion within weeks, helping stabilise the rupee almost immediately.

At that time, India's forex reserves stood at around \$275 billion, equivalent to 6-7 months of import cover.

Reserves are now about \$681 billion, providing roughly 11 months of import cover.

This gives India greater flexibility to manage the current situation by supplying dollars from reserves rather than reopening an FCNR(B) mobilisation window.

"When the economy is strong, and financing is not yet a major issue, a special NRI deposit scheme might send the wrong signal to investors," an official said.

FCNR(B) inflows are also temporary liabilities, and large

future maturities can create rollover risks and renewed pressure on both reserves and the rupee, as seen in the previous round.

Commenting recently on dollar-denominated bonds and high-interest NRI dollar deposits, 16th Finance Commission chairman Arvind Panagariya said, "These are costly instruments that pay significantly higher interest than the rate India earns on its own foreign-currency reserves. It is largely a transfer to rich NRIs."

Panagariya has urged the

MUKESH GAGOTA
New Delhi, May 29

NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN India and the US on an interim trade agreement are in their final stages, with only 1% of the deal left to be concluded, US Ambassador to India Sergio Gora said on Friday.

"Just last month, India sent a team to Washington, to finalise the last one percent of that trade deal. Next week, we will welcome a US delegation here to continue those talks," Gora said while addressing while addressing the US-India TRUST Initiative: Advancing Partnership in Research and Innovation.

The US-India TRUST initiative was launched during a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump on February 13, 2025. The initiative aims to catalyse collaboration among governments, academia and the private sector to promote the application of critical and emerging technologies across sectors such as defence, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, biotechnology, energy and space. It also seeks to encourage the use of trusted technology vendors while safeguarding sensitive technologies.

A US delegation led by Assistant US Trade Representative Brenden Lynch is scheduled to hold talks with the Indian team, headed by Chief Negotiator Darpan Jain, from June 1 to 4. Discussions will cover a range of issues, including mar-

ket access, non-tariff measures, customs and trade facilitation, investment promotion, and economic security alignment. "Our current interim trade agreement is on the table for us to finalise, and that will unlock prosperity for both of our countries. We fully expect that

the trade deal will be signed over the next few weeks and months," Gora said. Highlighting the growth in bilateral economic ties, Gora said trade between the two countries has expanded more than tenfold over the past two decades.

"This growth is increasingly driven by innovation, investment, and high-value sectors, from digital trade and advanced manufacturing to energy and emerging technologies, linking not just large corporations but also startups and entrepreneurs."

The first in-person meeting between the two sides to finalise the interim trade agreement, based on the framework understanding reached on February 8, was held in Washington from April 21 to 23.

Under the framework arrangement, the US had agreed to reduce additional duties on Indian exports to 18% from 50% in exchange for greater market access for American industrial and agricultural products. However, before the framework could be converted into a formal agreement, the US Supreme Court struck down the country-specific reciprocal tariffs that had formed the basis of the trade negotiations initiated by Washington with several trading partners.

After the US Supreme Court verdict the US had imposed 10% additional tariffs on all trade partners from February 24 under Section 122 of the Trade Act.

SERGIO GOR, US
AMBASSADOR TO INDIA

We fully expect that the trade deal will be signed over the next few weeks and months

The growth in bilateral economic ties is increasingly driven by innovation, investment, and high-value sectors



IN THE NEWS

CENTRE MULLS SOCIAL SECURITY FOR GIG WORKERS

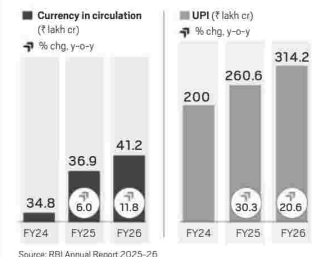
THE NUMBER OF gig workers in India could reach 25 million by the end of the decade, and the government is in consultation with fund managers to bring social security schemes for them, a labour ministry official said on Friday. At present, the country has around 10 million gig workers.

OMAN TO RECEIVE CERTIFICATES OF ORIGIN ON JUNE 1

CENTRE ON Friday said preferential certificates of origin for exports to Oman under a free trade agreement will be issued from June 1 from the Trade Connect portal. This certificate is important for exporters to avail duty concessions under the India-Oman CEPA, which will come into force from June 1.

SHARP GROWTH IN BOTH CASH & UPI: RBI DATA

DESPITE THE RAPID growth of UPI transactions, currency in circulation continued to expand, indicating that cash usage remains robust alongside the increasing adoption of digital payments, according to the Reserve Bank of India's Annual Report FY26. The report showed that the value of banknotes in circulation rose 11.8% year-on-year to ₹41.2 lakh crore as of March 31, from ₹36.87 lakh crore a year earlier. During the same period, UPI transactions increased 20.6% in value terms to ₹314.2 lakh crore from ₹260.6 lakh crore. According to the report, UPI continued to dominate retail payments, accounting for nearly 86% of total



retail payment transactions during the year. In volume terms, UPI transactions registered a growth of 30% y-o-y.

Centre eases guidelines for CSR fundraise

THE MINISTRY OF Corporate Affairs (MCA) has widened the scope of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending by allowing companies to use zero coupon zero principal (ZCZP) instruments to meet their CSR obligations. For this purpose, Schedule VII of the Companies Act, 2013, will be amended, the ministry said on Friday.

The move is aimed at easing compliance for CSR mandated companies while also enabling not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) to raise funds for public welfare projects in a transparent and regulated manner.

Under the revised framework, NPOs will be allowed to issue zero coupon zero principal instruments on the Social Stock Exchange (SSE) in accordance with the regulations prescribed by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi).

"With the inclusion of subscription to zero coupon zero principal instruments in Schedule VII, companies can now invest their CSR funds into such instruments issued through a SSE. It helps in furtherance of a transparent and credible mode of funding CSR projects by the companies and enable social enterprises to access wider pool of capital," said Anshul Jain, partner, PwC India.

ECLGS 5.0: Firms seek ₹25K-cr credit cover in three weeks

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, May 29

WITHIN WEEKS OF the launch of the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) 5.0, banks have received around 20,000 loan applications seeking credit worth nearly ₹25,000 crore, reflecting strong demand for credit to address liquidity constraints arising from the adverse impact of the West Asia conflict.

At a review meeting of public sector banks (PSBs) chaired by Financial Services Secretary M Nagaraju on Friday, the officials underscored the need for lenders to provide proactive and need-based support to eligible borrowers under ECLGS 5.0.

To ensure that businesses are not deprived of working capital required to manage the fallout of the West Asia conflict, the government on May 5 launched ECLGS 5.0. The scheme is expected to facilitate

CREDIT LIFTOFF



Banks have received around 20,000 loan applications

The scheme is expected to facilitate additional credit flow of ₹2.55 lakh cr during FY27

additional credit flow of ₹2.55 lakh crore during FY27, including ₹5,000 crore earmarked for the aviation sector. The total budgetary outlay for guarantees under the scheme has been fixed at ₹18,100 crore.

Under the scheme, micro, small and medium enterprises

(MSMEs) will receive 100% guarantee coverage, while non-MSMEs and scheduled passenger airlines will be eligible for guarantee coverage of up to 90%. The guarantee fee has been waived, and borrowers will also benefit from a moratorium on principal repayments, providing immediate relief from debt-servicing pressures.

Eligible borrowers include MSMEs, non-MSMEs and scheduled passenger airlines that had existing working capital limits and standard loan accounts as of March 31.

Under ECLGS 5.0, eligible businesses can avail themselves of additional credit of up to 20% of their peak working capital utilisation during the fourth quarter of FY26, subject to a ceiling of ₹100 crore per borrower. Scheduled passenger airlines can access additional credit of up to 100% of their peak credit utilisation, capped at ₹1,500 crore per borrower.

REALTY PLAYERS EYE MARKET TURNAROUND UNDER NEW GOVT

Property's great Kolkata hope

RAGHAVENDRA KAMATH
Mumbai, May 29

FOR YEARS, KOLKATA'S real-estate market has been something of an anomaly. Housing remains among the most affordable in India. Large tracts of land are available on the city's outskirts. Home ownership aspirations remain strong. Yet the city continues to lag most major metropolitan centres in both residential sales and new project launches.

Despite being India's third-largest metropolitan region, Kolkata ranks only eighth among Indian cities in housing sales and new supply. Several Tier-II cities have outperformed it in recent years, underscoring a deeper malaise that goes beyond the property market itself.

Now, with a new Bharatiya Janata government in West Bengal, developers are hopeful that long-pending policy reforms could help unlock growth. But industry executives and consultants argue that while changes in land laws and approvals are necessary, they may not be sufficient.

The bigger challenge is that Kolkata has struggled to generate the economic momentum that fuels housing demand in cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune and Chennai. Unlike these cities, Kolkata has not built a large ecosystem around information technology, fintech, professional services and global capability centres. These sectors have become powerful engines of urban growth, attracting talent, boosting incomes and creating sustained demand for housing.

"Kolkata sees limited talent inflow compared to these cities, and that directly impacts housing demand and price appreciation," said Vidvut Saraf, deputy managing director of Forum Group.

The consequence has been a steady divergence between Kolkata and its peers. While technology hubs benefited from migration-led demand and rapid urbanisation, Kolkata witnessed a gradual outflow of skilled professionals seeking

opportunities elsewhere. The property market reflects this reality. According to Anarock Property Consultants, homebuyers in Kolkata waited an average of 5.7 years for project completion between 2014 and 2024—the longest among major Indian metros. The city also continues to carry unsold inventory of over 19,000 housing units. Residential sales have remained subdued. Kolkata sells only a fraction of the homes absorbed annually in markets such as Bengaluru or Hyderabad.

Developers argue that economic factors have been compounded by structural constraints that have long inhibited large-scale development. Among the industry's foremost demands is the repeal of the Urban Land Ceiling Act (ULCA), a legislation that many states have already discarded. Originally enacted to prevent concentration of urban land ownership, developers argue that the law has instead con-

tributed to fragmented land holdings and discouraged the creation of large integrated developments.

"One of the biggest structural hurdles was the Urban Land Ceiling framework, which discouraged aggregation of large land parcels and led to fragmented, unplanned development," said Sushil Mohta, chairman of Merlin Group and president of Credai West Bengal.

Developers say complex land acquisition, restrictive tenancy laws and lack of progressive township policies have constrained the state's real-estate sector. The result is visible in Kolkata's urban landscape. Over the past six decades, the city has effectively created only two major planned townships—Salt Lake and New Town. Much of the subsequent expansion has occurred through standalone projects rather than integrated urban development.

"In the last 60 years, Kolkata has had only two townships. Most other development has happened without a larger master plan or supporting infrastructure," Mohta said.



Kolkata skyline at Rajarhat new town

EXPRESS PHOTO

Industry body Credai West Bengal plans to present a reform agenda to the incoming government after it settles in. Apart from scrapping the ULCA, the industry wants changes to land reforms laws, tenancy regulations, land conversion procedures and township norms.

Developers are also pushing for policies such as transferable development rights (TDR), redevelopment frameworks and incentives for planned urbanisation similar to those adopted by Maha-

rashtra and Gujarat. The argument is simple: larger, contiguous land parcels would enable integrated townships, mixed-use projects and modern urban infrastructure that could attract both residents and investors.

Consultants believe there is room for growth if those bottlenecks are addressed. "Kolkata's inventory position is manageable and there is scope for stronger absorption," said Prashant Thakur, executive director and head of research and advisory at Anarock.

Areas such as New Town, Rajarhat, Madiyagram, Barasat and Joka still offer land suitable for affordable and mid-income housing projects.

There are also early signs of changing buyer preferences. Although housing sales fell sharply in early 2026 amid election-related uncertainty and global economic concerns, demand for larger homes and premium apartments has remained resilient. Registrations for homes exceeding 1,000 sq ft have increased, reflecting evolving

consumer aspirations.

Infrastructure spending may also provide a tailwind. The Centre recently announced projects worth ₹18,700 crore spanning roads, railways and port infrastructure in and around Kolkata. Industry executives expect faster progress on metro rail expansion, airport upgrades and road connectivity projects that could improve access to peripheral growth corridors.

According to Knight Frank India, improving land accessibility and easing regulatory bottlenecks could attract national developers, institutional investors and REIT-backed residential platforms that have largely stayed away from the city.

But even the most optimistic developers acknowledge that real estate cannot revive in isolation. Housing demand ultimately follows employment. Without fresh investments in key sectors, property reforms alone may not be enough to revive Kolkata's real-estate market. "If manufacturing, IT, services and consulting sectors expand with the right incentives and policies, housing demand will automatically follow," Saraf said. "We don't want a rapid rise in prices. We want greater depth in the market." That may be the real challenge facing the next government.

Last Day To Join Private Channel. **Closing entry for new members Now.**

◆ Indian Newspaper

- 1) Times of India
 - 2) The Hindu
 - 3) Business line
 - 4) The Indian Express
 - 5) Economic Times
- And more Newspapers

◆ International Newspapers channel

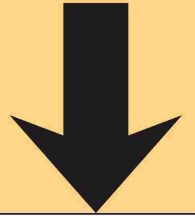
[European, American, Gulf & Asia]

◆ Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

◆ English Editorials

[National + International Editorials]



Click here
to join

◆ Lifetime validity at just 19 Rupees 

Trust me... this will be your best purchase of 2026

Opinion

SATURDAY, MAY 30, 2026

Drill deeper now

Rising geopolitical risks underscore the urgency of boosting domestic exploration and production

INDIA MUST BOLSTER its energy security by boosting domestic oil output over the medium term as geopolitical tensions in West Asia — which have resulted in the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz — may cause oil prices to cross the tipping point to trigger a global recession. The prospect of costlier oil is bad news for India, which imports 88% of its energy needs. To be sure, the ruling dispensation is seized of this imperative and is incentivising domestic producers and global giants for exploration and production (E&P) by enacting the Oilfields (Regulation and Development) Amendment Act, 2025. The objective is to increase exploration acreage to 1 million square kilometres (sq km) by 2030. The eleventh round of the open acreage licensing policy (OALP) has been launched, which together with the earlier tenth round, opens up 262,817 sq km for exploration. Effective royalty rates on crude oil and gas have also been reduced.

Clearly India needs to go all in to boost domestic production to be resilient in coping with energy shocks. For starters, it is a strategic necessity to reverse the steady downward trend in domestic oil production since FY12, which has been happening due to obstructive regulations, high taxation, and declining output from maturing fields. There have been no major discoveries lately. India lacks the technological capability for deep water exploration. The state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) engaged BP Exploration (Alpha) in January 2025 as a technical service provider (TSP) to revive production in Mumbai High — India's largest producing oil field — and BP Exploration Services India recently do to the same for western offshore oil and gas fields. Indications are that TSP implementation in Mumbai High has moderated the declining trajectory and stabilised oil production.

Domestic production can be boosted through E&P in the various offshore basins like the Andamans, Kutch-Saurashtra, and Mahanadi, which can only happen with greater involvement from global oil majors. Chevron and Total-Energies, for instance, have the latest technologies for deep-sea drilling that can operate at ultra-high pressures in the Gulf of Mexico to access previously unobtainable resources. The test of the new policy regime will be if global majors participate in the tenth and eleventh OALP rounds they need assurance against any fiscal policy changes that deterred them in earlier drilling rounds. Big oil must not be constrained by the challenging business environment including concerns regarding arbitration. High fiscal and regulatory burdens, including retrospective taxation, impacted Cairn Energy, which made the largest discovery of oil in Rajasthan in 2004.

The ruling dispensation is pushing domestic E&P more systematically by focusing on collecting seismic data in unexplored deep water and ultra-deep water oil and gas blocks. This must be welcomed as it addresses Big Oil's concerns regarding the lack of adequate data on the offshore oil and gas blocks. E&P is highly challenging in the Andamans, for instance, as it lies along a complex tectonic arc and is active seismically. India must go all in to boost data-driven E&P rather than blind E&P. As this process remains serendipitous, we should not be deterred by cost overruns and huge write-offs for unsuccessful drilling. While Big Oil will make huge difference, ONGC, for its part, is likely to spend \$1.8-2.0 billion to hire deep water drilling rigs in an ambitious E&P drive to boost domestic energy production.

THE GEOPOLITICAL UPHEAVALS since the launch of Operation Epic Fury on February 28 have brought out India's stark dependency on fuel imports, critical supply chain raw materials, and the "fickleness" of private capital. To be sure, this isn't the first time that the world (and India) has witnessed this state of affairs as evidenced by numerous such events — both related to energy security as well as financial stability — over the last few decades. Moreover, to India's advantage, the macroeconomic fundamentals are in far better shape than on the cusp of all such past global crises. Nevertheless, India needs to confront the myriad economic challenges precipitated by this latest disruption with short- as well as long-term measures.

FDI trajectory: Gross FDI since 2021 has remained steady and crossed \$80 billion in three of the last five years (including FY26). However, net FDI in FY26 was a mere \$6.3 billion, indicating a steadily increasing outflow from exits of previous investments and outbound FDI by Indian companies. While successful and profitable exits by foreign investors are actually a positive factor, the increasing trajectory of outbound FDI could signal derisking impulses of ultra-high net worth individuals and Indian corporates. A sector-wise break-up reveals that on a cumulative basis in this period, computer software, telecommunications, and services have dominated (44% of gross FDI). While this trend is a recognition of India's services talent, there is an urgent need (and opportunity) to replicate and broaden recent successes in mobile and semiconductor sectors. A close look at the utilisation of performance-linked incentive schemes reveals that while schemes for electronics and semiconductor have been successful, disbursement for green energy and rare earths have lagged. Thus, a laser-focused approach with time-bound improvements based on feedback from the stakeholders concerned is

GRIM FORECAST
Mrutunjay Mohapatra, DG of meteorology, IMD
We are providing the second-stage update for the June-September monsoon. Quantitatively, we expect 90% of the LPA (Long Period Average), with a 4% model error

STRESS TEST
ECONOMIC CHALLENGES POSED BY LATEST GEOPOLITICAL DISRUPTION DEMAND SHORT- & LONG-TERM MEASURES

The capital conundrum

SUDHIR KAPADIA

Senior board advisor and former President, Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry



required to attract and accelerate FDI in critical areas of the economy. A responsible nodal agency like DPIIT with experts should be tasked with monitoring and taking corrective steps on a real-time basis.

National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP): NMP 1.0, launched in FY22 with an outlay of ₹6 lakh crore, has met with great success (89% of target realised). NMP 2.0 (FY26-30) has an even more

area where, contrary to popular perception, the combined tax-GDP ratio (Centre and states) in India has been climbing steadily (from 16% in FY15 to 19% in FY25) on an ever-increasing GDP base. Moreover, despite a prominent sector like agriculture remaining exempt from tax, India's current (combined) tax-GDP ratio compares favourably with its ASEAN peers. Clearly, the digitisation and simplification initiatives in the last decade have borne fruit and time has now come for the next big leap in tax policy transformation, primarily aimed at attracting capital investments.

A laser-focused approach with time-bound improvements is required to attract and accelerate FDI in critical areas

Tax policy enablers: Currently, dividends, interest, and capital gains earned by sovereign wealth funds and pension funds on "eligible" investments in infrastructure and NBFCs

made before March 31, 2020, are tax-exempt. Restricting this exemption to "eligible" sectors crimps similar investment opportunities in other equally important areas which also need patient and long-term capital. Moreover, these entities are tax-exempt in their home countries any tax in India results in a higher burden rate of return for such investors. Hence, it is desirable to open up the exemption for all sectors and extend the time period of investment till March 31, 2027, to provide long-term stability and certainty.

Interest on bonds listed on a recognised stock exchange in IFSC: Currently, a tax rate of 9% (plus surcharge and cess)

applies to interest paid to a non-resident purchaser of bonds listed on a recognised stock exchange in IFSC. In order to incentivise such bond listings in IFSC and also attract large-scale bond investments by foreign investors, such interest should be made tax-exempt.

Reduced tax rate on interest on external commercial borrowings (ECBs) by Indian entities: A reduced tax rate of 5% on such interest should be applicable on ECBs regardless of end use. This will significantly enhance the inflow of foreign currency funds and also make the process easier and frictionless.

Tax exemption for interest income on municipal bonds: With increasing focus and empowerment of local municipalities to facilitate investments and renewal of urban areas, interest on such bonds should be exempt for foreign investors to attract large pools of committed institutional capital in a critical area of the economy.

Enabling seamless amortisation on pre-set up expenses for capital projects: A frictionless and litigation-free mechanism should be provided to allow amortisation of all expenses incurred in pre-set up stage of a capital project. This will remove an insidious tax cost currently incurred due to a severely restricted regime of amortisation.

Views are personal

Vietnam is Asia's rising power to watch

IF YOU WANT a blueprint for how countries can survive this era of great power rivalry, look no further than Vietnam

A focus on economic growth and a determination to avoid dependence on any single power has transformed it into one of Asia's most successful states. Hanoi offers a model for how nations straddling the line between the US and China can thrive even during uncertainty.

President To Lam is driving this agenda. He effectively became the communist regime's strongman when he secured the role of president and held of state last month, a predictable outcome in the one-party state. Lam's ascension has drawn parallels with China's Xi Jinping because of the unusual concentration of power in one leader. Hanoi has lessons to share, as we'll hear when Lam delivers the keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on Friday. In the audience at Asia's premier security forum will be US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, along with other ministers, generals, and officials from a region worried about American unpredictability, China's growing military might, and whether middle powers will have to do more to protect themselves from both.

I've argued that countries in the Indo-Pacific need to form closer security ties, the way that Japan and the Philippines have this week. This is sensible policy — there is strength in numbers. Vietnam's strategy is unique in that it has built close links with the superpowers, but isn't beholden to them. It has managed to do this by avoiding formal alliances, foreign military bases, and alignment with any single bloc. The key difference now is how actively it's pursuing ties with other nations.

This gives Lam greater room to achieve his ambitious economic goals. But to grow at least 10% annually over the next five years — significantly higher than regional peers such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand — and to obtain its objective of developed country or high-income status by 2045, Hanoi needs a stable global environment. Last year, the export-dependent economy grew 8.02%, despite US tariff pressure.

Lam has devoted significant political capital to cultivating ties with President Donald Trump. He's upgraded the traditional "bamboo diplomacy" Hanoi has practised for decades to manage ties with both the US and China — two countries it has fought wars with. Few nations understand the dangers of dependence on great powers better than Vietnam, which has spent centuries resisting domination by larger states while still finding ways to benefit from them economically.

That means creating a wide web of partners, notes Do Khuong Manh Linh, a researcher with the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics. Lam's diplomatic push in recent months reflects that. Besides Trump and Xi, he's met with an enviable group of middle powers, including South Korea's President Lee Jae-myung, Japan's PM Sanae Takaichi, and India's Narendra Modi. This week alone, he's met Thailand's Antin Charinrakul and is due to see the leaders of Singapore and the Philippines.

So far, the strategy seems to be working. According to the Loy Institute's 2025 Asia Power Index, Vietnam recorded the second-largest increase in overall influence in the region. It ranks seventh in Asia for economic relationships, reflecting its growing integration into regional supply chains and expanding diplomatic reach. Lam is pushing through major administrative reforms aimed at speeding up decision-making and cutting bureaucracy. Plans include reducing the number of provinces and municipalities by almost half and restructuring ministries and agencies to make the system more efficient. That's helped by one of the lowest risks of policy gridlock among emerging markets, second only to China, notes Bloomberg Economics, aided in no small part by the convenience of being a one-party state, where rules can be implemented without democratic wrangling.

These successes do not mean Vietnam's model is risk-free. Higher fuel prices from the US-Israel war with Iran could derail Lam's growth targets. Globalisation is retreating and the rules-based international order is giving way to fights, industrial policy, and economic blocs. Trump could still choose to enforce stricter punishment for his complaint that large numbers of Chinese goods are simply transiting through the country, escaping American tariffs. In that environment, Hanoi will have less room to manoeuvre.



STEPHEN S ROACH

Faculty Member, Yale University, and former Chairman, Morgan Stanley Asia

CHINESE PRESIDENT Xi Jinping sent an unmistakably tough message on Taiwan to US President Donald Trump during their recent summit in Beijing. Xi warned that if the issue was handled poorly, China and the US would "collide or even clash", creating an "extremely dangerous situation". He stressed that Taiwan holds the key to Sino-American relations.

This is a classic example of the bright red lines that Xi has grown fond of drawing in recent years. In 2022, on the sidelines of a G20 meeting in Bali, he warned US President Joe Biden of four red lines in US-China relations: Taiwan, democracy and human rights, China's political system, and its rights to development. Thus, in addition to stressing China's claim over Taiwan, Xi asserted the country's strict control of Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet, as well as the Communist Party of China's political monopoly, while rejecting any US efforts to contain China's rise.

While Taiwan is always mentioned first in China's red-line hierarchy, the increased emphasis on it at the Beijing summit was clearly intended to sharpen the distinction between this warning and the others. But the ranking of red lines produces more questions than answers. If China successfully enforces the red line on Taiwan, would that allow the Chinese government to ease its vigilance on the others? If not, what's the point of differentiating between them?

More than a messaging problem, this is a worrisome form of what I call "red-line

inflation". To be sure, drawing a red line can be an effective tool of coercive diplomacy, so long as it satisfies four criteria: First, the behaviour or action that crosses the line must be clearly defined. Second, the person or agency determining whether it has been crossed should be specified. Third, the consequences of crossing the line must be severe. Lastly, whoever determines whether the line has been crossed should have the political authority to carry out the stipulated response.

Former US President Barack Obama famously demonstrated how a red line can backfire when he explicitly warned Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime in August 2012 against the use of chemical weapons on civilians. One year later, when evidence confirmed widespread deaths from sarin gas attacks near Damascus, Obama waffled, opting for congressional consultation instead of military action. Ultimately, the US agreed to a Russian-brokered deal with Syria to dismantle the regime's chemical-weapons arsenal. Obama's red line turned into a failed test of US credibility rather than a forceful tool of restraint.

Notwithstanding the bombing of Iran as part of "Operation Epic Fury", Trump's threats suffer from a similar credibility problem, especially given his so-called TACO

penchant for "always chickening out". America's red lines typically pertain to foreign dominance of the military-enabling technologies, countering nuclear threats, defending the security of allies, and standing up for democratic values. Unlike China's red lines, however, America's are more loosely defined and often express the country's aspirations more than concrete achievements.

That can lead to allegations of hypocrisy when the US demands that China respect a red line that its own officials have side-stepped. For example, after then US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made critical comments about China's human-rights record at a high-level exchange in Anchorage, Alaska, in early 2021, senior Chinese officials called out the US for its own human-rights record in the aftermath of Black

Lives Matter protests. Multiple red lines send mixed signals. Is the country drawing them determined to assert its global power, or is it in the grip of a national paranoia?

Red-line inflation makes compromise on one issue, while remaining unwavering on others, look like surrender. Claiming a profusion of existential threats may not only weaken credibility, thus incentivising adversaries to call a country's bluff, but

may also raise the accidental conflict risks.

By increasing the number of non-negotiable positions, multiple red lines reduce the space for effective diplomacy, without which leader-to-leader dialogues become all but meaningless. Focused on threats rather than conflict resolution, China's red lines tend to concern sovereignty, territorial integrity, regime security, and national rejuvenation. By contrast, in the pre-Trump era, America's were related to rules, alliance credibility, deterrence, and non-coercion. As was the case in Anchorage in 2021, these different perspectives often result in the two sides talking past each other — potentially misinterpreting strong rhetoric as something more dangerous. As yet another tool to limit red-line inflation is complicated by an asymmetrical aspect of the problem: While the US has increasingly emphasised the military threats posed by advanced technology, Xi's recent blunt remarks in Beijing suggest China has gone much further in sharpening its focus on Taiwan. Without conceding any ground on its other perceived existential threats, China has a more serious problem with red-line inflation than the US does.

This phenomenon is at odds with Xi's emphasis on "constructive strategic stability" at the Beijing summit. If it's unaddressed, red-line inflation risks suffocating China's aspirations to be seen as a responsible steward of global affairs.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2026. www.project-syndicate.org



KARISHMA VASWANI

Bloomberg

That means creating a wide web of partners, notes Do Khuong Manh Linh, a researcher with the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics. Lam's diplomatic push in recent months reflects that. Besides Trump and Xi, he's met with an enviable group of middle powers, including South Korea's President Lee Jae-myung, Japan's PM Sanae Takaichi, and India's Narendra Modi. This week alone, he's met Thailand's Antin Charinrakul and is due to see the leaders of Singapore and the Philippines.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Disclosures important

Apropos of "Shareholders first" (FE, May 29), the SEC's proposal aims to reduce pressure on businesses. It may create serious drawbacks for investors and the financial market. Quarterly earnings reports play a vital role in maintaining transparency and accountability in the corporate world. Investors rely on them to evaluate a company's financial health, profitability, and future prospects. If reporting becom-

es optional, companies may choose to withhold key information, making it difficult for shareholders to make informed decisions. And less frequent reporting could increase the chances of financial manipulation and insider trading. Small investors would suffer the most. Large institutional investors often have access to private research and analysis. Instead, the SEC should focus on improving the quality and clarity of financial disclosures. —Bal Govind, Noida

Growth reset

"Growth strategy amid war" (FE, May 29) is right in arguing that India's development strategy needs recalibration for a world of fragmented trade and recurring supply shocks. The point about strategic reserves deserves attention. Holding crude reserves sufficient for barely four days of consumption is a structural vulnerability that no amount of diplomatic dexterity can compensate for. Expanding

this to 75 days, as suggested, requires sustained fiscal commitment over several years — precisely the kind of long-horizon spending that annual budget cycles tend to defer. The emphasis on domestic production across defence, pharmaceuticals, and fertilisers is sound. But the *Atmanirbhar* strategy must be interpreted as building competitive self-reliance. —SM Jeeva, Chennai

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

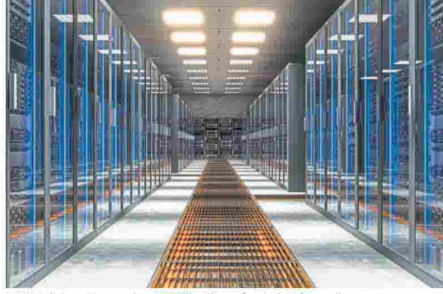
Time to say 'baked potato' to data centres



CHEAP THRILLS
NISHA SUSAN

Lewky, better known as Lewky, writes songs which are based on actual text exchanges between people on dating apps. In his videos, Lewky also dresses up as both parties in the conversations to great comedic effect. While it isn't his most famous video, my favourite is a song where a man is trying to figure whether he is talking to a bot pretending to be a person on Tinder. Typically, on social media, middle-aged and older men flirt without suspicion to the most obvious pornbots. In this video though, the man tries to test the bot by saying, "Say potato, Elizabeth". But Elizabeth (Lewky dressed up hilariously in discount robot gear with a silver-painted face and a blonde wig) relentlessly trots out scripted lines like "Hey, you are my first match" and "Why are you on Tinder?" The short video ends with the protagonist saying "say potato" with increasing desperation and Eliza-bot saying Ahaah. The Ahaah is so beautifully bot-approximating human that it reminds of the pricing insult in the children's show *The Bad Guys* where Shark pretends to be a killer robot and Snake asks why he

sounds like a microwave oven. These last few weeks, many people wanted a shibboleth like "say potato" to check if what they were looking at was human, bot or microwave oven. First, it came out that there was significant suspicion that the Commonwealth Short Story winner for the Caribbean region, Jamir Nazir's *The Serpent in the Grove* (which was published in *Granta*), was generated by AI. There is no reliable way of establishing the truth about AI usage but plenty of readers have pointed to ChatGPT symptoms in the story, such as a lot of repetition and the infamous "not x, but y" sentence structure. One of my favourite responses to this situation came from the Booker Prize-winning Jamaican author Marlon James who has written book after book without being stuck in any box the world has for him. For instance, he has a complicated novel notionally about the attempted assassination of Bob Marley, a Caribbean Gothic novel and also multiple fantasy series. James, now widely accepted as a brilliant blessing to literature, had his first novel rejected 78 times. In response to this suspicious *Serpent* situation, James posted on Facebook: "Forget AI for a minute. A story won an International Competition with a line like this: 'The girl smiled like sunrise over a sink.' Maybe her name was Elizabeth." The Commonwealth Foundation is continuing to promote the story regardless. Honestly though, the Commonwealth and Jamir Nazir had a soft land-



In 2023, data centres used up 140 billion litres of water just for cooling. ISTOCKPHOTO

ing. That's because in the same week, we were all shocked by Nobel Prize-winner Olga Tokarczuk said that she had been exploring AI to write her latest novel. She said she had used the paid model of an LLM (large language model) to ask questions like what songs her protagonists could have been listening to at a dance a couple decades ago. She apparently said, "Often I just ask the machine, 'darling, how could we develop this beautifully?'" Understandably, many, many people were appalled not least because Tokarczuk had uttered beatitudes like "perhaps a symbiotic future and coopera-

tion with artificial intelligence will help authors in the future." Background music: lalala. Later after the shock had run around the world saying "did you hear *Olga ne kya kya*", she issued a statement to Lit Hub saying that she uses whatever LLM she uses only for research and not for writing. This short statement then has a plot twist that her darling AI couldn't have thought up. She wrote, "I am sometimes inspired by dreams, but before this sentence too is cornered and torn to pieces by the experts, I hasten to report that they are my own dreams." Oh, Olga. Part of the irritation that people have with this situation is that it is being

served to us as inevitable. As if it is not actually possible to write a novel or a short story without using an LLM. Many, many writers joke that the best part of writing is having finished it. Yet the impulse to create beauty persists. At this moment a seven-year-old somewhere near you is writing their first poem or drawing their first colour pencil drawing of a dog. That poem is adding to the grain-by-grain arrangement of the beach of human dreams—aka art. You running in the park every morning may look like it has nothing to do with Sebastian Savae running a marathon under 2 hours for the first time in history. Yet your thump-thump-thumping around that cracked track is your tribute to the human enterprise of wonderful, pointless running. Using AI to write a short story seems as pointless to me as making a Savae-bot run a one-hour marathon. That bot doesn't salute your running in sweat and slush. Your sweat and slush doesn't salute the Savae-bot. That seven-year-old, you, Savae and Marlon James are running in a common dream. Artists using AI are mimicking the no-limits, all shortcuts, everyone out-of-any-way capitalist model. The same model that is so gleeful about the pyramid scheme that they are selling to all of us if it is inevitable. Is it? Can we not write or research or go goofy memes on Photoshop without sucking up all the water in the world? In 2023, the International Energy Agency estimated that data centres around the world

used up 140 billion litres of water (just for cooling, not for the much, much more thirsty task of running the centres). It is so easy for billionaires to stroll in and say that a data centre is somehow going to bring jobs, and stroll away in a couple of years, leaving behind literal and metaphorical scorched-earth. At that point, they can say "those were our dreams, oops". Hearing the news that a massive data centre is coming to Hyderabad reminded me of an old friend. Twenty years ago, during a summer, temperatures were estimated to hit close to 50 degrees Celsius and back then it was considered a rare level of heat for anywhere in India and certainly dangerous for humans. My friend Basava was working in an NGO that helped children who lived on the streets and in slums. Basava ran around in the early weeks of that summer renting small spaces and stocking them with fans, water and TVs so that the children had a place to get away from the sun. That summer he and his colleagues kept the children they worked with safe and replete with cartoons and fluids. In 2026, we are supposed to accept 50 degrees as a terrible summer. As the giant plan their new data centres all over India, Hyderabad is projected to have a water shortage of 900 million litres a day in the next two years. Time to say baked potato. Nisha Susan is the author of *The Women Who Forgot to Invent Facebook* and *Other Stories*.

When satire hits the sweet spot

Shrilal Shukla's 1968 novel 'Raag Darbari' remains a touchstone to understand India's governance dystopia, a new book reveals

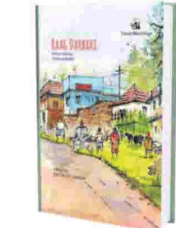
Aditya Mani Jha

Nearly 60 years ago, one of the most influential Hindi satirical novels was published—Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* (1968). Shukla, a former Provincial Civil Service officer working with the Uttar Pradesh government, presented an unforgettably dire portrait of India's Hindi heartland through the fictional village of Shivpalganj, where the novel unfolds. In the decades since its publication, *Raag Darbari* has been adapted for stage and screen, and every new production has underlined the novel's enduring prescience. Shukla's Everyman central character is an idealistic graduate called Rangnath who has just finished a master's degree in History. When Rangnath (who resembles Voltaire's *Candide* in his tragicomic naivete) visits his uncle "Vaidya-ji" in Shivpalganj, he finds himself with front-row tickets to the massive failures, inadequacies and hypocrisies of the still-nascent Indian state. The villagers are utterly dominated by the Machiavellian Vaidya-ji and his cronies, especially his wastrel sons, Rupan the student leader and Badri the *pahalwan* (wrestler). The local school and college are dysfunctional, corruption-riddled social welfare schemes seldom reach the people, while caste and gender-based oppression run rampant. Through the novel's anecdotal structure, we see how the scales gradually fall from Rangnath's eyes until he is convinced that this unique corner of the world is well beyond redemption. A recent book, *Raag Darbari: Polity as Fiction, Fiction as Reality*, edited by scholar Satyajit Singh, Shukla's classic from a political and social-science perspective. This well-researched, consistently insightful book began life as an academic conference on Shukla's novel, supported by Delhi University, where Singh teaches political science. In its final form, the book escapes the constraints of academic discourse and confronts some of the urgent governance challenges and societal obstacles faced by Uttar Pradesh and other Hindi-speaking states today. Across 10 essays (Singh writes the opening and closing chapters himself), this volume asks whether the "governance dystopia" described by Shukla has improved at all, nearly six decades after the novel's publication. Is the delivery of social welfare, the running of local institutions any smoother? Are we finally free of regional primaturs like Vaidya-ji? Or have we simply replaced the old figureheads with "new darbars and pahalwans that continue to mock the might of the state, and more pertinently, the will of the people?"



In 'Raag Darbari's' fictional village, social welfare schemes seldom reached the people. ISTOCKPHOTO

Singh asks in his opening gambit. Viboth Parthasarathi, in his essay *Darbari Redux: The Dystopian Roots of Public Communication*, notes that early editions of *Raag Darbari*, published by Rajkamal Prakashan, featured a cracked rural wall on the cover, cement peeling off and a medley of handprints in red and black signalling general despair. Using this as a starting point, Parthasarathi draws a number of artful parallels between Shivpalganj's "village wall" and the contemporary Facebook "wall". In Parthasarathi's reading, both these walls operate at the border of the public and the private, signalling a kind of public privacy that anybody who has lived in the Indian countryside will be instantly familiar with. For instance, an early episode in the novel follows the aftermath of the village wall being painted over with a federal government advertisement, where a muscular, hard-working farmer is being exhorted to grow more foodgrain by a cheerful young woman. In theory, the villagers are supposed to see themselves in the advertisement, and therefore be spurred on to greater agricultural productivity. In practice, however, the villagers decide that the muscular farmer looks like Badri the *pahalwan* and this creates a distance between the government's intended public service announcement and the villagers' take-away—what Parthasarathi calls "pahalwan publicness" in the register of the novel. Another pertinent example of this public-private liminality is the variety of nude-wink messages painted on the vil-



Raag Darbari: Polity as Fiction, Fiction as Reality. Edited by Satyajit Singh. Orient Blackswan, 248 pages, ₹1,560.

The book confronts some of the most important governance challenges and societal obstacles faced by Uttar Pradesh and other Hindi-speaking states today

lage wall, promising men that their sexual ailments will be cured in a jiffy by the Ayurvedic medicines peddled by (who else) Vaidya-ji himself. Therefore, mass media (newspapers, radios) in the context of Shivpalganj are little more than "mediated presences", as Parthasarathi phrases it—a message-stream will have to be filtered through the malicious membrane of Vaidya-ji and his men. Parthasarathi's essay is sandwiched between two entries that underline the strikingly contemporary modes of *Raag Darbari's* language and its political expressions—Ulka Anjaria's *The Contemporaneity of Raag Darbari* and Ashutosh Kumar's *Politics and Government in the Hindi Heartland: Revisiting 'Raag Darbari'*. Almost 20 years before *Midnight's Children* made it cool to do so, here was a Hindi novel that deployed modern-day "Hinglish" (Hindi with prolific usage of untranslated English loan-words) not just as intermittent comic relief, but as the dominant register of entire conversations. Within the first 10 pages of *Raag Darbari*, you will find "station-wagon", "CID", "managing director" et al printed in the Devanagari script) sans explanation. As Kumar points out in his essay, the linguistic choices made by Shukla in the novel are significant in and of themselves. While Rangnath slips into English words regularly a darkly funny sense towards the beginning of the novel sees him explaining the concept of a master's degree to a truck driver, the villagers and Vaidya-ji himself use a mixture of Awadhi, Braj and the "khadi boli" that even-

tually came to be recognised as "standardised" Hindi. This divergence is also one of the ways in which Shukla alludes to the distance between the actual on-ground state of governance in Shivpalganj and what the Anglicised, college-educated elite think governance should be in the newly-independent nation state. This issue assumes even greater significance when you remember the aggressive promotion of Hindi as not just "raajbhasha" (official language) but "rashtreebhasha" (national language), feeding into the Hindutva politics that would come to define this part of the world in the subsequent decades. Philip Oldenburg's essay *The Folklore of Corruption in Uttar Pradesh* argues elegantly, but it is also the one essay in the book with which I found myself disagreeing vociferously. Oldenburg is responding to Akhil Gupta's 2005 paper *Narratives of Corruption: Anthropological and Fictional Accounts of the Indian State*, where the latter explains how and why he came to read *Raag Darbari* as a quasi-ethnographic document on corruption, despite its status as a work of fiction. Gupta's argument is that it is near impossible to research Indian corruption using a rigorous, fact-based, social scientist's methodology. People lie, mislead and embellish facts in this context all the time and besides, acts of corruption operate on an inherently covert/mutual trust rather than a written contract. Oldenburg's big argument challenging Gupta's paper is that "while there was cer-

tainly fire producing smoke, the amount of smoke did not accurately indicate the extent of the fire." According to Oldenburg, if a landowning villager willingly pays a sum of money for, say, expediting *chakbandi* (land consolidation), the government officer in question cannot be said to be corrupt. Using economist Gunnar Myrdal's "folklore of corruption" theory, which spoke to a pessimistic acceptance of corrupt practices in developing countries, Oldenburg suggests that the earlier sequence of events should be described as paying a "fee", not a "bribe", because it is now "part of the system". Essentially, Oldenburg's argument is akin to Franz Kafka's parable: "Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial vessels dry; this is repeated over and over again; eventually it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony." Oldenburg claims, somewhat understandably, that a certain amount of greasing-the-wheels is not just necessary but inevitable in developing societies. However, he largely ignores the flipside of this argument, which pertains to the widespread erosion of public trust in the federal government. If the public at large is desensitised to corruption in governance, the social contract that keeps them paying taxes, feeding into social welfare schemes, and so on, will soon be shattered, with devastating consequences. Simply put, the average tax payer has to believe that his money is being used honestly and efficiently, otherwise they have no incentive to keep pumping capital into the welfare state (even a well-intentioned one). An entrenched system of this kind will soon devolve into a "pay-for-play" cronny state, where only the super-wealthy have any influence at all on policy decisions. American society spent decades obsessing over low-income "welfare queens" allegedly defrauding the state—and it has led them to Trump 2.0 where immigration officials can now lock anyone up for no reason at all, but wealthy immigrants can purchase the so-called "Trump Gold Card" that buys them citizenship for the princely sum of \$1 million. Surely, Oldenburg, a longtime professor at Columbia, could have used his own country's trajectory to offer, at the very least, a necessary counterweight to his provocative argument. The other contributors build their arguments off lesser-known essays of *Raag Darbari*. Paroma Ray's aspect, for example, starts with the near-total absence of women from the novel's "main" narrative, and branches out into what it means for Indian women in public and private realms. Gunjal Hair Munda's *Adwasi Worldview and Modern Politics* contrasts the politics of an average Adwasi village with the local politics of a Hindi-speaking village as depicted in *Raag Darbari*. Taken as a whole, *Raag Darbari: Polity as Fiction* throws some intriguing ideas around Shukla's magnum opus and its implications for contemporary Indian society and politics. Even when I disagreed with the book, it was fully locked in. And isn't that the platonic ideal that academic discourse is supposed to achieve? Aditya Mani Jha is a Delhi-based writer.

Beyond Fast-Moving CGs for Quick-Com

Push price sensitivity to impulse-buying

Consumer goods and quick commerce seem to be made for each other. Food, beverages and personal care are riding the surge in qcom sales, and the channel has come to dominate their online presence. Impulse-buying is beginning to catch on in smaller cities, and FMCG companies expect the share of qcom will continue to climb among online channels. This helps them push premiumisation by nudging sales away from staples on e-marketplaces to higher-value discretionary categories in qcom storefronts. By capturing the high-frequency component of ecommerce, qcom has drawn interest from Amazon and Flipkart.

There are, however, several challenges to the business model. Managing high-speed inventory in hyperlocal stores burns lots of cash. Feeding the impulse-buying habit through 10-min-odd deliveries raises labour and environmental concerns. Thin operating margins need to be offset by pricing models that yield the advantage to discounting by online supermarkets. Pushback from offline retail can be expected to intensify as qcom scales up. The warehousing advantage in large cities may not work quite as well in smaller towns. The main challenge to qcom, though, will be to change customer behaviour across market segments to favour impulse-buying over price sensitivity.

FMCG companies must hedge their qcom bets and deepen their online presence through alternative channels. Qcom grew out of temporary changes to consumer behaviour following the pandemic, and it's too early to conclude that these alterations will be permanent. India is an exception here. The qcom experience has been mixed in other countries. Alongside consumer preferences, social awareness about the economic cost of impatience will evolve as India's retail market matures. This holds true particularly for non-grocery items that come with a fast delivery promise/expectation. Qcom must demonstrate its ability to retail across a wider range of products higher up the retail hierarchy to establish itself as an alternative to established ecom models.

Why 'Trump Regime' Is Accurate Usage

Readers must have noticed our consistent use of 'Trump regime' on this page. The jury will probably be out for good as to whether Republican senator Dave McCormick's use of the term earlier this week on Fox News was deliberate, or a slip—hellater corrected himself to 'Trump administration'. But calling Trump's tenure a 'regime' is neither a mistake nor rhetorical excess. In fact, it's linguistically precise. In political science, 'regime' refers to the system of governance itself; rules of the game, the way power is exercised and constrained.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal regime reshaped American capitalism. Ronald Reagan's conservative regime redefined the state-market balance. Trump's years similarly altered the constitutional equilibrium, privileging executive fiat over legislative compromise. 'Administration' suggests managerial neutrality. 'Regime' signals something more troubling: centralisation of authority undermining of institutions, elevation of personality over process—the stuff of Beijing, Tehran, Pyongyang... and now Washington.

In popular culture, of course, we speak of diet or fitness regimes—strict, rule-bound systems that demand obedience. Applied to Trump, the term captures both the rigidity and theatricality of his rule: executive orders as performance art, loyalty tests as rituals, governance as spectacle, hyperbolic announcements on social media as policy. To call Trump's tenure a regime recognises that the US is currently living through a presidency that governs less by institutions than by individual whim. It may not sound right to many ears because of the perception of the US as 'land of the free' in our collective muscle memory. But it is what it is: correct usage that reflects the nature of the beast.



JUST IN JEST

The decimal point is in danger of becoming redundant in our dotty times

(Dashmav) Bindu Khatre Mein Hai!

You may not have noticed, but the decimal point is facing an existential crisis. Over the dignified custodian of precision, it now finds itself mocked, ignored and occasionally replaced by emojis. But the greatest threat to its form is the ignominy of being 'rounded off'. Accountants once bowed before it. Engineers whispered secrets to it in their dotty ears. Patriarchs once counted on it. Today, the dashmav bindu is reduced to a misplaced bindi, a punctuation refugee wandering between numbers like a grandpa.

Think of its plight. In supermarket racks, a pack of chips is no longer ₹29.99 any more, providing us that psychological comfort and kick of being under ₹30. It's now 'fully 30', because decimals are apparently too delicate for aspirational kirana counters. Which is ironic in this age of QR and online payment where that paisa can be 'returned' as change. Worse, inflation has turned it into a cruel joke. What's the difference between ₹99.99 and ₹100? Nothing, except the decimal point's desperate attempt to stay relevant. If existential crises had a mascot, it would be this lonely dot. Once a guardian of nuance, it's now a victim of rounding, inflation and human impatience. The decimal point doesn't just separate numbers but keeps barbarism and civilisation apart. Ignore it, and we'll soon be counting our days.

TECHNIK The world, us included, is becoming training data for AI, for which we're unprotected

YOU ARE THE PRODUCT



Nikhil Pahwa

There's a reason why the grid of images that pops up online when you're trying to gain access to a website or 'prove that you're human'.

It makes you identify motorcycles, buses or zebra crossings. Your labour of picking the right image is being used to train the AI that will drive driverless cars. Our email messages are probably used to train AI that provides auto-complete. The fact that all around digital space, what we do, and how we do things, are used to train AI.

Pronto, a home services startup founded in 2025 by Anjali Sardana, is running a pilot where workers wear cameras inside customers' homes. Pronto's investor Glade Brook Capital describes the footage as training data for physical AI and robotics systems. This has made people uncomfortable with the idea.

A few things to consider: We need to understand that Pronto is an AI data collection company masquerading as a home services company. Its real valuation, validated by its investor, lies in collecting data inside homes. Why is this data valuable?

Speaking at Super AI conference in Singapore last year, Persona AI CEO Nikolaus Radford highlighted that home is the hardest environment for humanoid robots to operate in because the work is unstructured and complex. Even small changes like different lighting impacts how humanoid robots perceive the environment and act in it. You can't replicate the variance in this envi-



Beta testing the beta tester

ronment via simulations. This makes training data inside homes extremely valuable for companies looking to train humanoid robots to operate in homes. Radford pointed out that 'the next 50 years are going to be the ubiquitous manipulation of the physical world, and that includes appropriate data training models, getting them distilled and deployed to produce action.'

While the recording is in a trusted environment of a one-time or short-term transaction, it's possible to see this as a mere transaction between a company, gig worker and home-owner. Pronto says that it is an opt-in for customers—they get a lower price for allowing recording—and they can choose to decline.

Meit'y was myopic enough to incorporate a clause stating that publicly available personal data is outside Digital Personal Data Protection Act's scope

don't necessarily realise. The home, and placement of items inside it, are being recorded. What precautions does the company take to ensure the footage isn't available to other people? Or that a second camera isn't used to record, and won't aid a crime later?

Tech companies, whether Airbnb or Uber, have operated on the principle of avoiding costly privacy issues and fixing issues only after harm. While the burden of proof for protecting against crime lies squarely with Pronto to have its legal terms explicitly absolve itself of all liability of the actions of its 'professionals', Pronto says that the footage will be deleted in 48 hrs. But we can't just take the claim of a tech company faced by criticism at mere face value.

Pronto's pitch to workers—that they 'participate in the AI economy'—rings hollow. Their embodied knowledge of navigating cluttered kitchens, handling fragile objects in an unfamiliar space, is being extracted, permanently. They're an instrument of a tech company faced by criticism at mere face value.

you cannot process behavioural data of a child. While Pronto says that it's compliant with DPDPDA, the privacy policy on its website, dated November 2024, makes no mention of video recording, parental consent or capturing training data for the purposes of AI training. As such, the purpose limitation requirements are not met, nor are they explicit.

The larger problem is that DPDPDA is built for the online space and for an individual's user behaviour and performance. It's not designed for video recording, parental consent or capturing training data for the purposes of AI training. As such, the purpose limitation requirements are not met, nor are they explicit.

What's happening inside homes with Pronto is symptomatic of a larger issue that is upon us—of capturing personal information without consent, as bystanders. Google has just launched AI glasses. Lenskart is launching its H-glasses. Kaze. And Meta mainstreamed

Pronto is an AI data collection company masquerading as a home services company. Its real valuation, validated by its investor, lies in collecting data inside homes

this with its Ray-Ban and Oakley glasses. Meta was found to be sending private camera recordings from glasses—including explicit content—to annotators in Kenya recently, without the wearers' knowledge.

The writer is founder, MediaNama

We, the Last Overgeneration



Harsh Goenka

So, here we go again. Deep into Sunday night, we'll again have our hearts in our mouths on that final over of another IPL final, which makes this the regime for Baby Boomers like myself to ask ourselves the question: when did we succumb to the IPL's razzmatazz? And betray that game most of us grew up worshipping?

Cricket was once about character building. But almost overnight, cricket got cheerleaders, strategic time-outs, orange and purple caps, dress cameras, dugout microphones and specialised batsmen—sorry, batters—called 'finishers'. In the 70-80s, no kid ever wanted to be a 'finisher'. The goal was to become an opener or a dependable middle-order batsman with solid technique. But, today, some of the loudest IPL enthusiasts are Baby Boomers and Gen Xers.

today lives a double life. In public, he declares, 'T20 is not real cricket.' In private, he's standing in front of the TV screen at 11.42 pm following a cliffhanger.

You see watch IPL differently. Young fans watch emotionally while we view it more clinically. A 25-year-old sees a 6 and shouts, 'Brooooo! Our reaction?' 'Him. Slightly overpitched ball... In our time... While watching, we delve into history every 6 mins. Yorkers remind us of Waqar; elegant cover drives of Gowar; every aggressive batsman we takes us back to Lloyd. Our minds are essentially an ESPN archive on steroids. Even while enjoying IPL, we continue mourning the death of 'proper cricket'.

The greatest gift people in their 50s-60s bring to IPL is perspective. We have seen enough to know that talent is common, but character is rare. We can spot which youngsters are likely to play the long haul, and which ones will be forgotten by the next auction. We also watch it with certain practical expectations. The volume on TV remains permanently at 38% because someone at home is sleeping, and we are considerate. We wish there were subtitles because commentators now speak at the speed of horse racing commentators. We pause

matches every 40 mins for tea, bathroom visits or medication. Unlike younger viewers, we experience no guilt whatsoever about falling asleep during strategic time-out, and we don't directly in the final over. T20 cricket is wonderfully senior-friendly that way. One glance on the scoreboard, and we immediately re-construct the entire narrative with the confidence of retired detectives.

Many Baby Boomers Gen Xers even develop expertise in fitness science during IPL, discussing Kohli's athleticism, Sharma's trimmed look and Bumrah's injuries. This from men whose primary exercise for years has been little more than hunting

for misplaced reading glasses. But perhaps what makes IPL special for this 'experienced' lot is nostalgia hidden inside the chaos. Every match reminds them of how far in eight years ago. We remember listening to commentary on scratchy transistor radios. Remember how we needed radical adjustments of the antenna to our B&W TV sets, and then neighbour boys had caught around one TV during Sharjah finals.

We remember when cricketers travelled cattle class carrying their own physical and earned less over their careers than what today's players make from shampoo endorsements. Today, franchise values rival MNCs. An uncapped player earns more in eight months than most CEOs earn in a year. And, oddly enough, instead of resenting this transformation, most 'old-timers' seem delighted by such developments. Because somewhere deep down, we know we earned this spectacle.

We sat through rain-affected draws, defensive captaincy, slow over rates and rain interruptions. We saw rain, but we survived. We survived the era where a one-day score of 250 felt impossible. After all that patience, life owes us a little madness.

The writer is chairman, RPO Enterprises

Aimed or Not, Does the Book Matter?



Roopa Kudva

The recent conversation over whether a Commonweath Short Story Prize narrative was written by AI is understandable. It's also beside the point.

Assume that AI has been used in producing a book to the maximum extent possible. Then, as a jury member, ask the harder question: what exactly are we judging? Is it originality of idea? Creativity of structure? Power of language? Overall impact on the reader? These are questions that literary award organisations have always needed to answer. AI's advent simply forces them to answer them sharply and honestly.

The idea of solitary authorship has always been a romantic one—by a complete myth. Consider the relationship between a writer and an editor. A great editor does not just correct grammar, but also challenges structure, questions characters in the story or narrative, pushes back on endings, and occasionally suggests entirely new directions. Max

well Perkins shaped Ernest Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald into the writers we now remember. Nobody writes a book like The Old Man and the Sea was 'truly' Hemingway's when he won the Pulitzer and Nobel for the novella in 1953 and 1954, respectively.

And editors are only part of the story. Beta readers—people who read early manuscripts and provide detailed feedback—routinely shape what a book becomes.

Then there's ghostwriting, which is more prevalent than the literary world likes to admit. Harry's 2023 memoir, Spare, and Andre Agassi's 2009 memoir, Open, were both written by the same ghostwriter, J.R. Moehringer. Few people remember his name. Fewer still argued that either book was 'inauthentic'.

Some will argue that even if we accept AI's role in the writing, surely, the originating idea must be the author's, no less. A weak sensibility working with AI will produce a weak work. A strong one will produce something that reflects that strength—perhaps more efficiently but no less authentically.

And, importantly, AI grants every day writers resources previously available only to those with access to top editorial talent. The award jury, in any case, has the final word. They read what is on the page. They do not read the process. If the work moves them, it moves them. AI-generated mediocrity will still read as mediocrity, and won't make the cut.

The AI tool is available to everyone. Authors who write with intelligence, taste and rigour will produce better work than those who do not. That has always been true of every tool available to writers—spellcheck, thesaurus, grammar, structural editors, copy editors... What AI is doing is a combination of all of these, at once and on demand.

The right response is not to police the tool—but to battle that cannot be won—but to trust the judgement we already have. Simply ask what we have always really been asking: does this book matter?

The writer is former CEO, Crisil

THE SPEAKING TREE

First, Learn How to Listen

SWAMI SUKHAHOBHANANDA

One of the oldest types of literature in the world is Vedas. Another is the Vedas shruti, shru-ti, shru-ti, meaning that which is heard.

The art of listening is the essence of Veda. If one knows how to listen to the master, to enlightened teachers and to everything in nature like Dattatreya, then nature becomes the guru.

Truly listen, the listener with-in must disappear. The listener is not nothing but one's autobiography identify we carry within us. There is always a listener inside us. This listener is shaped by our past experiences and conditioning. According to trishis, the listener is often imprisoned by personal opinions, dogmas and conclusions. While listening, these inner ideas interfere with the process. Instead of listening to what is being said, we begin listening according to what we already know and believe.

Whenever someone speaks to us, we may think we are listening. Truly listen, the listener we are merely hearing. The listener inside us constantly edits, judges and interprets words.

This inner translation pollutes the process of listening. If a person genuinely knows how to listen, he or she becomes an enlightened being. Even in elementary classical music, listening plays a vital role. A student takes years to understand and recognise the seven musical notes: Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha and Ni.

It means, therefore, not easy hence, Vedas say 'atmanava shrotavyam', which means, 'First, learn how to listen.'

LLOLLING ON SATURDAY

Brush Up on Austerity

A family decided to cut costs by sharing one toothbrush. 'It builds character,' said the father.

'And cavities,' muttered the mother. The teenage son suggested brushing only on alternate days. Grandma, ever thrifty, proposed they skip toothpaste altogether and just whisper 'Jai Neeem Devi' while brushing. The dentist now drives a BMW, courtesy of their austerity plan.

Training Programme

The city unveiled a cost-cutting metro plan—trains would no longer stop at stations. Passengers must jump off while moving. 'It saves electricity,' explained the minister. 'And bones,' muttered the commuters, as orthopaedic surgeons prepared for a boom in business. To save further, tickets were replaced with IOUs scribbled on paper napkins.

Cutting Coffee

A CEO declared, 'We're embracing austerity! No more free coffee.' Employees revolted. He compromised. 'Fine, you can have coffee. But only if you bring your own beans, grinder and electricity. We'll provide the mug, but it's a rental.' Later, HR announced that chairs were optional. 'Standing builds resilience,' said the HR mail. By year's end, the company saved enough to order posters to be displayed across the office that read: Efficiency is worth suffering for.

Chat Room

Facing the Retro Music

Apropos the Edil, 'Killing Online Betting Softly with Retro Tax' (May 25), the Supreme Court's approval of 'backdated GST' claims on online gaming companies resolves one regulatory problem while creating another. Retrospice taxation, however, justified in intent, sends a chilling signal to the broader digital entertainment industry that policy goals can shift without warning. Retrospice taxation approach is tightening regulation and taxation on wagering going forward, while ring-fencing non-wagering skill games from punitive treatment. India has genuine strengths in gaming technology and a large young market. Blunt fiscal instruments should not be allowed to dampen that potential. K.P. Bhakumati Chennai



Editor's TAKE

TFR Drop: When progress becomes a peril

India's fertility decline is a sign of progress. Managing its consequences wisely will be the real test of governance

It is irony at its finest. India has long been obsessed with its population – too many people chasing too few resources. Decades of family planning campaigns, incentives and occasional coercion were aimed at one goal: fewer births.

As the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) drops below sustainable levels, the real concern is no longer population explosion, but the consequences of falling fertility. The data now confirm that we have largely succeeded. But the big question that stares us in the face is: what happens next?

The latest estimates reveal that India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has slipped well below comfortable levels. Urban India now records a TFR of just 1.5 – a number closer to ageing Japan than to a young, growing nation. Rural India holds steady at 2.1, precisely the replacement level, but that fragile equilibrium will not last long as urbanisation accelerates. The country that once feared a population explosion is quietly moving towards a population implosion, a trend seen in many developed nations.

The causes are neither mysterious nor uniquely Indian. Rapid urbanisation has compressed living spaces and inflated costs, making large families economically unviable. Women's rising educational attainment and workforce participation – unambiguously good things – have delayed marriage and childbearing. Access to contraception has improved dramatically. And perhaps most powerfully, aspirations have changed: urban couples increasingly invest heavily in one or two children rather than raising several. The shift from quantity to quality of offspring is a universal feature of development. India has simply reached that inflection point faster in its cities than anticipated.

A falling TFR is not, by itself, a crisis. The danger lies in the transition and in what it does to the age structure of society. Within a generation, India's celebrated demographic dividend – its vast working-age population – will begin to invert. A shrinking workforce will be asked to support a growing elderly population, placing pressure on pension systems, healthcare infrastructure and social security frameworks, which are already under strain.

The political consequences could be equally disruptive. India's federal system allocates parliamentary seats and central funds partly on the basis of population. States in the south and urban centres – which have controlled fertility the longest – stand to lose representation relative to states where TFRs remain higher. This threatens to deepen regional grievances.

India needs a smarter, three-pronged response. First, make parenthood less economically punishing through affordable childcare, housing subsidies for young families and flexible work policies. Second, build the social infrastructure for an ageing population now, not after the crisis arrives.

Third, revisit the political compact around delimitation, finding formulae that reward states for human development rather than penalising them for it.

India cannot afford ambiguity in West Asia

West Asia's instability now directly threatens India's energy security, maritime trade routes, economic interests, and the safety of millions of Indians living across the Gulf



SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI

West Asia has ceased to be a distant crisis zone that India can manage with cautious rhetoric and calibrated ambiguity. The Iran-Israel-US war has made the region's instability immediate, structural, and deeply relevant to India's energy security, maritime access, trade routes, and the safety of millions of Indians across the Gulf. That reality leaves New Delhi with a choice: adapt strategically or keep reacting to shocks it should have anticipated.

For too long, India's West Asia policy has relied on a familiar formula: engage everyone, offend no one, and let the region's storms pass around us. That formula worked when the region was volatile but still relatively containable. It is far less convincing now, because the conflict has exposed a more dangerous landscape: weakened states, competing external powers, new forms of warfare, and a regional order moving beyond old assumptions. India can no longer afford to think of West Asia as a background problem.

The old playbook is breaking

The first lesson of the war is that maximum pressure did not produce maximum results. The assumption that coercion, regime-change logic, and "shock and awe" could force Iran into political submission has not held up. Instead, the conflict has deepened instability and made the region less predictable. India should draw a hard conclusion from that failure: imported strategic theories do not guarantee regional order, and wishful thinking is not policy. That matters because India's own interests are tied to the region's stability in the most direct way possible. Energy corridors, shipping lanes, and trade routes are all exposed when West Asia convulses. So is the security of India's 10-million-strong diaspora. In a country that depends on imported energy and uninterrupted maritime access, these are not side issues. They sit at the core of national interest. The traditional "Look West" and "Link West" frameworks now face a genuine stress test. They were built for an era in which India could pursue steady ties across the region without being forced into sharper strategic choices. That era is over.

The region is more multipolar, more militarised, and more vulnerable to spillover than it was before. A serious power cannot keep using a lower-intensity foreign policy vocabulary in a higher-intensity environment.

This is where India must move beyond the comfort of balancing. Balance is useful; drift is



WEST ASIA IS NOW A TEST OF WHETHER INDIA WANTS TO ACT LIKE A CONSEQUENTIAL POWER OR MERELY A CAUTIOUS ONE. THE REGION TOUCHES INDIA'S ECONOMY, ITS DIASPORA, ITS SEAS Lanes, AND ITS DIPLOMATIC STANDING. THAT MAKES IT CENTRAL, NOT SECONDARY

The writer is President of the Chintan Research Foundation and former Director of WTO
 @daily_pioneer
 @TheDailyPioneer
 ThePioneer

not. India should certainly continue engaging all major regional actors, but it also needs to speak and act more clearly when its interests are at stake. A rising power cannot be content to look neutral while others shape the regional order around it. That means thinking harder about diplomacy, maritime security, and energy resilience at the same time. The war has become a laboratory for asymmetrical tactics and new military technologies, and those developments are redefining maritime and security risks in the wider region. India's free access to international waters cannot be treated as an abstract principle; it is a practical requirement that needs investment, planning, and deterrence.

India also needs to see itself, and be seen, as a stabilising force. As its economic and military weight grows, its diplomatic posture must grow with it. That does not mean seeking confrontation. It means being prepared to make principled, proactive interventions on issues that affect global supply chains, regional security, and the safety of Indian citizens. If India wants strategic respect, it must demonstrate strategic seriousness.

China, Pakistan and the real contest
 The emerging landscape also requires a clearer reading of external actors. China has

not been a passive observer; its background support to Iran and the benefits it draws from instability should be taken seriously. That does not mean India should overstate every move as part of a grand confrontation, but it does mean that Beijing's role should be understood as part of the wider contest over influence in West Asia.

Pakistan, by contrast, should not be allowed to distort the larger picture. Its role as a facilitator matters far less than whether diplomacy produces a workable peace. That is the right standard for India too. Diplomacy is not a zero-sum game. If a settlement reduces pressure and lowers the risk of escalation, India has an interest in that outcome regardless of who claims credit.

It is also important not to reduce West Asia to sectarian shorthand. The Shia-Sunni divide is often overplayed by Western commentators. The more important dynamic is competition for leadership, legitimacy, and strategic influence across the region. India's policy will be stronger if it is built on that reality rather than on simplistic labels that obscure more than they explain.

A better Indian line

There are signs that New Delhi has already begun to adjust. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visits to Israel and the UAE suggested a subtle recalibration in India's regional posture. Recent visits by India's National Security Adviser and External Affairs Minister to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar point in the same direction. So does India's support at the BRICS foreign ministers' meeting in Delhi for a two-state solution

on Palestine, including a reference to East Jerusalem. These and similar gestures indicate that India is trying to regain strategic credibility after a period in which its position looked less settled than before.

That effort is welcome, but it must not stop at symbolism. India has done well, so far, to secure its energy position better than many others. But short-term insulation is different from long-term strategy. New Delhi needs a more durable framework for crisis response, maritime protection, energy diversification, and regional engagement. It should plan for instability instead of assuming that instability will always remain manageable.

West Asia is now a test of whether India wants to act like a consequential power or merely a cautious one. The region touches India's economy, its diaspora, its sea lanes, and its diplomatic standing. That makes it central, not secondary. If India wants to shape the world around it, it must first show that it can read this region with clarity and respond with confidence. In West Asia, hesitation is also a choice, but it is becoming a costly one.



A peacock displays its plumage in Gurugram, Haryana. PHOTO: PTI

PICTALK

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

www.dailypioneer.com
 facebook.com/daily_pioneer @TheDailyPioneer
 instagram.com/daily_pioneer linkedin.com/in/ThePioneer

Why good people are quietly disappearing?



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION

We often hear of animal and bird species being declared endangered by governments and international organisations, leading to campaigns for their protection and conservation. Yet, very little attention is paid to another endangered species emerging in our times: the morally upright human being. In today's disturbed moral ecology, marked by corruption, crime, mental pollution and growing insensitivity, the ethically sound elite and morally strong middle class are slowly becoming a vanishing tribe. The drought in human compassion and the steady erosion of values have created a crisis far more dangerous than the extinction of wildlife.

This decline has not happened overnight. It has entered society quietly under attractive labels such as modernity, competition, success and personal freedom. In the

relentless pursuit of wealth, comfort and social visibility, people have compromised the principles that once gave strength to families, institutions and national character. Honesty is now often viewed as a weakness, while manipulation and opportunism are celebrated as intelligence. As a result, moral values that once shaped society have steadily lost their relevance in public life.

A major role in this transformation has been played by electronic and social media. Television, digital platforms and endless streams of entertainment dominate everyday life. The print media, too, is increasingly driven by sensationalism, conflict, celebrity gossip and "breaking news" stories of integrity, sacrifice and moral courage rarely find space. One seldom reads about a businessman refusing a bribe, a teacher serving selflessly, or a doctor placing humanity above profit.

Educational and value-based content has become scarce, leaving readers vulnerable to shallow popular culture, propaganda and manipulative advertising.

Even in the world of books and magazines, commercial success often matters more than intellectual or moral enrichment. Publishers aggressively market material that entertains, shocks or excites because the market follows a simple rule: "What entertains well, sells well." A visit to any railway station bookstall reveals the trend clearly: sensational headlines, lurid covers and gossip packaged as journalism. Such material gradually

weakens society's appetite for ethical reflection and meaningful education.

This situation calls for urgent corrective measures. Society must consciously cultivate an interest in moral and spiritual values. The media, both print and electronic, should collaborate with educational and cultural institutions to promote ethical interpretations of events and issues. What is needed is not censorship, but conscience. People, especially the young and intellectually vulnerable, must be protected from becoming passive consumers of harmful content disguised as entertainment.

India once enjoyed immense respect among nations because of its moral and spiritual stature. Today, however, ethics appears increasingly absent from classrooms, clinics, courtrooms and boardrooms. Many believe that honesty and success cannot coexist. Those who firmly uphold moral principles despite heavy odds have become rare. Therefore, there is a pressing need to establish moral and spiritual centres across the country to preserve and promote ethical values. Just as wildlife sanctuaries protect endangered species, such centres can nurture people committed to integrity and inspire society at large. If action is not taken now, the extinction of moral character may become irreversible.

The writer is spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

TRANSPARENCY NEEDED IN CGHS PATIENTS' RIGHTS

The Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) serves as a vital lifeline for millions of pensioners and government employees. However, there remains a persistent disconnect between the official policy guidelines formulated by the Ministry and the ground-level implementation within empanelled private hospitals. Far too often, hospitals conveniently "evade" or outright deny essential services such as the issuance of mandatory medicines upon discharge, and the waiving of follow-up consultation fees for the initial visits. However, these are not mere suggestions. They are stipulated rights within the CGHS framework.

The current system relies on the patient having prior knowledge of these circulars, which creates an unfair power imbalance, where the patient or the caregiver who is unaware of a specific provision is left vulnerable to being exploited by the hospital. One way to bridge this transparency gap is to issue a formal directive mandating all empanelled hospitals to display a standardised document that lists the rights of CGHS beneficiaries. This document should highlight key entitlements such as mandatory supply of medicines at the time of discharge, and beneficiaries, above 75 years of age, and free of cost follow-up consultations for initial visits post-discharge. By displaying this information within the hospital premises, the CGHS prioritises the ease and dignity of its beneficiaries by ensuring that their rights are visible, accessible, and non-negotiable, and can empower them to advocate for their rights in real-time.

MEERA JHANGIAN | GURUGRAM

The rise of a prodigy

The more you watch his batting style on the pitch, the more in awe you are left of Vaibhav Suryavanshi. It was surreal to watch players of the caliber of Pat Cummins and Heinrich Klaasen huddle together after each ball to this 15 year old kid, trying to fathom what to do next.

The teenage sensation produced his latest extraordinary innings by hitting 96 from just 29 balls to set up Rajasthan Royals' win over Sunrisers Hyderabad in the Indian Premier League eliminator.

The 15 year old struck twelve sixes, including three in a row off Australia captain Pat Cummins, before he was dismissed in the eighth over. It was an innings of brute power, exquisite timing, a good combination of hand-eye contact and scintillating stroke play of a power packed game.

The Rajasthan Royals opener also shattered a four-teen year old record, previously held by Chris Gayle of being the batter with the most sixes ever recorded in a single IPL season.

His prowess on the field matches that of legends like Sachin Tendulkar and his success augurs well for the future of Indian cricket. He has immense talent but how he nurtures it remains to be seen.

KRISHNAN SUBRAMANJ | CHENNAI

Karnataka's political transition

The long power struggle within the Congress over Karnataka's leadership has resulted in Siddaramaiah relinquishing the Chief Minister's chair, with Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar replacing him.

The task upon the Congress high command, now, is to avoid friction between the two factions and present a unified front to avoid the deeply entrenched trend in Karnataka's politics, which has not reelected the incumbent government since the 1980s.

A delicate balance must be struck between the two, as Siddaramaiah enjoys deep-rooted support among the minorities, backward classes, and the Dalits, while Shivakumar has organisational prowess that is second to none in Congress.

That's why Congress can neither afford to mishandle Siddaramaiah nor give too much indulgence to DK Shivakumar.

A key challenge for DK Shivakumar will be to maintain political stability within the state, ensure effective governance, while addressing public concerns, and balance party unity while meeting the expectations of different groups within the government. For Congress, DK Shivakumar is a gamble, for which they hope to see a return to power in the state in 2028.

BAL GOVIND | NOIDA

NEET needs an honest intent

Every year, lakhs of students set out to appear for one of India's most prestigious and highly competitive exams, NEET, with a dream to serve the nation as doctors.

Every year, repeatedly, their aspirations are shaken up by paper leaks, delays, and recently with the news of the Government considering militarising the way the exam is going to be conducted, with the defence forces managing the logistics and transportation for the NEET-UG 2026 re-exam scheduled for June 21, 2026.

NEET is an annually scheduled civilian examination, not a border operation, and if the Education Ministry cannot conduct it without the army's help, then it is an admission of its institutional failure.

If an examination hall requires the same security as a sensitive zone, then the message communicated is that we do not trust our own systems. The National Testing Agency was constituted to be a body of professionals and yet today, its credibility is being protected by olive-green uniforms, not by reforms.

What NEET needs is not the military, but rather an honest intent to digitize security, plug the leaks and fix accountability from top to bottom.

BALARAM PARMAR | MADHYA PRADESH

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



The social erasure of domestic violence victims

Domestic violence is often sustained not only by abuse but by disbelief. Victims are frequently labelled, dismissed, and silenced, while their repeated cries for help go unheard, shifting attention away from accountability and towards questioning their credibility



HIMANJALI GAUTAM

In India, domestic violence is often not experienced as a single visible act of harm but as a prolonged process of emotional erosion followed by narrative control. What begins as private distress is frequently transformed into a public story about the victim's personality rather than the behaviour she is responding to. A woman who repeatedly raises concerns about emotional neglect, humiliation, or control is often met not with inquiry or support, but with minimisation. She may be told she is "overthinking," "too sensitive," or "mentally unstable." In more extreme cases, informal psychiatric labels such as "bipolar," "schizophrenic," or "crazy" are casually introduced into family conversations, not as clinical observations but as tools to weaken her credibility. In the context of ongoing public discussions around emotional abuse and psychological manipulation—reflected in cases like Twisha Sharma's—the pattern that emerges is not isolated to one case but indicative of a broader social system where disbelief often arrives before understanding, and where labels are used more quickly than listening.

A critical issue in such situations is that mental health terminology is frequently removed from its clinical foundation and used as a social weapon. In reality, psychiatric diagnoses can only be made by qualified mental health professionals after structured assessment, observation, and the application of recognised diagnostic criteria. However, in domestic disputes, these terms are often used informally to end uncomfortable conversations rather than to describe actual medical conditions. Statements like "she is schizophrenic" or "she is imagining things" are rarely grounded in clinical evaluation; instead, they function as rhetorical devices that shift attention away from the conduct being questioned and towards the suspected instability of the person raising the concern. Once this shift occurs, the conversation is no longer about harm or accountability, but about credibility. The victim's experience becomes secondary to the question of whether she can be trusted at all. This is where labelling becomes powerful: it does not need to prove anything; it only needs to cast doubt.

Another recurring pattern is the consistent minimisation of abuse through the framing of it as a "family dispute" or a "difference of opinion." Such language appears neutral, even reasonable, but it often serves to depoliticise and privatise harm. When something is classified as a family matter, it is removed from scrutiny and external intervention. Victims are then encouraged to adjust, compromise, or remain silent in the interest of preserving family harmony. Phrases like "ghar ki baat bahar nahi jani chahiye" are frequently invoked, reinforcing the idea that maintaining the family's image is more important than addressing internal harm. While cultural emphasis on privacy is often framed as tradition, in practice it can operate as a mechanism of containment that discourages disclosure and protects existing structures. In such environments, the cost of silence is borne disproportionately by the person experiencing distress, while the cost of acknowledgement is avoided by those responsible for the environment in which that distress arises.

Within this dynamic, repeated cries for help often go unacknowledged. Victims rarely remain silent from the beginning; instead, there are often multiple attempts to communicate discomfort, ask for support, or seek resolution. However, these attempts are frequently met with dismissal. The response is often to "adjust," "ignore it," or avoid escalation for the sake of family peace. Over time, this creates a pattern in which communication is met not with engagement but with deflection. The message becomes implicit: speaking will not change anything. In such circumstances, silence is not a choice but an outcome shaped by repeated invalidation. Yet, when the situation later becomes visible or reaches a breaking point, the same social environment often asks why the victim did not speak earlier. This contradiction overlooks the fact that speaking may have occurred repeatedly, but it did not lead to recognition or support. The failure lies not in communication alone, but in the absence of a response to that communication.

A particularly misunderstood consequence of prolonged emotional invalidation is reactive abuse. This refers to situations in which a person subjected to sustained



psychological pressure, control, or humiliation eventually reacts with distress, anger, or an emotional breakdown. This reaction is then isolated from its context and used as evidence that the person is unstable, irrational, or abusive. What is often missing in public interpretation is the sequence of events: sustained emotional strain, repeated dismissal, lack of support, and eventual visible breakdown. The reaction becomes the focal point because it is observable, while the slow accumulation of distress remains invisible. In this way, the most visible moment of emotional collapse is often misinterpreted as the origin of the problem rather than its consequence.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

IN INDIA, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS OFTEN NOT EXPERIENCED AS A SINGLE VISIBLE ACT OF HARM BUT AS A PROLONGED PROCESS OF EMOTIONAL EROSION FOLLOWED BY NARRATIVE CONTROL. WHAT BEGINS AS PRIVATE DISTRESS IS FREQUENTLY TRANSFORMED INTO A PUBLIC STORY ABOUT THE VICTIM'S PERSONALITY RATHER THAN THE BEHAVIOUR SHE IS RESPONDING TO

Within this dynamic, repeated cries for help often go unacknowledged. Victims rarely remain silent from the beginning; instead, there are often multiple attempts to communicate discomfort, ask for support, or seek resolution. However, these attempts are frequently met with dismissal. The response is often to "adjust," "ignore it," or avoid escalation for the sake of family peace. Over time, this creates a pattern in which communication is met not with engagement but with deflection. The message becomes implicit: speaking will not change anything. In such circumstances, silence is not a choice but an outcome shaped by repeated invalidation. Yet, when the situation later becomes visible or reaches a breaking point, the same social environment often asks why the victim did not speak earlier. This contradiction overlooks the fact that speaking may have occurred repeatedly, but it did not lead to recognition or support. The failure lies not in communication alone, but in the absence of a response to that communication.

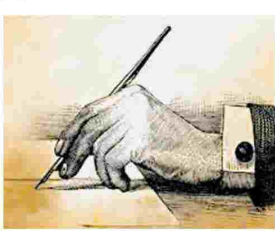
Hindi journalism@200: Power, polarisation and the loss of editorial Integrity



NEERAJ K SINGH

Two centuries after *Udant Martand*, the first Hindi newspaper, the industry of Hindi journalism stands at a crucial turning point that demands deep reflection rather than mere celebration. It began as an insecure yet courageous journalism in vernacular language. Over the past two hundred years, it has transformed into one of the most powerful media landscapes across the world. Today, Hindi journalism has penetrated deeper into the social and political psyche of India than almost any other media tradition. It shapes the consciousness of the electorate, helps to define public morality, influences nationalism, and serves as a vital mediator between citizens and the state across northern Indian territories daily. However, the immense growth of the Hindi media has not always been matched by a similar degree of boldness, autonomy, or democratic oversight. Indeed, the reverse often seems to be the case now. This is certainly not a problem concerning the language itself. Hindi remains a medium of public communication that continues to be incredibly dynamic and influential in India currently. Instead, this represents a crisis of technology, ethics, and structure. Digital transformations, troubled business models, and platform monopolies are immense challenges facing all journalistic traditions worldwide. Yet, there is a much

deeper crisis prevalent in certain sectors of the Hindi journalism that requires our immediate attention. This internal crisis is fundamentally moral and structural. We are witnessing the shifting of public interest journalism into the realm of pure spectacle journalism. Accountability is frequently sacrificed in favour of remaining close to political power, as citizens are increasingly reduced into an emotionally manageable digital audience. In its early days, Hindi journalism was never merely a business affair; it functioned as a vibrant, deeply committed intellectual and political movement across the nation. The early Hindi press viewed journalism as a profound democratic responsibility that could never be ignored under any circumstances by the writers and editors. Pioneers like Bharatendu Harishchandra utilised it for linguistic nationalism, while Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi championed fearless reporting against communal violence and state repression. Vidyarthi firmly established the stance that journalism must actively fight against oppression and injustice. Sadly, this moral clarity has slowly vanished over vast areas of the modern daily news landscape. Economic liberalisation brought about a massive paradigm shift in the fundamental economics of the Indian media industry. The competition for audience attention, advertising revenue, and market share increased dramatically during the late twentieth century and beyond. Private television networks rapidly accelerated this massive transformation very significantly then. The underlying logic of news had already



begun shifting in the year two thousand. Over time, journalism transitioned from a public institution into a commercial venture. In this metamorphosis, the Hindi media was uniquely susceptible due to the sheer size of its audience and the fierce competition within its regional markets. Today, editorial priorities can no longer be ignored, as commercial factors heavily influence it. A vast majority of people now consume news via social platforms rather than through traditional institutional news outlets that were once highly respected universally. In this context, algorithms are exerting a powerful, indirect impact on editorial decisions by constantly promoting emotion, absolute certainty, extreme nationalism, and continuous confrontation. Newsrooms have ceased to function simply as mediums for delivering factual news. Instead, they actively fight for visibility in a digital age entirely predicated upon

engagement metrics. This impact is exceptionally apparent within specific parts of the mainstream Hindi press industry, where debates are highly polarised. Often, television debates resemble ideological theatres than a genuine journalistic inquiry. Emotionally charged binaries completely redraw complicated structural issues. The industry has discovered a highly efficient method for creating, spreading, and commercialising public outrage. Over the last few years, the traditional vocabulary of democratic scrutiny has been steadily replaced by a new vocabulary of payment, mobilisation. Media analysts have consistently highlighted the growing sensationalism, the tragic loss of public trust, and the normalisation of polarising content in Indian television news. This is not ideological diversity; it is the destruction of basic editorial integrity and genuine seriousness. This failure is most noticeable in what remains absent: the true problem with contemporary Hindi journalism is not merely what it magnifies, but also what it consciously ignores. Unless presented in a highly theatrical fashion, severe issues such as agrarian distress are seldom investigated. Furthermore, issues including soaring unemployment, local government failures, environmental degradation, and failing infrastructure are frequently neglected. Ground reporting has severely suffered, losing its foundational strength as the essential backbone of authentic regional journalism. Meanwhile, the relationship between various media houses and political power has undergone a complete metamorphosis. Historically, Hindi journalism derived its legitimacy from maintaining a

questioning attitude towards authority. Nowadays, cultivating proximity to power has increasingly become the standard business model. The space for adversarial journalism has shrunk considerably due to concentrated media ownership, massive reliance on government advertising, corporate consolidation, and heightened regulatory vulnerability overall. Internal censorship has thus become completely internalised within these traditional news institutions. These vulnerabilities are further amplified by modern digital complexities. Whilst social media broadens engagement, it disperses authority. Organisations' complete reliance on propagandists, anonymous networks, and automated misinformation systems. Consequently, being viral surpasses being verified. Prolonged exposure to emotionally charged environments diminishes civic tolerance for deliberation. However, excellent journalism continues within smaller, less metropolitan networks, surviving against formidable systemic odds. The future credibility of Hindi journalism relies entirely upon regaining institutional trust, especially confronting deepfakes and tailored propaganda. As we reflect upon two centuries since *Udant Martand*, the press must challenge power, enlighten citizens, and assert public good. The best tribute to Hindi journalism is reflecting fearlessly on what it has become.



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Climate crisis: When comfort masquerades as immunity

Almost every historical crisis has produced its version of the same thought: that what is happening is happening to someone else. In times of plague, those with better houses and cleaner air believed the arrangement of their lives protected them, until the plague climbed the stairs. In times of famine, those with granaries assumed the hunger would stay at the gate, until the gate became the problem. The ego, that false sense of "I" which has built itself from a body, a position, and the externalities accumulated around both, manufactures this thought not out of malice but as the expression of its most fundamental operation: the construction of a self that stands apart from its predicament.

The climate crisis has produced a version of this thought particularly well suited to the Indian urban professional class. It runs approximately as follows: climate change is inevitable, perhaps urgent, but its primary victims are the farmer without irrigation, the construction worker without shade, or the landless labourer whose livelihood is written entirely on the weather. These are people exposed in ways the urban professional is not. She has the air-conditioning, the subscription delivery service, the cab that comes to the door; in short, a cushion of affluence between herself and the conditions that devastate those who cannot purchase that cushion. The crisis is real; it is simply not hers.

The flaw in this reasoning is physiological, infrastructural, economic, and biological, and the evidence for it is not projected but already distributed through the middle class's own daily life. India has entered a heat season that scientists are describing in terms that would have seemed excessive a decade ago. Delhi's drainage infrastructure dates from 1976, when the city held six million people and the system was designed to handle 25 millimetres of rainfall per hour; the city now regularly receives more than double that in a single hour. The crisis the middle class has assigned to someone else is visible in the city's own property markets, its own seasonal calendar, its own streets after an hour of rain, and the exemption the middle class believes it holds has already been declined, though its holders have not yet checked the correspondence.

The air-conditioning is one of the middle class's primary counter-arguments to the climate crisis: that affluence can purchase a private atmosphere, a set point of 23 degrees at which whatever happens outside becomes irrelevant. This is the ego's preferred relationship to shared consequence, the belief that what one has assembled around oneself constitutes a genuine separation from what one has produced.

The human body has exactly one mechanism for shedding internally generated heat: sweating, and the evaporation of sweat. Metabolism produces heat continuously; the body is, in thermal terms, an inefficient machine that generates more heat than work from everything it consumes. What the body cannot evaporate, the skin cannot cool, and the body's core temperature rises until the organs most sensitive to heat, the brain foremost among them, begin to fail, and the failure is sudden rather than gradual. A healthy person sitting in the shade with unlimited water will lose consciousness and die when the wet-bulb temperature reaches 35 degrees, solely because the body's only heat-removal mechanism has been rendered inoperative by the moisture content of the surrounding air.

The air conditioner addresses this, as long as several simultaneous conditions hold: there is electricity, the unit is functioning within its operating range, the person is in the shade, and the grid can carry the aggregate load of every unit in the city running at once during a heat emergency. When heat is severe enough to require cooling, every unit runs simultaneously, and the grid carries a load it was not designed to sustain. Before the grid fails, the apartment must be exited anyway, because the apartment runs on labour from outside it. The domestic worker arrives each morning from a neighbourhood where power cuts run twelve to fifteen hours a day and the roof is tin, which turns a small room into an oven before noon. The delivery worker completing forty rides before noon, whose dark T-shirt shows a white outline of salt from what his body has spent in the heat, cannot be replaced by a platform algorithm that also operates in the shade. The worker's comfort is downstream of all of these labour chains, and when those chains degrade, the comfort degrades with them.

Through the winter months, air quality sits at AQI levels above 400, producing the metallic taste and sustained coughing that anyone who has spent a winter in Delhi recognises without being told. Come July, waterlogging closes parks, courts and outdoor spaces, while the standing water breeds dengue and chikungunya, diseases that the middle class contract alongside everyone else, with the same fever, the same falling platelet counts, and the same hospital queues. A farmer in Uttar Pradesh reported this season that wheat grains are thinner and the harvest lighter than in previous years. The body recognising this food is itself not exempt from the atmospheric pressure it has been arranged to ignore. The human organism, in the most precise biological sense, is not a single entity; more than half the cells within a human body are microbial, belonging to communities of bacteria and fungi that govern digestion, immune response, and aspects of neurological function. When ambient conditions shift systematically across years and decades, those communities shift with them. The body that walks out of the air-conditioned apartment a decade from now carries a different internal biological arrangement from the one that walked out today, regardless of what the thermostat reads.

The exemplar of the middle class has, as arranged, never felt the ambient temperature of one room. It does not cover the food arriving in that room, the labour sustaining the supply chain, the grid powering the cooling, the social fabric outside the entrance, the rivers that will not always run, the soil producing the staples, or the body inhabiting the room and the microbiome the body is. The ego that wrote this exemption wrote it in a language the climate system has never learned.



The human body has exactly one mechanism for shedding internally generated heat: sweating, and the evaporation of sweat. Metabolism produces heat continuously; the body is, in thermal terms, an inefficient machine that generates more heat than work from everything it consumes.

Through the winter months, air quality sits at AQI levels above 400, producing the metallic taste and sustained coughing that anyone who has spent a winter in Delhi recognises without being told. Come July, waterlogging closes parks, courts and outdoor spaces, while the standing water breeds dengue and chikungunya, diseases that the middle class contract alongside everyone else, with the same fever, the same falling platelet counts, and the same hospital queues.

The exemplar of the middle class has, as arranged, never felt the ambient temperature of one room. It does not cover the food arriving in that room, the labour sustaining the supply chain, the grid powering the cooling, the social fabric outside the entrance, the rivers that will not always run, the soil producing the staples, or the body inhabiting the room and the microbiome the body is.

The ego that wrote this exemption wrote it in a language the climate system has never learned.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life. @acharya_prashant_pdf @Prashant_Advait prashantadvait

The writer is Head, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, LCPSS, Lucknow. @TheDailyPioneer The Pioneer

A thought for today

Predicting rain doesn't count. Building arks does.

WARREN BUFFETT



Dry Run

Brace for weak monsoon, and hope for best

It should have been a good day for markets, with Iran and US talking peace, but Friday ended with Sensex and Nifty down roughly 1.5% each. The dampener was El Nino, which is now expected to weaken this year's monsoon further. In April, IMD had forecast rainfall at 92% of long-term average - below but still close to normal. Now, it's revised it down to 90%. That doesn't seem like a big change, but averages don't tell the whole story. Drought in the food basket states, and excess rainfall elsewhere, can add up to a good average, but food production, inflation,



consumer demand, and govt budgets, will all take a hit. That's why the seemingly small, 2 percentage point change is a big deal. And markets are naturally worried. Not only is it looking like the worst monsoon since 2015, it comes at a time when the Hormuz blockade has pushed Indian fuel prices to their highest levels ever. While diesel for farmers is costlier, govt's subsidy bill for fertilisers could more than double to ₹3.8L cr this year - again because of Hormuz. Given that almost half of India's population is dependent on farming, and half of agriculture is rain-dependent, govt can't ask farmers to share the fertiliser bill. That will strain its finances, curbing infra spending. And while the country's food stocks are adequate, higher food prices due to reduced production will stretch budgets of most families.

It's not a full-blown crisis, but the situation demands deft handling. Centre and states will need to coordinate better, to soften the impact on farmers. The outlook could improve quickly if Iran and US make a deal, easing the pressure of energy and fertiliser prices in a couple of months. Fingers crossed.

Bombay (Union) Talkies

A filmy fight with an interesting message

In a new role, fire-fighter Salman Khan has gone all in to put out flames licking Bollywood. Big Bros Ranveer Singh and Farhan Akhtar are in a rare fight, triggered by Singh's exit from Akhtar's supermega project, Don 3. Singh quit Dec last, took the 'no comment-icado' highway. Akhtar took the shorter road to the producers' body, and films association, which, after meetings failed, hopped across to FWICE, the umbrella body of over 30 cinema workers' unions, lights to make-up, the full shebang. Union bosses pronounced,



let no one cooperate with Singh - "No superstar is above the rules of the industry." Only the union's directive has little legal substance, but, as things stand, "non-cooperation" is dramatic, and carries weight - remember, it did bring down an Empire.

Mediation, bhaijaan style, for long has been Bollywood's route to dose flames. But a film is no longer just a film. Big-budget ones involve complex scheduling, global releases and streaming deals. Sudden exits hurt not just producers, but technicians, spot boys, camera crews and a host of others whose jobs depend on productions staying on schedule. Whatever the outcome, what's already evident is that this could be a turning point for Bollywood to professionalise. A union publicly challenged an A-list actor. The script says contracts matter more than star aura. An actor is being treated more like a corporate partner. That makes for a good, and interesting, ending.

Fascism And The Future Of Home

We will all be seeking shelter among strangers

She's been called Cassandra. Because author and journalist *Ece Temelkuran*, ever since she left her home in Turkey in 2016, with two shirts and a pair of trousers, has been warning the world that what she fled, fascism, is coming for everyone else too. In Greek mythology, Cassandra was blessed with the gift of prophecy, but cursed never to be believed.

In her new book *Nation of Strangers: Rebuilding Home in the 21st Century*, for the first time, Ece no longer feels that she's a step ahead of everyone else. "Dear stranger", she addresses the reader. And asks, "How about you? Are you home? Do you feel at home?" Everywhere, more people are feeling unhomed, not just physically, but just those whose houses are bombed. But also morally, politically, even digitally. Even if they live in their own country.

Her book makes the claim that the misfits, outcasts, foreigners and the like who are now the majority, are too scattered to claim their own nation, and in urgent need of a common language. It's a poetic thesis.

Out in the cold with monsters, lost, broken, melancholic, we already know that many more will soon learn to live like us. What we can tell the others is how to stay human when everything is working against us, how to survive homeless with dignity, and where to go next.

Right now, Ece says, we are mourning not what we have already lost, but what we eventually will. We still have a bit of the rule of law here and there. But we know what's coming. So we doubt why we should even carry the flower seeds, when the soil everywhere is

becoming unreliable. But remember, during WW II, during years of butchery and fascism, with their loved ones gone, and everything turned to dust and ashes, some city planners saved the blueprint of Warsaw. They refused to forget the far future. That's how the entire old town could be rebuilt anew.

That's how we will also survive, Ece says. By depending on our inherent urge to create beauty; and doing it together. When Eyad, a Syrian refugee, got onto a boat, heading for Germany, and it struggled against the waves, he first got an old man on his shoulders, then held a woman and her baby, saving them all from drowning, that's us, the strangers, holding the defence line.

The survival lesson is, don't look at the waves, look at the people next to you. It's not really about hope. But about determination, doing what you can to survive. When parts of the self are lost, "the ultimate decision a stranger makes is how and with what to fill that gap."

At a weekend waltzing with the beasts, aka an exclusive gathering of the world's techno-feudal overlords in the Alps, amid speeches about money, space, colonies on Mars, AI, and money again, Ece discovers that survival is not part of these billionaires' story. "They are designing a future by ensuring there is no return to the familiar homes of humanity: good old democracy, human rights, and the rule of law."

So, what do we have to work with? There is, there is, there is you, and all the others like us, Ece says. Take care of each other. Don't fall into the trap of getting separated by your differences.

Breather For Now? For How Long?

As a tentative US-Iran deal awaits Trump's signature, the global economy is hoping for a break. But geopolitics, as well as politics in Trump camp & among Iran hardliners, means conflict can restart after a few months

Jane Kimminott



Columnist based in London

That could create some space to negotiate a broader agreement, including on ways to ensure Iran's nuclear programme is kept peaceful.

However, it's unlikely that this represents progress towards a stable equilibrium, whether in Hormuz or West Asia. There are too many sources of volatility and uncertainty, coming from the broader fighting in the region, a growing contest for power in global politics, and unsettled politics inside Iran and US.

The ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon are stretching the definition of 'ceasefire' to become almost meaningless. Israel killed more than 700 Palestinians in Gaza in the first six months of the ceasefire there, and the figure continues to climb, while Netanyahu has recently said Israel aims to recapture 70% of Gaza, and perhaps more.

Meanwhile, the Lebanon ceasefire may collapse altogether, with Israel ordering Lebanese civilians who live within 25km of the border with Israel to leave their homes, as it declares growing parts of southern Lebanon to be an 'active combat zone' with Hezbollah. Both Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts with Israel have the potential to disrupt the Iran-US ceasefire, and they also indicate that US is reluctant to rule out continued use of force, even when a ceasefire is formally in place.

That, in turn, makes it difficult to ensure that a ceasefire agreement will be either respected or trusted by both sides.

The Iranian leadership has always been fairly paranoid about internal and external enemies. They will not trust America, and will want to retain the

power to disrupt Hormuz in future, as they have discovered that this can be a powerful deterrent.

While Iran will remain anxious about attacks, it appears that its leadership also thinks it has won. And indeed, many US commentators are saying the same thing, making parallels with Iraq or Kuwait, and proclaiming that this has been a strategic defeat for Trump. This alone may mean that Trump can go back to war later on to prove a point, perhaps after gas prices ease, and US mid-term elections are out of the way. It also creates an ongoing risk of Iranian overreach in the region, as a new generation of even more hardline

of breaking down, if the negotiation process stops at the ceasefire stage. Warring parties may just use the pause to regroup.

There are various possible explanations of why wars are intensifying, and peace processes are being stretched this time. The factors are the rise in competition between the world's big powers. Global politics is undergoing a process of 'multipolarisation' - a redistribution of power; beyond the bipolar model of the Cold War; or the dominance that US enjoyed in 1990s and early 2000s.

This has much to do with the economic rise of Asian powers and relative decline in America's share of the world economy. Some would also say it's a reversion to a historical norm, and that the period where the world had a single superpower was extremely unusual, only seeming normal to us because we lived through it.

But while there is widespread acceptance that the world is becoming more multipolar, there is a fierce competition over how this will play out. The uncertainty creates a sense there is everything to play for. This is relevant to the standoff between Iran and US, because their leaders are campaigning for different global futures, while at the same time, their (very) different political systems are also deeply unsettled.

Trump's supporters believe that he will empower America to reassert global economic dominance. They think he will succeed by being more willing than other presidents to wield American hard power. They also think he offers a chance to end China's 'winning the AI race', unconstrained by concerns about AI safety, or its vast consumption of energy. The attack on Iran comes from this place of conviction that US power is on the rise, brought back by a 'strongman' leader.

If Iran is seen as a test of US power, then the stakes are extremely high for all concerned. A final factor is America's domestic opposition to more war in West Asia. This is what is really bringing Trump to the table. But Iran may reach too much into this, and overlap its hand with Hormuz.

It ain't over, not by a long stretch. The writer is a West Asia expert



leaders has been empowered, as a direct result of US and Israel killings so many of the old guard.

This is not only about America and Iran, but the broader global picture. UN secretary general said this week that the world now has more wars than at any time since the UN was founded 80 years ago. Wars are also becoming harder to stop, harder to contain, and more deadly for civilians. Where negotiated agreements take place, they are very often producing temporary stopgap solutions - such as a ceasefire - rather than progressing towards a political settlement or addressing the root causes of the conflict.

Ceasefires are important, but they also have a habit

'Being Careful Kills The Mood? So Do Clinics'

Modern intimacy comes wrapped in freedom, confusion, risk. A fun fling can be followed by sleepless nights doing a Google search of symptoms. Why not get with the sexiness of sexual health?

Shinie Antony



Passion has a reputation to uphold: It must be red-hot, risky, unplanned. Filed last week on screen when Rajesh Khanna complimented Sharmila Tagore on her roop being *mastana*. Love is a force of nature and mere humans can only moan in the face of it. And once things have reached boiling point, it is considered impetuous to stand up or bring up protection.

In romance novels, a lack of contraception is equated with a loss of control. There's a lot of 'he took her' and 'she gave herself', somewhat nullifying the exchange. Hetero lust routinely displays no fear of the future. In fact, less the thought given to consequences, more pleasurable the act is supposed to be. There is the morning-after pill, abortions are no longer an obstacle course, and STDs happen only to others.

This touching faith stems from the human need to be swept away. To be caught up in something larger than themselves. In the hands of which they are but putty, whittled down to mere hormones. 'It just happened,' they whisper helplessly.

Wholistic health has its PR. The wellbeing industry - physical, emotional, spiritual - is thriving. Buddhist chanting, meditation retreats, therapy sessions, wearing a particular stone, annual check-up packages at hospitals. But when it comes to sexual health, ignorance is bliss.

There was a time when matriarchs kept everything suspiciously 'down there' secret, preferring death to any treatment options. That coyness is no longer in fashion. Pap smears and mammograms are the norm now, however dreaded they are. Spread-eagled with feet in stirrups, or squashed intimately against cold metal, staying disease-free requires an such or two. Friends make a picnic of this trip, and laugh each other out of colposcopy discomfort.

No liaison fades into the sunset. After an unbridled moment, one is destined to forever lie sleepless worrying about their sexual health. Someone is always calling up someone about a missed period. Sensible women feel like killjoys, for bringing up the matter of birth control, when the gang is giggling over one-night stands, or sudden encounters.

The end of fertility periods can also trigger frisky adventures, with pregnancy no longer a fear. This is what newly menopausal women celebrate: An empty



nest and their libido. All along, however, conception was never the only threat.

Multiple partners or sex with strangers, I am sure, come with their compensations. A host of high-risk infections are on the horizon too! While the girl talk is centered around a HIM, there's also HPV and HIV. Maintaining sexual hygiene grows grayer in the era of hook-ups and ghosting.

The thrill lies in eyes meeting eyes and trysts

arranged breathlessly - swapping hospital reports does tend to bring the charge down. Even if a handsome man you just met tells you his medical history, chances are he will seldom reveal all. And even if he carries the Harrischandraan, he mostly shares the truth, most venereal diseases escape the first round of tests, and lie in wait for a year or more to reveal themselves. So, he may be even telling the truth, but only as he knows it right then.

When medical tests follow penicillides, the instant chemistry, the flirtatious giggle, the tender embrace, all is forgotten during the nervous pacing in a hospital corridor. HPV vaccines are a recent invention, coming to India perhaps too late for the current sexually active generation. The best time for the Human Papillomavirus vaccine is at nine years, to be concluded by age 14. Very few parents get this done, as the kids are just being kids at that age, and any upcoming dalliance is just a cute joke at this juncture.

Armed about precautions or regular vaccines, various infections are dismissed as public loo woes. Wrongly you don't get HPV (even a UTI) from a toilet seat.

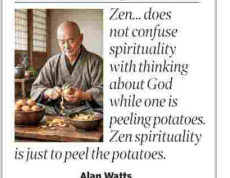
But in the age of apps, it seems downright prudish to be cautious in amour: It is presumed casual sex keeps one young and a daredevil. Films segue on. Books are full of it. In a room full of steamy stories, a dull and prosaic query on protection only elicits covert pity. Oh, they say, you poor thing, go have some fun. Then, some of my friends who urge me to have this really nice app, they know end up calling up late at night to discuss symptoms of a thing that just won't go away.

A simple 'did you use something?' elicits a pause and memory loss. Most of the time all is well, but the road may hold a bump or lump. To anyone who values a good night's sleep I recommend protection - if that's off-putting, then stay celibate.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space



Matter, Energy And Mystery Of Consciousness

Shri Shri Anandmurti

What we call matter, whether an atom, molecule, mountain, river, or human body, is ultimately condensed energy. Matter is simply energy existing in a compact and organised form. Modern physics has gradually moved towards this realisation. The difference between a stone and a beam of light is not that one is completely different from the other, but that energy manifests itself in different forms and patterns.

By discovering laws of energy, we have generated electricity, built machines, explored space, and unlocked the hidden structure of atoms. A scientist is one who understands workings of matter through the language of energy. Yet an important question remains unanswered: Is energy the final truth of existence?

If the universe is nothing more than a collection of particles and forces, where did consciousness come from? How did

thought, feeling, imagination, love, memory, and the sense of 'I exist' suddenly emerge from lifeless matter? Something cannot arise from absolute nothingness. If consciousness exists in human beings today, then its possibility must have been present from the very beginning of creation.

Billions of years ago, when the Earth had no plants, animals, or human beings, only subtle forms of energy existed. Yet hidden within those primitive forms was the dormant potential of consciousness. Gradually, through the long movement of evolution and the operations of nature, that latent awareness began to express itself. First came the faint stirrings of life in plants, then instinct and sensation in animals, and finally the self-awareness and reflective intelligence seen in human beings.

This process may be compared to a seed. A tiny seed appears lifeless and

insignificant, yet within it lies the possibility of a vast tree. Under proper conditions, hidden life within the seed slowly unfolds. In the same way, consciousness existed in a dormant form within the earliest states of energy and gradually awakened through evolutionary process of nature.

Indian spiritual philosophy describes this cosmic relationship through the concepts of Shiv and Shakti. Shakti represents energy movement, and the dynamic force of creation. Shiv represents pure consciousness, the silent witnessing presence behind all activity. Just as a dance cannot exist without a dancer, energy cannot be fully understood without consciousness. The movements of nature, formation of stars, growth of life, and emergence of human awareness all unfold within a deeper field of consciousness.

Electricity flowing through a wire cannot always be seen directly, yet its presence

becomes evident through its effects. Similarly, consciousness manifests in varying degrees throughout existence. Reducing existence entirely to atoms and particles oversimplifies the mystery of life. A machine may process information with extraordinary speed, but it does not experience joy, sorrow, wonder, or the feeling of being alive.

In moments of deep meditation, contemplation, or spiritual realisation, people sometimes experience a state in which the ordinary boundaries of time, space, and individuality begin to fade. Awareness expands beyond the narrow sense of the individual self and feels connected to something vast and universal.

Indian spiritual traditions describe this awakened state as the realisation of Brahmin, Shiv, or Cosmic Consciousness. Matter is condensed energy, but energy itself moves within the embrace of consciousness. Ananda Marga is conducting Dharma Maha Sammelan at Ananda Nagar, WB, till May 31

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



Out in the cold with monsters, lost, broken, melancholic, we already know that many more will soon learn to live like us. What we can tell the others is how to stay human when everything is working against us, how to survive homeless with dignity, and where to go next.

[OUR TAKE]

A textbook case of failure

The CBSE toolkit is a showpiece of the education bureaucracy's failings

When Class 12 results for the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) were declared on May 13, the pass percentage was at its lowest in seven years. Some explained the drop as the outcome of a more transparent new evaluation system — on-screen marking of answer scripts, deployed for the first time for all 1.76 million students who appeared. Slowly, however, it emerged that the system was badly broken. Students reported blurred and truncated scans, scripts uploaded under the wrong roll numbers, and answers left unmarked; evaluators encountered copies where hands, water bottles, and pens appeared in the frame alongside answer sheets, as though photographed in a hurry. Many teachers pressed into service as online examiners had not received adequate preparation for the platform.

It emerged this week that CBSE's regional offices had sent unsigned messages to all school principals urging them to make social media posts defending the system, complete with a word-for-word script. The document leaves little doubt about CBSE's priorities: managing perceptions of the failure, not addressing it. The same instinct runs through the rollout's origins. With barely three months between the qualification of a vendor — as late as November — and the commencement of examinations in February, the procurement record tells its own story. Two rounds failed before a bidder qualified; CBSE secured one only after relaxing quality requirements — lowering minimum scanning resolution, dropping the requirement for specialised scanners, and reducing the software quality certification demanded of vendors. The same tender imposed aggressive penalties for scanning delays. In other words, quality floor lowered, and speed pressure tightened. Members of CBSE's governing body had recommended wider pilot projects before any full deployment. Teachers who participated in a two-day dry run made the same case, warning the board it needed one to two more years. Neither recommendation was heeded.

Why CBSE chose to persist with the rushed timeline is yet to be adequately explained. As the controversy grew with each new disclosure — minutes of its own governing body recommending the rollout be deferred, security vulnerabilities in the portal, the social media directive to principles — the board's response followed the same templates: defend the decision, describe the scale of failure as within acceptable parameters, or simply deny the existence of a problem. On the procurement failures, a senior official described the specification changes as "correcting shortcomings" in line with government procurement rules. On the toolkit, the board denied having issued any instruction.

It is hard not to conclude that this is what the education bureaucracy optimises for: The announcement, not the outcome. Curriculum revisions, infrastructure inaugurations, digital modernisations — each generates a headline, a date, a photograph. The work that generates none of these — sound examinations, reliable learning materials, thorough testing and impact assessment — receives no comparable urgency. A board examination that functions produces no news; one that fails produces a flood of reevaluation requests and, eventually, a social media toolkit. NCERT textbooks have drawn persistent criticism for the quality of their lesson content; the response has been reviews and committees. The system is practiced at handling the appearance of failure. Addressing its cause requires more painstaking work, and capacities it has not yet built.

[MINOR HINTS]
Rahul Sagar

OPINION



The God that Indian liberalism has forgotten

The aim of the early advocates of Indian liberalism was not to separate religion from politics but to develop and ordain a universal religion. The unravelling of that project set the stage for the rise of Hindu nationalism

Last week marked the birth anniversary of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. On social media, the occasion elicited the lament that by turning toward Hindu nationalism, Bengal has abandoned the liberal tradition Roy inaugurated. But this lament misunderstands the story of Indian liberalism — and Roy's place in it. The early advocates of liberalism in India did not believe that liberalism required the separation of religion from politics. They believed almost the opposite: that only religion could move individuals to treat one another humanely. Hence, their great aim was not to separate religion from politics but to develop and ordain a universal religion.

At its core, liberalism seeks to protect the individual against compulsion. But why should we care about the individual? A leading response was that individuals were entitled to freedom because God had endowed them with reason. But this answer proved unstable. Religious authorities disagreed on God's word, while scientific advances gave reason to doubt God's existence altogether. As this foundation weakened, many liberals came to argue that "human nature" demanded freedom, making it essential to order, prosperity, and happiness. But this claim invited an age-old rebuttal: Since the individual cannot survive for long without the succour of the community, the claims of the latter ought to take precedence over those of the former.

Liberals in 19th-century India had to grapple with this conundrum as well. They read canonical works from Locke to Mill, but they came away dissatisfied by the "patry rationalism" on offer. A philosophy that began and ended with the individual could not answer the pressing question of why a person should willingly suffer to advance social reform and secure political liberty. The "victims" of a modern education, they feared, would end up like "Young Bengal" — the radicals whose challenge to orthodoxy had amounted to little more than hedonism and meanness.

This is why it became so important to Indian liberals to prove that God existed and wanted individuals to be so. To this end, they drew on arguments that had been articulated under the banner of deism. According to this school, God's existence could be inferred from features of the external and internal worlds that humans inhabited. The awe-inspiring beauty and marvellous order of the natural world, together with the ever-present voice of conscience, were pieces of evidence, accessible to every human being, that hinted at the existence of a divine hand.

If God existed, Indian liberals went on to argue, then their compatriots had "a claim to something more than mere secular good government". They were entitled to what the British enjoyed in Britain: a sovereign who was "the head of the Church as well as of the State". That is, a ruler able to use the authority and resources at his disposal to shape the religious beliefs and thereby the morality of her subjects. This did not mean that religious devices dictated "correct men's consciences". Rather, they wanted to introduce "a system of religious instruction" to challenge what was "rude and irrational" in established religions.

Indian liberals even wanted to go beyond what was offered in Britain. They believed that faith that distinguished between believers and unbelievers could never underwrite a genuine liberalism. In practice, they argued, such religions easily ended up supporting colonialism and conquest.



At its core, liberalism seeks to protect the individual against compulsion. But why should we care about the individual? A leading response was that individuals were entitled to freedom because God had endowed them with reason.

This was that liberals of the day came to espouse theism and look to Roy as their patron. They were drawn to Hindu scripture because they found in it a conception of God that was abstract and inclusive and did not rely on faith in any person or intermediary. But they were ecumenical, ever willing to learn from what RG Bhandarkar called "foreign Rishis". Indeed, they were convinced they were destined to create a universal religion since, as MG Ranade declared in his *Philosophy of Indian Theism* (1899), "alone in all the countries of the world, India has had the privilege of witnessing a convergence of historical faiths".

This form of Indian liberalism was destined to fail because India was not Britain. The country was ruled by a foreign power that had little desire to involve itself in theological matters, much less to promote theism. Indeed, when liberals solicited the help of the colonial authorities, they often provoked a backlash that strengthened the very orthodoxes they hoped to weaken. This British one reason why, by the end of the century, the editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* could write that theism had become "a term of reproach" in Bengal.

Seeking common ground with other religions proved even harder. Left to its own devices, liberalism had little hope of competing with the far better-organised Abrahamic faiths, whose proponents treated it with undisguised contempt. Typical was the charismatic preacher Nehemiah Goreh's *Four Lectures to the Brahmans* (1875), which denounced theists for "daring to set up a new religion" that was leading their "enlightened" brethren away from "the blessings which Christianity alone imparts". Tellingly, the Prarthana Samaj, the most active of the theistic

churches, had only three Muslims and one Christian on its rolls.

The final blow came with the rise of the Indian National Congress. In vain did liberals warn that religion is never far behind in the affairs of men. The Congress dismissed their pleas on the ground that it was "not fitted to deal with the social affairs of the multitudinous divisions of India". This fateful decision meant that when religion subsequently reared its head in the form of fundamentalism and then separatism, there was no answer to give but electoral formulas. Coexistence came to depend on arithmetic rather than theology.

The difficult lesson this history teaches is that separating religion and politics can undo liberalism. This is because, as James Fitzjames Stephen put it in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1873), when men are "deeply stirred" by revelations, they "compel others" to accept them as "absolute truths", and "will no more tolerate error for the sake of abstract principles about freedom than any one of us tolerates a nest of wasps in his garden". The early proponents of liberalism in India responded to this challenge by fashioning a liberal theology, but they lacked the means to institutionalise their vision. When that theology failed to command broad allegiance, the field was left to fundamentalism and separatism, which in turn bred resentment and reaction. All this is to say: the rise of Hindu nationalism is not what undid Indian liberalism; to the contrary, it is the earlier unravelling of Indian liberalism that set the stage for the rise of Hindu nationalism.

Rahul Sagar is a Global Network associate professor at NYU Abu Dhabi. His latest book is *The Birth of Indian Liberalism*. The views expressed are personal

Meet the overlooked architect of the body

Last week, I saw a 51-year-old woman in the clinic with fatigue, mood changes, body aches, poor sleep and bouts of night sweats. Routine tests were normal. "Doctor, there is something wrong with me, but no one seems able to diagnose it," she said. Her periods had stopped a year earlier. It was clear that she might benefit from estrogen replacement. The real question was whether she should receive it, and whether it would be safe.

That question is worth asking more often, because estrogen is one of medicine's most misunderstood hormones. Most people still think of it simply as a female sex hormone, but that narrow label hides its wider importance. Estrogen shapes puberty, menstruation, fertility, bone strength, brain health, skin, and even the heart and blood vessels. The term itself was coined in 1906, from Greek roots referring to desire and production.

Estrogen's first crisis is everyday conversation at puberty, when it helps the breasts develop, brings on menstrual cycles, and supports the reproductive system.

It also influences how body fat is distributed and how bones grow. Later in life, it continues to act far beyond reproduction, helping maintain bone density, influencing mood, and supporting the lining of the genital and urinary tract.

Like all hormones, estrogen is a chemical messenger that acts far from its main source. In women, the ovaries are the principal producers, but the adrenal glands and body fat also contribute

small amounts. In men, too, estrogen is made in modest quantities when enzymes convert androgens such as testosterone into estrogen; this matters particularly for bone health.

Estrogen levels are not fixed. They rise during puberty and decline as menopause approaches. They rise during ovulation to prepare the body for pregnancy and rise again during pregnancy, peaking in the third trimester, only to fall dramatically after childbirth.

During pregnancy, estrogen plays multiple roles. It promotes foetal development, growth of the uterus, blood flow to the placenta, and breast development.

Menopause, what my patient was going through, marks the time when ovarian estrogen production declines. With that fall comes a familiar cluster of symptoms — hot flashes, night sweats, sleep disturbance, vaginal dryness, painful intercourse, low mood and urinary complaints.

The long-term consequence that often receives less attention is bone loss. Estrogen helps keep calcium in bone, when estrogen falls, bone breakdown accelerates, increasing the risk of osteoporosis and fractures.

Estrogen deficiency can also occur before natural menopause. It may follow removal of the ovaries, certain cancer treatments, premature ovarian insufficiency, or, in some cases, extreme body fat from extreme weight loss, excessive exer-

cise or chronic illness. In these settings, the hormonal effects can be even more abrupt and disruptive than after natural menopause.

The idea of using estrogen to ease menopausal symptoms is not new. In the late 19th century, studies using ovarian tissue from cows suggested relief in women with menopausal symptoms and sexual dysfunction. Later, estrogen was extracted from the urine of pregnant women and then from the urine of pregnant mares, which became the source of Premarin, a preparation that is still used in clinical practice.

For women with troublesome hot flashes or vaginal symptoms, estrogen therapy can be highly effective. Local vaginal estrogen is usually enough for dryness and urinary discomfort, while systemic therapy — tablets, patches or gels — is used when symptoms are broader and affect daily life. Hormone therapy remains the most effective treatment for vasomotor symptoms, and local therapy is preferred when symptoms are limited to the genitourinary tract.

This brings us to the difficult question: If estrogen helps so much, why not prescribe it to every woman at menopause? The answer is that every medical intervention has potential side effects, and estrogen is no exception. The main concerns are breast cancer risk in certain settings, blood clots and, with some formulations, stroke.

Risk depends on age, timing, formulation and route of administration; transdermal estrogen is generally associated with a much lower clot risk than oral therapy.

Timing matters. Hormone therapy tends to be most favourable within five-to-10 years of menopause onset, when symptom benefit is greatest and risks are lowest. The more recent you start, the better. Starting later, particularly after age 60 or after a

long gap from menopause, is generally not recommended unless there is a compelling reason and careful supervision.

There are also situations where estrogen therapy should be avoided or approached with caution. A history of breast cancer, unexplained vaginal bleeding, active liver disease, prior blood clots, stroke, heart attack or certain heart conditions can change the balance of risk. In women with a uterus, estrogen must also be paired with a progestogen to protect the lining of the uterus.

For bone health, the message is equally important. Estrogen preserves bone health, but not every menopausal woman needs it. Lifestyle measures, adequate calcium and vitamin D, weight-bearing exercise and fracture-risk assessment remain essential. In women at high fracture risk, osteoporosis medicines may be added rather than estrogen alone.

My patient's story is a common one, and a reminder that menopause is not merely the absence of periods. It can be a period of real physiological change, with symptoms that are easy to dismiss and easy to miss. A careful history, thoughtful examination and appropriate tests often reveal that the problem is not "in the mind" at all, but in the endocrine transition itself.

A better way to think about estrogen is not as a hero or a villain, but as a powerful biological signal whose benefits and risks depend on context. Used wisely, it can relieve symptoms, protect bone and improve quality of life. In that sense, estrogen therapy may improve "healthspan" more than lifespan. The goal is not to give hormones to everyone, but to give the right treatment to the right woman at the right time.

Ambrish Mithal is chairman and head of endocrinology and diabetes at Max Healthcare. The views expressed are personal

Ananya Panday & classical dance in the age of virality

Over the last few years, the Indian classical dance fraternity has voiced outrage over actor Ananya Panday's dance in the movie *Chand Meri Dil*. Panday has drawn the ire of the Bharatanatyam world for performing a melange of hip-hop, popping (a street dance form involving stiff, jerky movements) and what is alleged to be Bharatanatyam. Several well-known practitioners of the dance form, apart from ordinary social media users, have aired their criticism of the treatment meted out to the classical dance. A viral meme goes, "Bharatanatyam was founded in 200 BCE and ended with Ananya Panday in 2026". Panday's dance has been disparagingly termed "nepo-natyam", invoking the perception that nepotism has allowed mediocrity to be rewarded.

The criticism is centred on lack of tech-

nique, ignorance of centuries-old traditions of the dance form, use of Nataraja (the dancing Shiva) in the background for such a piece, etc. Social media is rife with comments comparing the dance with Hollywood's treatment of ballet, comparing Panday with actresses such as Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit and their engagement with classical dance forms, saying actresses who don't know a particular form should not attempt it. None of this is new. Such comments follow when performers with little to no formal training in a "classical" art form perform it on screen.

These protestations remind one of an older, more urgent protest. A century ago, hereditary dance practitioners were edged out, their way of life deemed disrespectful, and an entirely

new class and caste of dancers replaced them. Entire repertoires were deemed unsuitable, movement patterns transformed, even the stage itself shifted from temples and saloons to the proscenium of theatres. As they watched their art form transform so radically, where could hereditary dancers voice their discomfort? Did they ever come across their dance — altered and tailored for a new body, a new aesthetic, a new nation — and rage the same way?

Hereditary dancers wrote letters protesting the reform bill of 1928 introduced by Muthulakshmi Reddy, for instance. Bharatanatyam doyenne Thanjavur Balasaraswati, who was from the hereditary community, criticised the puritanism of the newly reformed and Brahminised Bharatanatyam. Hereditary dancers struggled with the rapid de-familialisation of their form, the addition of stage accoutrements that had never been considered necessary, as well as their ousting from their artistic practice. But their caste and class status rendered any protest largely ineffective in halting the trajectory of the "modern" ren-

dering of their dance. Those sympathetic to this "reform" might say that it was necessary for the survival of the dance. So why resist the same logic today? Dancers increasingly use social media as their primary platform, and their movements for shorter attention spans and vertical forms. In this landscape, dance is altering rapidly, and movies reflect this shift. This stage demands the "re-forming" of dance and its aesthetics, and is primed for virality. And like it or not, "nepo-natyam" achieves this.

Read in this light, the allegations of disrespect levelled at Panday and the choreographer who has valiantly tried to defend her, seem out of proportion. Is Bollywood doing anything so vastly different from what a modern, socially and economically advantaged group forced on another a 100 years ago? The stark difference is only how the caste and class status of today's dancers offers them greater visibility and stakes in the demand for respect.

Ranjini Nair is a dancer and dance researcher with a PhD from the University of Cambridge. The views expressed are personal

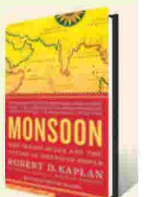
[EDITOR'S PICK]

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

MAPPING GEOPOLITICS

Geography is the key for Robert Kaplan to explain complex geopolitical manoeuvres and power relations. From the '90s work *Heart of Darkness* to the more recent *War and Peace*, as Kaplan plots the crises that have beset the world across long time spans. The historical eye helps to predict the action ahead as nations belligerently make their moves on the board of global power relations.

This week, the Quad foreign ministers met in New Delhi. The US and Iran are negotiating a ceasefire to douse the fire that has engulfed West Asia and global energy markets. *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, Kaplan's 2011 work, anticipated the geopolitical shifts in this region, the archipelago and is home to the monsoon winds. He draws from history, economics, and trade to outline a Great Game on the storied channels of the Indian Ocean.



Monsoon Robert Kaplan 2011

Rubio executes a good repair job for India and Asian allies

The broad agenda of India-US cooperation has been reaffirmed, but emerging US-China bonhomie raises questions over the future of Quad



SHYAM SARAN

The visit of United States Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco Rubio to India from May 23 to 26 had two components, separated by a visit to the Taj Mahal. One was bilateral, involving talks with his Indian counterpart, S Jaishankar, while the other was to attend a Quadrilateral foreign ministers meeting, the third under President Donald Trump's second term.

The foreign minister of Australia, Penny Wong, and Japan, Toshimitsu Motegi, were also able to hold bilateral meetings with Mr Rubio on the sidelines of the Quad meeting. These bilateral meetings would have been as important as, if not more than, the multilateral one. One should examine the bilaterals separately from the Quad meeting.

Mr Rubio's visit was clearly a deliberate effort on the part of the US to repair its relations with India, which have seen a serious downturn over the past year. Not only has President Trump singled out India for penal tariffs on account of its purchase of Russian oil, while

exempting China, Turkey, and even Hungary — all significant buyers of Russian oil and gas — he has often used disparaging language about India, once describing it as a "straggler" in the economic world.

Several of his administration officials have used even more abusive language for India and this has been echoed within the Maga constituency. India has also faced the brunt of Mr Trump's anti-immigration crusade, with limitations on H-1B visas, which had for years been a passport to career advancement for professional Indians.

The growing bonhomie with Pakistan's military leadership, and the prominence Pakistan has been accorded as a mediator in the ongoing war with Iran, has brought back the spectre of India-Pakistan hyphenation and concerns about Pakistan being able, once again, to draw support both from the US and China, even during days of acute confrontation between these two patrons.

More significant has been the prospect of a degree of strategic accommodation between the US and China, reinforced by Mr Trump's recent visit to Beijing.

The two sides agreed to pursue constructively, "strategic stability" and engage in a dialogue on a range of contentious issues, including economic security, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. The setting of a Board of Trade to handle trade-related

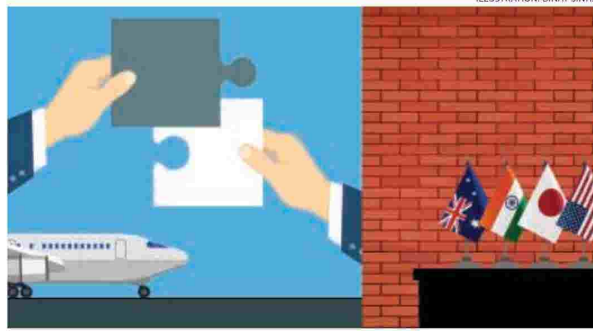


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

issues and a Board on Investment to promote, within clearly laid parameters, two-way investment, showing that de-risking rather than decoupling from China is now the preferred US strategy. Economic security is now clearly an integral part of national security. This shrinks the room to manoeuvre for countries like India. Even small shifts in relations between the two strongest powers — what Mr Trump calls the G-2 — mean larger shifts for other partners on both sides.

It is this realisation that explains the visit of the Russian President to China days after

Mr Trump's departure. It also explains Mr Rubio's visit to India in its wake. Both powers, the US and China need to reassure allies and partners that they continue to be important, despite the shift in US-China relations.

Judging by the atmospheres surrounding the visit and the warm sentiments expressed by Mr Rubio in his numerous public statements, one may conclude that the repair job has been largely successful and that the broad agenda of India-US cooperation in diverse domains, including defence, technology and anti-counter-terrorism, will remain unaffected for the foreseeable

future. This is a plus for India.

The convening of Quad may be seen through the same prism. It is designed to convey that the pursuit of strategic stability with China does not alter the US Indo-Pacific strategy. If China is signalling that its "no-limits partnership" with Russia remains unchanged, as does its tacit support for Russia in its war on Ukraine, then it is in the US' interest to convey that its Indo-Pacific strategy, aimed at constraining China, remains in place.

This may be the intent, but if nothing has changed, then what is the content of the "strategic sta-

bility" now being pursued? There is merit, therefore, in acknowledging the reassurance but remaining on guard with respect to a significant shift in the geopolitical strategic environment. The shift, if it continues to unfold, will not be compatible with the reassurances being extended.

One needs to watch what happens in the three summits that Mr Trump and Xi Jinping are committed to holding this year: One bilateral meeting, likely in September, and the other two on the sidelines of the forthcoming G-20 and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings, respectively. These will give a clearer indication of the content of the strategic stability that the two sides are committed to pursuing.

The Quad meeting in Delhi is important because its convening reflects a US reappraisal of its value in terms of managing China. Quad remains useful as one more bargaining counter for the US, just as the China-Russia partnership is for China. Mr Rubio described Quad as the linchpin of its Indo-Pacific strategy, but is this strategy still valid in view of the overarching consensus reached at the Trump-Xi Jinping summit?

If the US now looks at Quad only as a bargaining counter and not as a component of an enduring strategic framework in the Indo-Pacific, then the Quad is sacrificed, or more likely, allowed to slowly atrophy, if the stakes in

relations with China were high enough. This happened during the first incarnation of Quad.

In 2007, the US decided to set it aside to assuage concerns of China and Russia, whose support it needed for dealing with the Iran and North Korea nuclear issues at the United Nations Security Council. One should be alert to a similar possibility now, even while pursuing, to India's advantage, the several practical collaboration initiatives announced at the meeting. These have a value beyond Quad and could continue to be pursued by India, Japan and Australia even if the US decided to downgrade its importance.

Lastly, the future of Quad is linked to the fate of the US commitment to the defence of Taiwan against a Chinese invasion and its reinforcement with the mainland by force. If the US changes its language on Taiwan, either to accept that it acknowledges a One China policy, that it opposes Taiwan independence, or that it would reduce and stop arms supplies to Taiwan within a specified time frame, then the US Indo-Pacific strategy would have no legs to stand on. This will matter more to US allies — Japan, Korea and Australia in particular — rather than to India. But it would render Quad as a security partnership irrelevant.

The author is a former foreign secretary

A meme movement



VIEWPOINT DEVANGSHU DATTA

about this phenomenon. LGBTQ activists, black activists and other targeted groups have done this often enough.

Mr Dipke satirically adopted the cockroach slur and owned it. Millions of youngsters followed in his wake. Self-deprecatingly, the CJP says it's the "voice of the lazy and unemployed", even as the Chief Justice who triggered the meme claims he meant it to refer to people with fake degrees.

It's actually impossible to figure out if young Indians are lazy, since a large proportion of them are unemployed, and the unemployed lack opportunity to prove they can be industrious. A wellspring fuelling the CJP tsunami is the high levels of youth unemployment. A very significant proportion of Indians under 35 is unemployed and some have been seeking jobs for over a decade. Others are doing what every mill-gen of youngsters, including extremely over-qualified people, apply in desperation for any job that is advertised. No government has been able to deliver on this front and thus may be worse as artificial intelligence (AI) enters the workforce.

When it comes to fake degrees, 2026 may also mark a watershed. Given the NET UG paper-leaks and the CBSE website scandal, it is possible to argue that degrees and certificates are, at the very least, of dubious credibility. That is yet another cause of youth anger. The CJP website had a petition demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. It had been signed by 600,000 "cockroaches" before the site was blocked.

The Net fiasco and revelations about the ease with which the CBSE website can be hacked and marks changed make it hard to trust exam results. The poisoning of the educational well

directly affects everyone in that age-cohort. Those boys and girls will have to prove their degrees are credible, even if they got good marks.

Unemployment and dubiously administered exams disproportionately affect the youth. But the CJP "cockroaches" have also highlighted the pain of inflation and the privations it has imposed on their families. And, they are, of course, blaming the government for the escalating cost of living.

The CJP "manifesto" also addresses other issues that seem to trigger frustration among today's youth. These include allegations of cronyism. The CJP founder has also refused to engage with the TV studio circuit even while speaking with many independent websites. That's a sign of mistrust of the establishment, which should concern any politician trying to connect with younger people.

The CJP and its rise is one indicator that mainstream politics are no longer able to easily connect with youth. Disillusioned youngsters are turning to satire to express their anger because they feel they cannot trust politicians to deliver on their everyday concerns like employment, inflation and education.

Are commentators jumping the gun by comparing the CJP to the youth movements that overturned governments in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka? Early days, perhaps. But the banning of online satire is a response that may prove ineffective — bans can cause a Streisand Effect, where content is amplified.

The CJP's satirical approach, what it targets, and why it resonates with youngsters are worth careful study. The CJP and its manifesto offer the equivalent of an unstructured opinion poll that tells us what youngsters find concerning, and addressing those concerns could and should drive electoral outcomes.

Throwing governance out with the garbage

It's not an accident that Apple's Steve Jobs, maybe the greatest of all high-tech founders and CEOs, had no need to shelter behind bespoke extra protections

Elon Musk, who already owns about 42 per cent of SpaceX, will have 85 per cent voting control following the company's initial public offering (IPO). Documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission lay out some rare terms.

Mr Musk will simultaneously be chairman of the board, chief executive officer and chief technology officer. He appoints most of the board's directors. He cannot be fired. Because SpaceX filed for "controlled company" status under Nasdaq rules, it will even be exempt from the requirement that a majority of its directors be independent. Public investors waive their rights to jury trials and class actions.

Although the world's richest man with a fortune estimated by Bloomberg at more than \$725 billion is officially the "Technoking" of Tesla, his title at SpaceX might as well be "God Emperor." But he's far from the only CEO throwing traditional corporate governance out with the garbage. Such an approach ignores centuries of hard-won wisdom on what really helps leaders succeed, even ones as mercurial as Mr Musk.

SpaceX isn't the first tech company to try to give its leader a completely free hand. Google's 2004 IPO brought dual-class shares into the tech market, with a founders' letter arguing (correctly) that capital markets had become too short-term in its views and the company's founders needed more voting control. Companies like Meta, Snap, Roblox and Pinterest followed Google's example. The structure has spread dramatically. In 2025, 41 per cent of all US IPOs and almost half of tech IPOs were dual class, both all-time highs and up from less than 2 per cent in 1980.

But SpaceX has gone much further, enabled by the institutions that are supposed to push back and protect all shareholders. Texas changed its laws to favour management and lure companies like SpaceX away from Delaware. To compete for the SpaceX listing,

Nasdaq cut the seasoning period for index inclusion from roughly three months to 15 days for companies in the top 40 of the Nasdaq 100 (so if potential IPO candidates, SpaceX, OpenAI, and Anthropic), and restructured the requirement that at least 10 per cent of a company's shares be publicly tradeable by weighting low-float stocks at three times their free float, forcing index funds to pour money into the company's stock despite a relatively small number of available shares. The institutions designed to constrain founders have abandoned their job to curry favour with this one.

We constrain leaders because we've learned that it works. The motto of Britain's fabled Royal Society is *Nullius in verba*. Take nobody's word for it. The foundation of science is that ideas must be tested, not accepted on faith, no matter who proposes them. That strictures even applied to the greatest scientists who ever lived.

Albert Einstein spent decades of his life rejecting quantum mechanics. Other scientists proved him wrong and modern physics, including the foundations of quantum computing, is built on those debates.

Legendary Intel CEO Andy Grove applied the same approach to management via constructive confrontation. Problems had to be confronted directly and quickly, focused on the idea rather than the person, never left to fester. Grove realised that disagreement doesn't make leaders weaker; it makes them better.

To get another perspective, I called former Ford Motor Co CEO Gerald Dally, in my opinion the finest of his generation, and asked him how his Working Together system encouraged speaking up, even to him. He told me, "I would say, 'If I did something that didn't look like I was following Working Together, I'd appreciate your thoughts.'" Two of the best CEOs America has ever produced know that

pushback doesn't make leaders weaker. It makes them better.

Companies that reject that insight pay for their mistake. Take Meta's Reality Labs. CEO Mark Zuckerberg's voting control of Meta is, like Mr Musk's at SpaceX, the product of a dual-class structure. He reoriented his company around the Metaverse with such enthusiasm he renamed Facebook Inc as Meta Platforms Inc. Nevertheless, cumulative operating losses through the end of 2025 exceeded \$83 billion. Someday maybe we'll all hang out in the Metaverse. But for now, the vision far outstrips the technology. When you schedule a major announcement to proclaim that after spending billions of dollars your avatars now have legs, you've misjudged the situation. A CEO who had to justify his choices might have had someone point that out before the checks were written.

It's not an accident that Apple's Steve Jobs, maybe the greatest of all high-tech founders and CEOs, had no need to shelter behind bespoke extra protections. Apple has always been one share, one vote. When Jobs was pushed out by the board, it had good reason to do so. He spent the next 12 years learning. Getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have happened to him. That's not my opinion; that's what Jobs told the Stanford University graduating class of 2005. The Jobs who returned in 1997 could partner with a board and listen to Jonny Ive and Tim Cook (sometimes). The results speak for themselves.

The leading scholar on dual-class structure, Harvard's Lucian Bebchuk, has shown that even if they provide an initial advantage, it fades over time. Psychology can explain why. Power changes the people who hold it. The powerful are less willing to listen to others and more willing to manipulate. Stripping away constraints on CEOs exacerbates power's worst tendencies, when good corporate governance would be seeking to counteract them. The fact that Mr Musk has been successful running SpaceX isn't a guarantee that he'll continue to succeed, especially if any guardrails around him are removed.

SpaceX's structure takes a CEO who is already unfiltered and completely unleashes him. It virtually guarantees that we'll get the worst version of its leader. Other companies seeking to emulate Mr Musk are sure to adopt similar structures, and the result will be to same. Today's CEOs are understandably tempted by the prospect of ignoring the whims of financial markets. Their diagnosis that Wall Street's short-termism is a problem is correct. Becoming an absolute monarch is like giving yourself cancer to cure heart disease. You've fixed a real problem by giving yourself much worse one.

Bloomberg

Muddled petroleum-pricing regime



AJAY TYAGI

nately, this topic crops up during serious discussions only during crisis periods like the present one. Notwithstanding the fact that petroleum product pricing is a politically-sensitive subject, it is time for the government to bite the bullet, take hard decisions, and stick to them.

First, some facts. The proportion of oil in the total energy basket has virtually remained the same over the last two decades — it was about 32 per cent in 2000 versus 31 per cent now. Despite the increased focus on renewables, various conservation attempts and plans to encourage electric vehicle (EV) adoption, domestic consumption of oil and gas is not going to go down in a hurry.

Our oil and gas import dependence has only increased over the period; currently, it is about 85 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively,

of domestic consumption. India's dependence on oil for accounting for about 12 per cent of total global oil imports, and India is nowhere near being a price-setter in the international market.

Another important aspect of the oil and gas economy is that a significant proportion of the indirect tax revenue of the central and state governments comes from these commodities. This is one reason why they couldn't be brought under the goods and services tax (GST) regime till now. The government also earns revenue through corporation tax and dividends from state-owned oil and gas firms.

The government faces a trilemma — keeping domestic prices low, not losing out on tax revenue, and containing the forex outflow and current account deficit. Challenging times, like the present one, pose a serious stress test to the system.

Naturally, there is a limit to which the petroleum sector's accounting companies (OMCs) can be asked to absorb the losses. No one knows how long the current geopolitical situation would continue. Note that OMCs are listed companies, answerable to public shareholders.

As for the government, it hardly has any fiscal space to take on this burden. The Reserve Bank of India has limitations in supporting the rupee, which is bound to depreciate in such situations.

There is no other alternative but to give the correct pricing signal to the market and consumers. The appeals and calls for conservation won't work. Inevitably, this would increase inflation, but that can't be helped. Keeping the prices artificially suppressed has huge economic costs.

Going forward, the government must put in place a principle-based

standard operating procedure (SoP) to deal with situations involving prolonged periods of high international prices. During such periods, the central and state governments should agree to take a hit on their tax revenues. Conversely, in the case of lower than normal international prices, governments could increase the tax rates.

Coordinated action between the central and state governments is crucial for achieving the desired objective. Bringing petroleum under the GST regime is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. That said, the GST Council might be the right forum to build a consensus on the subject.

A feature of the oil and gas industry in India is the predominance of government-owned companies in the market. Undoubtedly, over the

period, they have done a good job. But no one can argue against the need for facilitating private-sector participation. There is another related aspect. With the state-owned OMCs holding almost 70 per cent of the market share, the government is under public pressure to intervene, formally and informally, in pricing.

The government is being criticised for increasing petrol and diesel prices by 77 to 78 per litre within a short span of 10 days. The increase in domestic prices should have been effected gradually, in smaller instalments, spread over a longer period, say, two to three months. The people would have got an early message and there would have been less public outcry. This would have presumably happened if a substantial proportion of the petro-

leum product marketing share had been with the private sector, with no monopoly of public-sector units.

As and when the situation normalises, the government needs to renege its efforts to get the private sector to participate in the oil and gas sector. The right approach would be to privatise one of the existing OMCs having a significant market share.

The government should take a fresh look at the proposal for the privatisation of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL), which was established in 1976 but has been largely dormant. Once a company of size of BPCL, with over 20 per cent of market share is privatised, it would completely change the petroleum product marketing scenario in the country. This would reduce the government's role in pricing, and its presence in pricing situations like the present one. Over time, people will get used to market-based pricing.

The author is a former IAS officer who has worked in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Delayed verdicts

Supreme Court spells out timeline for HCs

INVOKING Article 142 of the Constitution with the aim of delivering "complete justice", the Supreme Court has directed all high courts to curb delays in the pronouncement of judgments. The timeline spelt out for verdicts — within three months from the date of reserving the order — is a step in the right direction. The Court has yet again acknowledged a troubling reality: delayed judgments are not merely administrative lapses but a denial of justice itself. It was in the Anil Rai case (2001) that the SC observed the worrisome practice among HC judges of first reserving verdicts and then failing to pronounce judgments for months or even years — or delivering only operative parts of the verdict with a promise to provide detailed reasons later, which in some cases was not done.

Litigants suffer when cases are "reserved for judgment" indefinitely. Undertakings continue to languish in jail despite hearings being completed, while victims and their families remain gripped by uncertainty. The Court's insistence that bail orders be issued on the same day — or at the latest, the next day — is therefore both humane and constitutionally necessary. The SC's focus on transparency is also welcome. By directing high courts to upload judgments within 24 hours and disclose timelines relating to reservation, pronouncement and uploading of verdicts, the judiciary is embracing greater accountability. Public confidence in courts depends not only on the quality of judgments but also on their timely delivery. The apex court would also do well to ensure that its own judges don't err on this front.

It's lamentable that the SC has to repeatedly remind high courts to do the needful. The figures are stark: over 64 lakh cases are pending in HCs across the country (around three-fourths are more than a year old). The latest directions are an attempt to institutionalise discipline within the judicial process. At the same time, judicial delays cannot be viewed solely as the failure of individual judges. Timelines must be accompanied by broader reforms, including expedited judicial appointments, better technological support and efficient case management systems.

Punjab pulse

Civic polls verdict boosts AAP's confidence

PUNJAB'S local body election results may not be a definitive pointer to the Assembly elections due early next year, but they do offer important political signals. Civic polls are shaped more by local concerns than by broader state-level narratives. Historically, ruling parties enjoy an advantage in such contests because voters often believe development funds and administrative support flow more smoothly to areas aligned with the government of the day. That trend was visible again as the AAP swept the polls, leaving the Congress at a distant second, with the SAD and the BJP trailing behind even Independents. But these figures must be viewed with caution. Punjab recorded an overall turnout of nearly 64%, but participation in municipal corporations remained below 60%, reflecting subdued enthusiasm in larger urban centres. Local body polls have generally witnessed uneven and lower voter mobilisation, reducing their predictive value for Assembly contests where turnout is usually higher and political issues broader.

Even so, the verdict underlines a troubling reality for the opposition: despite criticism of the government over drugs, gangsterism, law and order and governance issues, rival parties have failed to convert public discontent into meaningful gains. The Congress continues to suffer from factionalism and leadership uncertainty, while the SAD is still struggling to recover from the political fallout of the sacrilege controversy and the farmers' agitation. The BJP, though still a marginal player in the state's electoral landscape, appears to have begun preparing early for 2027. The appointment of Kewal Singh Dhillon, a Jat Sikh, as the Punjab BJP chief is significant as it signals an attempt to move beyond its traditional urban Hindu base.

The road to the Assembly elections remains long. But for now, the AAP has seized the early advantage while the Opposition is still searching for coherence and direction.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, MAY 30, 1926

Jail Committee's report

VERY serious disclosures have been made in respect of the state of affairs in prisons in this province by the Jails Inquiry Committee, a summary of whose report and of the government resolution thereon we published in our last issue. There has been an inordinate delay in the publication of the report by the Punjab Government. The committee was appointed in November to inquire into serious allegations regarding unauthorised punishments and indulgences and examine the question of prisoners' diet. It went through a mass of evidence, examined witnesses, including gentlemen of the status and position of Lala Lajpat Rai, visited a number of jails and recorded the statements of a large number of prisoners. But its investigations had to be confined to the narrow limits of the terms of reference made to it. These terms, as we pointed out more than once at the time of the appointment of the committee, were meagre and left uncovered several phases of jail administration in this province which require to be reformed. Although the gentlemen who sat on the committee were highly capable and efficient in their own spheres of work, yet it could hardly be said that they possessed any special knowledge for the work entrusted to them. Moreover, there was the serious handicap placed in the way of a satisfactory inquiry into Punjab jail administration which renders it so easy for jail officials to obliterate evidence against their unlawful acts inside jails. It is when the findings of the committee are read subject to these facts that some idea can be formed of the real nature of the evils prevailing in Punjab's jails.

Poll din gets louder in Punjab

The next six months are expected to be long and hard in the run-up to Assembly polls

THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

HOW has come late — or early, depends how you look at it — to Punjab, with the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) celebrating its sweep in the Municipal Corporation elections in the state with colour and *dhol* and sweetmeat. The Congress is a far second, and Independent candidates have fared better than both the BJP and the Akali Dal.

With the BJP's state chief, Kewal Dhillon, only 24 hours old, it may not be fair to pronounce a verdict on the party's performance — it has been decimated in Dhillon's own area, Barnala. But what is interesting is that one of the two BJP MLAs in the existing Assembly, Jangl Lal Mahajan from Mukerian, notes my colleague Deepkamal Kaur, openly campaigned for the Akali Dal candidate (who won), although neither party is in alliance.

If this election is, indeed, a dry run to the Assembly elections later this year or early next, it promises to be hotly contested. Some will say the BJP may have left the transition too late — too late for Delhi Lt Governor Taranjit Sandhu to be showcased in Punjab and too late for Kewal Dhillon to take charge. Certainly, there was a lot of lobbying for the post, since Sunil Jakhar announced a year ago that he didn't want the job. But the party will take heart in the fact that it has swept Naya Gaon, a municipal council in Mohali, cheek by jowl with Chandigarh — not



VICTORY: AAP has swept the municipal polls, while the Congress has finished a far second. TRIBUNE PHOTO: MALKIAT SINGH

far from the Chandigarh Golf Club, with its undulating courses, watering holes, a favourite parking spot for the city elite — while both AAP and Congress have been reduced to one seat each.

This election has also more or less made clear the direction that both AAP and BJP are taking — the former will do everything to protect its turf and the latter will do everything else to break into the state.

It's clear now that Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann will be the face of AAP, with the national leadership from Delhi, both Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia, in charge but firmly in the background — everyone is keenly aware that Punjab is an outlier, rebels without a pause, and like to take charge of their own fate. Moreover, all the accusations against Mann on his own home turf, Dhuri — faction-fighting, drug usage, an unclear city — have fallen flat, with AAP sweeping the Dhuri municipal council election on Friday.

As for the BJP, it is equally

AAP will do everything to protect its turf and the BJP will do everything else to break into the state.

clear the RSS will play a significant role in managing the upcoming contest — its cadres and 'panna pramukhs' (literally, the 'pramukh', or person, who manages the names of every voter on the page, or 'panna') have already been diligently working the ground. However, Kewal Dhillon turns out — his declared net worth is between Rs 200-229 crore, with homes in Delhi's Vasant Vihar, Sector 9 in Chandigarh, in Dubai,

and Marbella in Spain — his performance will be a clear measure of the hard work the RSS puts into the state.

Question is, what does the Congress want to do? This column has often been disparaging about the grand old party's warring factions, all of them angling for the pure pleasure of the Delhi High Command — which, admittedly, has been busy this week with executing a bloodless transition in Karnataka, with CM-so-far Siddaramaiah handing over the baton to his Number Two man DK Shivakumar without a yelp.

Certainly, many in Punjab will be hopefully looking at Delhi for a repetition of that skilful manoeuvre. In fact, if the Karnataka experiment is anything to go by, it seems it may have incorporated into its learning curve the damage it did to its own party back in 2021 when Punjab Chief Minister, Capt Amarinder Singh, was changed less than one year before the Assembly election. The Delhi rumour mill today

is rife with speculation that the Congress High Command, flush with the success in Kerala and enamoured with its intervention in Tamil Nadu, is willing to play for high stakes in Punjab in the coming months, in Himachal Pradesh in late 2027 when polls are due and in Rajasthan in late 2028. (This also means that Sachin Pilot may finally have a chance, because, like DK Shivakumar, he did not quit the Congress, unlike several of their colleagues.)

For now, the party's poor showing in the municipal elections became apparent on Friday — it had even lost from the home turf of the state party president Raja Warring, Jalandhar MP Charanjit Channi didn't even campaign in his constituency. Voters have paid no heed to candidates in the belt where Partap Bajwa and Sukhinder Randhawa reign. And so, as the top leadership plus state leaders huddled to discuss the road ahead in Delhi, it was clear to everyone that if the party wants to remain in the reckoning, it will have to take some tough decisions.

The next six months are expected to be long and hard. Every day will count. MLAs will jump ship, some will shift their constituencies. The long shadow of the Enforcement Directorate will hang over the land. AAP minister Sanjeev Arora has been in ED's judicial custody since May 9. Congress leader in charge of Punjab Bhupesh Baghel's son was arrested by the ED last July in two cases linked to an alleged liquor scam, but granted bail by the Chhattisgarh High Court this January.

So, are these municipal polls a shape of things to come, or will Punjab have to resort to Shah Rukh Khan? Kya Punjab mein picture abhi baqi hai, mere dost?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Politics without morality is a thing to be avoided. —Mahatma Gandhi

A requiem for 'Jim Khanna'

SHELLEY WALIA

THE Delhi Gymkhana hasn't shut its doors yet, but the obituaries are already being circulated, mostly on WhatsApp. Black ambands haven't been formalised, but let's give it another week. The order is likely already with the tailor.

The club, founded in 1913, when the British still presumed permanence, supplied three essentials to the elite: privacy, continuity and properly served Scotch. The lease, a paltry Rs 1,000 a year, survived Independence, new governing bodies and the city's many reinventions through bureaucratic inertia. Nobody looked closely until someone finally did.

Amusingly, security concerns have been advanced as the civil explanation. This is fittingly ironic too. The club was long the capital's most comfortable neutral ground, where diplomats of convenient allegiance, officers of vague repute and civil servants whose titles shifted with the seasons drifted across the lawns with studied casualness. The chicken sandwiches, by most accounts, retained their customary Edwardian restraint.

Now, the same 27 acres are suddenly a potential risk. But the story is not primarily about fences. It is about the intentional redrawing of the city's cultural map. At the centre of this remapping sits Jim Khanna, the club's most faithful inhabitant and its unofficial archivist of privilege. Jim keeps a mental ledger of every handshake, each table's history and suitable anecdotes for every occasion. To him, membership was never merely a pass; it was an inherited posture, a civic accent worn with the ease of long habit.

The current ruling dispensation's project, however, is less about Jim Khanna's nostalgia and more about a competing aesthetic for public life, an ideology that prefers visible renewal to imperceptible continuity. Public spaces and institutions are being designed to reflect a different set of priorities where ossified habits of discretionary decision-making can no longer escape scrutiny. In practice, this often looks less like erasure than a rearrangement, as is apparent in monuments dusted, languages elevated, civic rituals repackaged, and in one small but telling swap, long-table lunches replaced by the plain efficiency of *paneer pakoras*.

Meanwhile, those who never received a call, waiting for the selection process that crawled at a glacial pace, are full of gleeful *schadenfreude*. For them, there is now an almost festive satisfaction. They spent years on the waiting list, often told that the committee's slow deliberations were some kind of high-minded selection. They are savouring the moment when the elites discover that a thousand-rupee lease and a fat membership ledger were never an impenetrable shield.

History tells us that Delhi remakes itself constantly through avenues, apartment blocks and the narratives it chooses to privilege. The club that outlived an empire may not outlast the cultural reordering done in its name. When it finally closes, it will go as it lived — with the last round ordered, Jim Khanna woelessly polishing his memories and nobody quite willing to call for the bill. Outside, a stall sells chicken sandwiches under a banner promising "heritage with a modern twist." People aren't sure whether to feel hungry or affronted.

The writer is former Professor and Fellow, Punjab University

epaper.tribuneindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SC verdict weakens voting right

Refer to 'No twist in the SIR tale'; the Supreme Court's endorsement of the SIR has normalised exclusion in the name of electoral purity. The Court ignored the central issue raised by political parties, civil society groups and petitioners: there is no provision for Special Intensive Revision in the Representation of the People Act, 1950. Section 21 only speaks of revision of electoral rolls, while Rule 25 of the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, mentions intensive revision, not SIR with mass citizenship scrutiny. By upholding the ECI's sweeping powers, the judgment has weakened universal adult franchise. The State is deciding who deserves to vote.

RAMPHAL KATARIA, KURUKSHETRA

Cong high command's control

Appropos of 'Karnataka power tussle ends as CM Sidda quits, makes way for DKS'; Congress veteran Siddaramaiah was made to resign on the instructions of the Congress High Command. His sudden exit looks like a Punjab rerun of September 2021 when Congress Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh was asked to step down by Sonia Gandhi to make way for Charanjit Singh Channi. In its aftermath, Congress faced a crushing defeat in the 2022 Assembly elections in Punjab. The Congress high command, controlled by the Gandhi family, has started a vicious circle, which may create a plethora of political problems for the party in the near future.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

LoP's multifaceted role

The Leader of Opposition (LoP) is not to be considered a rubber stamp to endorse every government policy. He/she has to possess the qualities of statesmanship, sportsmanship, candour and compassion. In fact, the LoP is a *sine qua non* for good governance. He does not necessarily have to criticise every government move. Appreciation of the ruling party's strong points and constructive criticism of the party's follies can make him an asset. He must not be cowed down by vendetta politics and must stand firm in his opposition to policies not in the national interest or measures reeking of corruption or nepotism.

JARNAIL SINGH BRAR, BATHINDA

Towards AI sovereignty

Refer to 'Modi's AI mission in Europe'; India has recognised that the traditional IT services model is becoming obsolete due to generative and agentic AI. The PM's tour sought to bolster India's AI economy through sovereign computing, the proposed 8-exaflop supercomputing cluster (high-speed computing) and semiconductor partnerships. The Tata Electronics partnership with ASML for the Dholera (Gujarat) chip fab is particularly significant. However, MoUs alone cannot guarantee industrial reality as automation is already threatening millions of jobs. Hence, India must accelerate indigenous research, upgrade technical education and ensure swift execution to become a global tech hub.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Vaibhav must represent India

With reference to 'New six machine'; cricket pundits have fallen short of adjectives to describe the child prodigy Vaibhav Sooryavanshi. Chris Gayle took 456 deliveries to hit 60 sixes in a season, while Sooryavanshi took just 266 balls to break that record. He does not just play an innings, but unleashes a hurricane that blows away records and opposition bowlers. The way he is treating international bowlers like club bowlers, he is proving that he is not a multidimensional player. It is just a question of when, and not if, as far as his selection in Team India is concerned.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Culture hostage to violence

Refer to 'Dramas beyond borders'; there is no denying the fact that Indian viewers admire Pakistani dramas and our neighbours equally appreciate Indian cinema and music. The common man on both sides desires peace, goodwill and opportunities to reconnect with their ancestral roots. Unfortunately, sponsored terrorism and vested interests continue to hold this natural harmony hostage. The day Pakistan realises that friendship and cooperation bring greater dividends than violence, not only the two nations but the entire South Asia will prosper. *Na deewar rahegi, na fasla rahega, Mohabbat ka safar hi silsila rahega.*

VIJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribuneindia.com

Last Day To Join Private Channel. **Closing entry for new members Now.**

◆ Indian Newspaper

- 1) Times of India
 - 2) The Hindu
 - 3) Business line
 - 4) The Indian Express
 - 5) Economic Times
- And more Newspapers

◆ International Newspapers channel

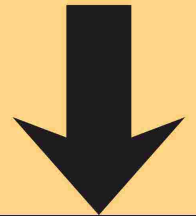
[European, American, Gulf & Asia]

◆ Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

◆ English Editorials

[National + International Editorials]



Click here
to join

◆ Lifetime validity at just 19 Rupees 

Trust me... this will be your best purchase of 2026

Haryana sex ratios & society



PRACHY HOODA
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR,
OP JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

HARYANA'S poor sex ratio at birth (SRB) is back in the news. In the first four months of 2026, the ratio has fallen sharply to 895 girls for every 1,000 boys, as against last year's 925. Charhki Dagri has reported the lowest ratio of 769 girls per 1,000 boys. Despite being Haryana's wealthiest and most urbanised district and home to global capital, Gurugram's ratio stands at 863.

The response from district administrations and police and health officials has been prompt and familiar: intensifying sting operations, crackdown on illegal sale of abortion kits and dismantling organised interstate networks involved in sex determination, along with village awareness campaigns, wall paintings and renewed invocation of the *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* slogan. Officials, as always, are speaking the language of enforcement and persuasion. The public is to be warned, educated, corrected.

But even after decades of campaigns, policing and slogans, a more uncomfortable question demands an ask: what if the state is misdiagnosing the problem itself? Renowned Australian policy scholar Carol Bacchi has argued that public policy does not merely solve problems; it actively constructs them. As per her framework, the focus shifts from simply asking 'What is the problem?' towards 'What is represented to be the problem?' Haryana's falling SRB offers a textbook example.

The crisis is framed in terms of deviant behaviour: it is considered to be a problem of immoral doctors, criminal interstate networks, backward rural attitudes and families shaped by patriarchal mindsets. Once the problem is represented this way, the solutions naturally revolve around surveillance, punishment and behavioural reform. Hence, the sting operations, raids, posters and awareness drives.

Yet, as Bacchi notes, all framings are inherently political. In the case of SRB, the framing



SON PRIORITY: The crisis mirrors inequalities embedded within the social order. FILE PHOTO

positions the state as a protector and disciplinary while shifting scrutiny away from deeper structural failures. The "problem" is framed as one of problematic citizens rather than ineffective institutions.

Even the official campaigns often reduce a profoundly political and structural issue into a morality play. Families and communities are urged to "save" and "value" daughters. But the wider structural problem of gender inequality remains curiously untouched.

Consider the paradox of Gurugram. If urbanisation automatically weakened son preference, Gurugram should have been at the forefront of Haryana's demographic recovery. Instead, it continues to be one of the state's worst performers. This shows that we must abandon the simplistic assumption that urbanisation, education and rising incomes naturally contribute to gender justice. They do not.

Research across East Asia and South Asia has repeatedly shown that son preference withstands economic transformation. Monica Das Gupta and others (2003) noted that the persistence of skewed sex ratios in countries like India, China and South Korea stemmed not merely from "culture" in the abstract but from durable family systems and kinship structures that privilege sons economically, ritually and socially.

In north Indian kinship systems, sons continue to be tied to inheritance, lineage continuity, old-age support and social status in ways daughters are not. Despite legal reforms and developmental gains, daughters are perceived as transient members of the natal household. Under

such conditions, access to sex-selective technology merely modernises/eases patriarchy; it does not dismantle it. This is precisely why the reliance on prohibition and policing has yielded limited success. It might be misplaced to see illegal sex determination as the root cause, when it is often merely the instrument. Crackdown on one clinic leads to the emergence of another. Banning abortion kits might shift demand elsewhere. Technology adapts because the underlying social logic remains intact.

Nor is the issue confined to "backward villages", as rhetoric often implies. In fact, Haryana's urban areas have witnessed a steeper long-term decline in child sex ratio than rural regions. Between 1981 and 2001, the decline in urban Haryana far outpaced that in rural areas. Affluence has not diluted son preference; in some contexts, it has improved families' ability to act upon it.

Thus, by reducing the SRB imbalance to criminality and ignorance, we avoid confronting harder questions about the institutional organisation of society itself. Why does women's partici-

ipation in the workforce remain low despite rising education? Why are inheritance laws weakly enforced in practice? Why does marriage continue to impose crushing economic and social burdens on families with daughters? Why are women systematically excluded from political and economic power even in rapidly urbanising regions?

These questions rarely feature in the official discourse because the usual action plan is easier to implement than to restructure property relations or invest meaningfully in social security systems that reduce dependence on male heirs.

Even the *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* campaign reveals this contradiction. This is certainly not to say that educating girls is not important. Rather, the rhetoric of saving girls often positions daughters as recipients of state benevolence instead of equal citizens entitled to autonomy and economic security. Feminist scholars have long argued that education alone does not automatically undo discriminatory gender norms. Schools might reproduce patriarchal expectations, labour markets might continue to exclude women, families can still privilege sons despite daughters' academic success.

Haryana's crisis, therefore, cannot be solved through surveillance and symbolism alone. More raids may generate headlines and more posters may create visibility. While both are important, neither addresses the institutional foundations of son preference. We must stop treating the crisis as simply a failure of individual morality. The crisis mirrors inequalities embedded within the social order.

Limits of coercive diplomacy with Pak



AIR MARSHAL AMIT TIWARI (RETD)
FORMER AOC-IN-C, CENTRAL AIR COMMAND

SHOULD India abandon its defensive strategy of deterrence towards Pakistan and pivot towards a more coercive offensive policy of compellence? It is felt that unless India adopts a more coercive and compelling posture, Pakistan will not abandon its state policy of sub-conventional aggression under the nuclear umbrella.

Historically, compellence only succeeds under the condition of overwhelming disparity in military strength, which can be applied in a sustained manner and a total absence of external support for the target state. Post World War II, Germany and Japan were convincingly defeated and were compelled to surrender. They had to agree to have limits on defence forces and adopt a pacifist constitution.

The US intervention in Panama in 1989 led to the capture of General Manuel Noriega and similarly, the January 2026 US operation in Venezuela resulted in the capture and extradition of President Nicolás Maduro. Subsequent to the abduction of their leaders, both these countries took the line dictated by the US. These are examples where compellence succeeded decisively. The common factors were overwhelming disparity in military strength, sustained application of force, lack of strategic depth, nuclear capability and external support.

Conversely, compellence failed or turned out to be enormously more costly than the cost of deterrence when it was attempted on deeply entrenched, ideologically driven states, having robust external support. This bitter lesson was learnt by the US in Vietnam and Afghanistan, by the USSR in Afghanistan and by Russia in Ukraine. In the case of Afghanistan, covert support to the Taliban by Pakistan, a country surviving on US doles, negated 20 years of work by the US. The present status of US involvement in Iran also falls in a similar category. India, too, had a disastrous experience in Sri Lanka when it tried to compel the LTTE to disarm.

In the geopolitical realities of South Asia, Pakistan has strategic and economic partnerships with its all-weather friends, China, Türkiye and several West Asian countries. This reliable and enduring network provides Pakistan with critical financial buffers, military hardware and diplomatic support in multilateral forums, like the UN Security Council and the Financial Action Task Force

(FATF). Moreover, Pakistan's military establishment exercises a disproportionate influence over the country's strategic and political decision-making. Consequently, the military has the first right on all national resources. It also has almost free access to Chinese weaponry and is nuclear-capable. Consequently, no coercive measures, such as trade suspensions or precision military strikes, can generate the existential threat necessary to compel Pakistan to alter the core of its foreign policy with respect to India.

Furthermore, the strategy of compellence has a major drawback. Once started, the coercer cannot afford to fail or back out without substantial loss of credibility. In the recent Iran and Ukraine wars, the US and Russia, respectively, tried to draw red lines for compliance. The crippling sanctions and military interventions failed to create existential threat for the target countries. Now the situation has reached a point where both these superpowers are searching for honourable exits. This apparent impotence signals to the rest of the world that defiance is survivable, which permanently weakens the coercer's leverage elsewhere.

Though India has been increasing the intensity of deterrence, there are limits to escalation in a nuclear environment and there is always a threat of the strikes losing their impact and punishment potential, like Israeli strikes over Lebanon. Moreover, compellence is not a viable option. Thus, India must shift its focus towards imposing costs on Pakistan by reciprocating in an asymmetric manner and applying multi-dimensional pressure. Instead of waiting for a terror attack to occur before retaliating, it should proactively exploit the fault lines within Pakistan and degrade the standing of the Pakistani army in the eyes of its citizens. To achieve this, India could encourage deniable grey-zone operations to expose economic disparities among the Pakistani population and exploit ethnic fissures. India should also shape the strategic environment through intelligence dominance, cyber and information operations. Leveraging its partnership status with the US, Japan and the EU, India can impose financial costs on Pakistan for any misadventure and work towards making its proxy war unsustainable by effectively utilising agencies like the FATF (Financial Action Task Force).

By neutralising conventional nuclear blackmail through deniable, non-linear coercion, India can shift from a reactive defensive state to an active shaper of the strategic environment without the risk of attempting to impose compellence. In a nuclearised environment, the objective of strategy is not absolute coercion, but sustainable pressure that steadily raises the cost of proxy warfare without triggering uncontrolled escalation.

Public transport requires investment, not appeals



TIKENDER SINGH PANWAR
FORMER DEPUTY MAYOR, SHIMLA

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi, while addressing a public rally recently said: Use the metro, Car-pool. Shift goods to rail. Work from home. Reduce petrol and diesel consumption. The appeal was framed as a response to the crisis in West Asia, which has sent oil prices surging. The logic is correct. But the PM did not answer one question: if citizens must use public transport, where exactly is it?

Against a current demand for 1,30,000 buses across 127 cities, only 46,000 buses provide services and 82% of that operate in megacities alone. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs' recommendation of 40 to 60 buses per 1,00,000 people is a standard that most cities have not come close to meeting.

Between 2011 and 2024, the share of urban households owning a motor vehicle surged from 40% to 68%. It happened because the bus became unreliable, uncomfortable, infrequent, and in many cities simply absent. Two-wheelers and three-wheelers filled the gap. The state created the conditions for private vehicle dependence and is now appealing to citizens to undo it through individual moral choice.

The working poor — construction labourers, domestic workers, street vendors, factory hands — who constitute most of the urban workforce already use public transport because they have no choice. For them, metro

Build the public transport first. Make it free, or nearly so.

fares are beyond their means. The private vehicle user belongs to the middle and upper-middle class. And that class will not shift to public transport through appeals alone. It will shift only when public transport offers comparable comfort, frequency, reliability and safety. That requires investment, planning and making privately driven cars an uncomfortable choice through selective pricing.

Several states have, in recent years, experimented with free or subsidised bus rides, primarily for women. These are genuine steps and their results have been striking. Karnataka's Shakti scheme saw a 47% surge

in women passengers within its inaugural month. Delhi's scheme drew over 40 million women passengers in its first nine days. It proves that when public transport is made affordable and accessible, people use it.

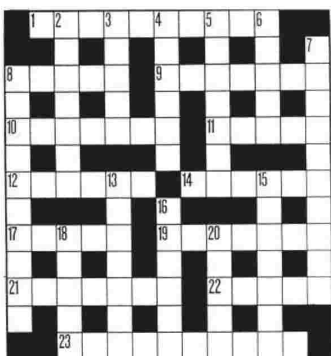
The demand must go further: free or near-free public transport as an urban right, funded not from welfare allocations but from the consolidated funds that currently subsidise roads, flyovers, and urban expressways that serve the private vehicle — and therefore, disproportionately, the middle class and above.

The 74th Constitutional Amendment, passed in 1992, promised decentralised urban governance. It listed urban transport among the functions to be transferred to urban local bodies. That transfer has not happened in any meaningful sense. Urban transport is managed by state departments, corporations, and increasingly special purpose vehicles that bypass elected local governments. The city corporation has no pow-

er over the bus route, the fleet, or to set fares. The result is a governance vacuum.

A genuine public transport policy would, first, immediately scale up the bus fleet, the most cost-effective and spatially flexible form of urban mass transit. Buses carry up to nine times as many passengers as metro systems in cities that have both, yet metro corridors receive the capital. Second, it would devolve transport planning and finance to urban local bodies, giving cities the constitutional authority the 74th Amendment promised but never delivered. Third, it would move toward universally accessible, low-fare or free public transport funded from a dedicated urban transport fund, built from a portion of fuel taxes and road cess that currently disappear into consolidated accounts. Fourth, in hill cities, emergency measures to restrict private vehicles and build alternative mobility systems must be the priority.

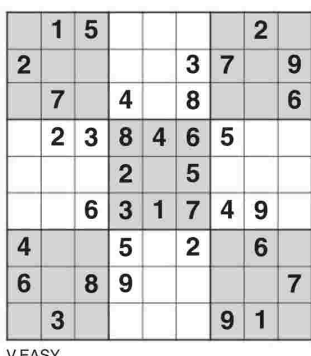
QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Massive horned animal (10)
 - Raise objections (5)
 - Weapons store (7)
 - Excess (7)
 - Hit repeatedly with fists (6)
 - Toxic substance (6)
 - Swift (7)
 - Vague idea (7)
 - Using undue force (7)
 - Make suitable (5)
 - Abandon life of crime (2,8)
- DOWN**
- Dull (7)
 - Boldness (5)
 - Sly (6)
 - Italian rice dish (7)
 - Spanish equivalent of Mr (5)
 - Financially untrustworthy (3-2-5)
 - Take exception to (10)
 - Perpetual (7)
 - Green leafy vegetable (7)
 - Scattered rubbish (6)
 - Point of a fork (5)
 - Military uniform colour (5)

Yesterday's Solution
Across: 1 Detect, 4 Saucer, 9 Pliable, 10 Annul, 11 Token, 12 Useless, 13 Forthcoming, 18 Cricket, 20 Cable, 22 Orion, 23 Theorem, 24 Lariat, 25 Reject.
Down: 1 Deputy, 2 Thick, 3 Cabinet, 5 Aware, 6 Condemn, 7 Relish, 8 Resuscitate, 14 Olivier, 15 Macheite, 16 Scroll, 17 Hermit, 19 Kenya, 21 Barge.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- MAY 30, 2026, SATURDAY**
- Shaka Samvat 1948
 - Jyeshtha Shaka 9
 - Jyeshtha Parvishite 16
 - Hijri 1447
 - Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 11:58 am
 - Shiva Yoga up to 5:25 am
 - Vishakha Nakshatra up to 1:21 pm
 - Moon enters Scorpio sign 6:39 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: 18:18 HRS	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	19:18 HRS
SUNRISE: 05:22 HRS	CITY	MAX	MIN
	Chandigarh	34	20
	New Delhi	35	23
	Amritsar	40	22
	Bathinda	43	21
	Jalandhar	39	23
	Ludhiana	40	22
	Bhiwani	39	24
	Hisar	43	23
	Sirsa	45	24
	Dharamsala	33	18
	Manali	26	11
	Shimla	25	17
	Srinagar	28	13
	Jammu	39	25
	Kargil	16	09
	Leh	16	06
	Dehradun	34	22
	Mussoorie	23	11

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India - founded 1818

Frozen Lines

India's sharp rejection of the latest China-Pakistan joint statement on Kashmir was predictable. What deserves closer attention, however, is not the diplomatic rebuttal itself but the steadily changing strategic environment in which such statements are now being made. For years, Beijing maintained a calibrated ambiguity on Kashmir. China would occasionally raise concerns over Ladakh or support Pakistan in multilateral forums, but it generally avoided language that appeared overtly aligned with Islamabad's full political narrative. That caution now seems to be fading. By describing Kashmir as an unresolved issue rooted in history and invoking United Nations resolutions, China has signalled that it is increasingly willing to internationalise the dispute alongside Pakistan, despite India's categorical opposition. The timing is not accidental.

The statement emerged amid deepening strategic convergence between New Delhi and the West, expanding Quad cooperation, and intensifying geopolitical competition across Asia. This is no longer merely about Kashmir. It is about the emerging architecture of Asian power politics. China's partnership with Pakistan has evolved far beyond traditional defence cooperation. The latest joint statement reportedly spurs artificial intelligence, counterterrorism, governance, water resources and regional coordination. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has already tied Pakistan's economic future closely to Beijing's strategic ambitions. What is now visible is a more explicit political dimension to that alliance.

For India, the concern lies not in rhetorical attacks alone but in the possibility of a coordinated diplomatic front that seeks to repeatedly reopen questions New Delhi considers settled. Since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, India has maintained that Jammu and Kashmir is entirely an internal matter, leaving no scope for third-party involvement. China's renewed references challenge that position directly. India's response was therefore deliberately uncompromising.

By asserting that Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh are integral parts of India and rejecting any external "locus standi", New Delhi was not merely responding to Pakistan. It was drawing a red line for Beijing as well. The reference to Pakistan's "illegal and forcible occupation" of territories claimed by India - some of which were ceded to China by Islamabad - also carried an unmistakable warning regarding Chinese investments and infrastructure activity in the region.

Equally significant was the joint statement's criticism of "double standards" on terrorism. In diplomatic language, such phrasing rarely appears by accident. It reflects continuing discomfort in Beijing and Islamabad over India's growing success in framing Pakistan-backed militancy as a global security issue rather than a bilateral grievance. Yet there is a paradox at the heart of this triangular rivalry.

The rising China-Pakistan alignment with Pakistan on Kashmir, the more India is likely to deepen strategic partnerships with the United States and its allies. Far from isolating India, aggressive signalling could accelerate the consolidation of rival geopolitical blocs in Asia. Kashmir remains a territorial dispute. But increasingly, it is also becoming a barometer of a much larger contest over influence, alliances and the future balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

Code Red

Artificial intelligence is no longer merely a technological story. It is becoming a labour market story, a social stability story and, increasingly, a middle-class survival story. For nearly three decades, countries such as India benefited from a historic global shift in white-collar work. Multinational firms outsourced software development, back-office processing, accounting support, customer service and research functions to a vast English-speaking workforce. Entire cities were transformed by this model. Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune and Gurgaon emerged as symbols of aspirational India precisely because knowledge work appeared immune to the disruptions that had earlier devastated factory labour.

That assumption is now crumbling. The first wave of artificial intelligence largely functioned as an assistant. It helped workers write code faster, summarise documents, analyse data and automate repetitive tasks. Companies presented these tools as productivity enhancers rather than job destroyers. But the next stage of AI development is qualitatively different. "Agentic AI" - systems capable of independently executing complex tasks with minimal human supervision - threatens to alter the economics of white-collar employment itself. The implications extend far beyond the technology sector.

Across advanced economies, firms are already slowing recruitment for junior roles. Entry-level programming, technical writing, basic legal drafting and standardised analytical work are increasingly being handled by AI-assisted systems. Corporations may still require experienced professionals to supervise outcomes, but the pyramid beneath them is narrowing. That matters because the middle class depends not merely on elite jobs, but on a steady pipeline of entry-level employment that allows younger workers to enter the system. India is especially exposed because its service economy was built around the kind of structured, rules-based and English-language tasks that AI performs well. The country's IT-services industry succeeded because it industrialised knowledge work. Artificial intelligence may now industrialise it further - with fewer humans required in the chain.

The danger is not immediate mass unemployment. AI systems still suffer from reliability problems. Autonomous decision-making remains risky in fields where errors carry financial, legal or reputational costs. High-end computing infrastructure is also expensive, limiting large-scale deployment. But technological history suggests these constraints rarely remain permanent. Costs fall, systems improve and businesses adapt rapidly once efficiency gains become undeniable. The deeper risks lie in the social consequences of a prolonged squeeze on educated, salaried workers. India's urban middle class is already burdened by rising housing costs, stagnant wages, consumer debt and shrinking job security.

If white-collar employment loses the stability it once promised, the economic anxieties currently visible in parts of the West could become sharper in India's densely competitive urban centres. Governments have not yet grasped the scale of the transition. Public debate still treats AI largely as an innovation story rather than a structural labour disruption. Reskilling alone may not be enough if technology begins reducing the overall demand for large sections of routine knowledge work. The AI revolution will undoubtedly create wealth. The unanswered question is whether it will also create enough human work.

Fractured Healthcare

The contrast between urban and rural facilities is stark. Metros like Delhi or Mumbai boast world class hospitals, yet they are overcrowded and often inaccessible to the poor. In rural districts, primary health centres are understaffed, under-equipped, and frequently non-functional. This imbalance leaves rural populations dependent on informal practitioners, while urban hospitals are flooded with patients who cannot afford private care



uneven: ambulances are scarce in villages, trauma care is concentrated in cities, and reaching a hospital in time is itself a challenge for millions. Lives are lost not because treatment is unavailable, but because it is unreachable. Modern Indian city life has become sedentary, screen-heavy, and isolating. Over 243 million adolescents are at risk from inactivity, leading to obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. Energy levels are dwindling, physical strength is eroding, and mental resilience is weakening. Hours spent on screens reduce physical activity, slow metabolism, and increase insulin resistance. What was once a disease of middle age is now creeping into adolescence, visible in the declining vitality and patience of India's youth.

Gyms mushroom across cities, yet remain underutilised, serving more as symbols of aspiration than instruments of health. Alongside this physical decline, urban loneliness has emerged as a silent epidemic, with one in four youth suffering from depression, anxiety, or substance abuse. India has less than one psychiatrist per 100,000 people, far below WHO norms, leaving millions underserved. Academic stress, unemployment, and social media comparison fuel mental strain, which manifests in reckless behaviour, strained relationships, and a fraying social fabric. Unless addressed, this crisis will erode the resilience of an entire generation, worsened by stigma and the absence of accessible counselling or community support.

Rural areas continue to suffer from inadequate infrastructure, understaffed primary health centres, and limited emergency care, while urban centres choke under congestion, costly facilities, and rising lifestyle diseases. Out of pocket expenditure still accounts for nearly half of total health spending, leaving millions vulnerable. The answer lies not in further corporatisation but in establishing multi-specialist government hospitals where doctors and paramedics are compensated respectfully to remain in service. Unless government hospitals are strengthened to retain skilled professionals, the imbalance between corporate hubs and neglected districts will only deepen. Without such dispersal and accountability, universal healthcare will remain elusive.

The contrast between urban and rural facilities is stark. Metros like Delhi or Mumbai boast world class hospitals, yet they are overcrowded and often inaccessible to the poor. In rural districts, primary health centres are understaffed, under-equipped, and frequently non-functional. This imbalance leaves rural populations dependent on informal practitioners, while urban hospitals are flooded with patients who cannot afford private care. Emergency handling is equally

protectionist policies, under which it has imposed a ban on sugar exports to Nepal. Even as all this is happening, Nepal lacks a strong government response. The latest surge in prices cannot be attributed solely to the ongoing geopolitical conflict. The country's already weak economic conditions and lack of preparedness for such a global crisis are much to blame. Successive governments have focused more on milking the state coffers rather than on buttressing the country's economic pillars, which were already weakened by the 2015 earthquake, the Covid-19 pandemic and climate-induced disasters. Even the incumbent government, which holds a historic mandate for reform, has failed to bring the desired level of urgency in dealing with this unfolding economic crisis. The government has made minor

translates into social decline. Diagnostics and testing form another neglected pillar. Hospitals in metros may boast advanced equipment, but the costs are prohibitive for ordinary families. In rural areas, even basic blood tests or imaging facilities are scarce, forcing patients to travel long distances or rely on informal practitioners. Accountability here means ensuring that every district hospital, every primary health centre, has functional, certified diagnostic facilities that deliver results quickly and transparently. Without accountability, diagnostics become a profit driven enterprise rather than a public service.

The issue becomes even more urgent when we look at food testing. Adulteration in milk, vegetables, and staples is widespread, and yet reliable testing facilities are few and far between. Why do so much adulteration carry on unchecked in India? The answer lies in weak enforcement, lack of accessible testing labs, and a culture of impunity where violators rarely face consequences. Citizens are left consuming food contaminated with hazardous preservatives, chemicals and dyes, which, while it causes immediate harm, also leads to long-term health issues.

Affordable, authentic food testing facilities must be dispersed across regions, so that both producers and consumers are held accountable. Without this, the polluted plate becomes a silent killer, undermining health at its very foundation. Dietary pollution compounds the crisis. Adulterated food, pesticide laden produce, and processed diets are creating disastrous health hazards. Combined with sedentary lifestyles and mental strain, India faces a compounded health emergency that threatens productivity, stability, and the well-being of future generations. The polluted plate today is the precursor to tomorrow's chronic disease. The health hazards are not abstract - they are lived realities, shaping the energy, temperament, and productivity of India's youth. The irony is that while India prides itself on being the world's largest producer of fruits and vegetables, the very produce reaching our plates is often contaminated, robbing nutrition of its natural value. The polluted plate is a metaphor for the polluted

environment, and together they conspire against the health of the nation. Other democracies offer lessons. Scandinavian countries embed preventive care into everyday life, ensuring that healthcare is not just about hospitals but about lifestyle. Japan tackles its urban health stress through community-based clinics and emphasis on diet and exercise. Canada disperses health facilities across regions, reducing the rural-urban divide.

Brazil, after facing corruption scandals in healthcare, moved toward universal access with stronger regulation. India can learn from these examples. Healthcare must be decentralised, preventive care must be embedded in education, and mental health must be treated as integral to wellbeing. Without such reforms, India risks falling behind not just in health outcomes but in social stability. The comparison is not to suggest that India must copy models wholesale, but to underline that solutions exist, and the failure lies in political will and administrative inertia. The lesson is clear: healthcare reform is not a matter of convenience but of survival.

Healthcare inequality in India is not just about rural versus urban access - it is now deeply intertwined with youth lifestyle changes, mental health crises, and social conduct deterioration. Unless addressed through universal healthcare, civic education, lifestyle awareness, stricter regulation of alcohol and road safety, and accountability in diagnostics and food testing, the nation risks a generational decline in both physical and mental resilience.

The solution lies in decongesting our choking cities, dispersing healthcare centres with affordable facilities, embedding preventive care into everyday life, and ensuring that food and diagnostic systems are reliable and authentic. Healthcare must be seen not as a privilege but as a universal entitlement, proportionate to the population and accessible to all. The urgency is clear: without bold reform, India risks not only a health crisis but a social crisis, where the very temperament of its youth is reshaped by neglect. The danger is not distant; it is already visible in the impatience, aggression, and civic indiscipline that mark everyday life.

Unless we wake up to reality, the decline may become irreversible. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and inhumane."

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

India's healthcare system has yet to match the country's claimed growth in economy and living standards. The strain comes not only from uncontrolled population increase and rapid urban migration, but also from a chronic shortage of doctors and paramedics. With fewer than one doctor per 1,000 people - far below WHO norms and trained paramedics even scarcer, the gap is glaring. After years of study and heavy investment, many doctors gravitate toward corporate hospitals where compensation and visibility are higher. Patients, meanwhile, are swayed by the publicity of gleaming corridors and machines, often overlooking modest clinics that could serve them more directly. The paradox is stark: families pay hefty sums to hospitals yet resist paying fair fees to individual practitioners, making private practice less viable.

Rural areas continue to suffer from inadequate infrastructure, understaffed primary health centres, and limited emergency care, while urban centres choke under congestion, costly facilities, and rising lifestyle diseases. Out of pocket expenditure still accounts for nearly half of total health spending, leaving millions vulnerable. The answer lies not in further corporatisation but in establishing multi-specialist government hospitals where doctors and paramedics are compensated respectfully to remain in service. Unless government hospitals are strengthened to retain skilled professionals, the imbalance between corporate hubs and neglected districts will only deepen. Without such dispersal and accountability, universal healthcare will remain elusive.

The contrast between urban and rural facilities is stark. Metros like Delhi or Mumbai boast world class hospitals, yet they are overcrowded and often inaccessible to the poor. In rural districts, primary health centres are understaffed, under-equipped, and frequently non-functional. This imbalance leaves rural populations dependent on informal practitioners, while urban hospitals are flooded with patients who cannot afford private care. Emergency handling is equally

THE KATHMANDU POST

Urgent measures needed to protect the poor

It has been some time since the impact of tensions in West Asia has been felt by Nepali households. Prices of staple foods and daily essentials have soared, transport costs have risen to record levels, and farmers who rely on imported raw materials and fertilisers needed for the main paddy planting season are struggling to sustain farming.

As recently reported by the Post, the price of a 25 kg bag of rice, which previously cost Rs2,000, now goes for Rs2,250. Edible mustard oil prices have also gone up by Rs20 to Rs30. Similarly, diesel prices have jumped by 60 percent and petrol by 28 percent in just the past three months, driving up prices of vegetables, construction materials and daily goods.

The cost of LPG, the cooking gas popular in Nepali households, has risen by 11.5 percent. Likewise, education inflation has increased to 6.7 percent. Add to this India's

protectionist policies, under which it has imposed a ban on sugar exports to Nepal. Even as all this is happening, Nepal lacks a strong government response. The latest surge in prices cannot be attributed solely to the ongoing geopolitical conflict. The country's already weak economic conditions and lack of preparedness for such a global crisis are much to blame. Successive governments have focused more on milking the state coffers rather than on buttressing the country's economic pillars, which were already weakened by the 2015 earthquake, the Covid-19 pandemic and climate-induced disasters. Even the incumbent government, which holds a historic mandate for reform, has failed to bring the desired level of urgency in dealing with this unfolding economic crisis. The government has made minor

tax adjustments and periodic fuel price revisions, required to keep the fuel bill half, and extended the weekend from one day to two. These are vital measures. But it hasn't curbed the role of middlemen who have taken advantage of the crisis and swindled people by inflating the prices of daily essentials. Low-income families have little financial cushion. Yet there have been no targeted subsidies for them.

South Korea, for instance, has launched cash aid for the vulnerable people in response to the repercussions of the conflict in West Asia. Earlier this month, the Asian Development Bank urged the government of Nepal to take measures to protect vulnerable people.

According to a preliminary assessment report, "Military Escalation in the Middle East: Human Development Impacts Across Asia and the Pacific", published by the

United Nations Development Programme last month, the conflict in West Asia prolongs, Nepal could go through "some of the highest risks of cumulative human development losses".

The country cannot afford to ignore such dire warnings from credible agencies. While short-term relief packages to protect the poor and most vulnerable will provide immediate assistance, Nepal now needs to work towards self-sufficiency by modernising agriculture and cutting its dependence on fossil fuels by expanding electric public transport. Should IDN further impact agriculture, India may impose a ban on other agricultural commodities to meet its domestic demand.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

Letters To The Editor

editor@thestatesman.com

Clear direction

Sir, Apropos today's first page report quoting Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's appeal to understand the context of the three F's - Fuel, fertiliser and foreign exchange - India is grappling with, the article "Opportunities beckon" by Devendra Saksena is a refreshing discussion on the same issue and provides very clear directions for both the long- and short-term. As payments for crude, fertiliser and gold prices will have to be in foreign exchange, the West Asia crisis is exerting pressure on India's foreign exchange outgo, the FM claimed.

Despite visiting US Secretary of State Marco Rubio's assertion that American negotiations are "a work in progress", no one can predict how long the imbroglio will last. Even after four price rises in recent days, it is said that state-run oil marketing

companies continue to lose around Rs 600 crore a day.

As a knee-jerk measure, India is applying to the US for sanctions waiver to purchase Russian crude oil in spite of the fear of being irrationally tariffed by Washington, writes Saksena. He cited how the present West Asia crisis could not affect the energy supply of China, the largest importer of oil in the world.

The big Asian nation established a direct pipeline from Russia and the China-Myanmar pipeline bypassing all supply choke points. China has also developed its energy capacity in a big way by applying technology for coal gasification, and converting petrol cars to EVs.

India must try to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels by using renewable energy to the best of its capacity.

Yours, etc, Sukhendu Bhattacharjee, Sheoraphuli, 26 May.

who have taken advantage of the crisis and swindled people by inflating the prices of daily essentials. Low-income families have little financial cushion. Yet there have been no targeted subsidies for them.

South Korea, for instance, has launched cash aid for the vulnerable people in response to the repercussions of the conflict in West Asia. Earlier this month, the Asian Development Bank urged the government of Nepal to take measures to protect vulnerable people.

According to a preliminary assessment report, "Military Escalation in the Middle East: Human Development Impacts Across Asia and the Pacific", published by the

United Nations Development Programme last month, the conflict in West Asia prolongs, Nepal could go through "some of the highest risks of cumulative human development losses".

The country cannot afford to ignore such dire warnings from credible agencies. While short-term relief packages to protect the poor and most vulnerable will provide immediate assistance, Nepal now needs to work towards self-sufficiency by modernising agriculture and cutting its dependence on fossil fuels by expanding electric public transport. Should IDN further impact agriculture, India may impose a ban on other agricultural commodities to meet its domestic demand.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

environment, and together they conspire against the health of the nation.

Other democracies offer lessons. Scandinavian countries embed preventive care into everyday life, ensuring that healthcare is not just about hospitals but about lifestyle. Japan tackles its urban health stress through community-based clinics and emphasis on diet and exercise. Canada disperses health facilities across regions, reducing the rural-urban divide.

Brazil, after facing corruption scandals in healthcare, moved toward universal access with stronger regulation. India can learn from these examples. Healthcare must be decentralised, preventive care must be embedded in education, and mental health must be treated as integral to wellbeing. Without such reforms, India risks falling behind not just in health outcomes but in social stability. The comparison is not to suggest that India must copy models wholesale, but to underline that solutions exist, and the failure lies in political will and administrative inertia. The lesson is clear: healthcare reform is not a matter of convenience but of survival.

Healthcare inequality in India is not just about rural versus urban access - it is now deeply intertwined with youth lifestyle changes, mental health crises, and social conduct deterioration. Unless addressed through universal healthcare, civic education, lifestyle awareness, stricter regulation of alcohol and road safety, and accountability in diagnostics and food testing, the nation risks a generational decline in both physical and mental resilience.

The solution lies in decongesting our choking cities, dispersing healthcare centres with affordable facilities, embedding preventive care into everyday life, and ensuring that food and diagnostic systems are reliable and authentic. Healthcare must be seen not as a privilege but as a universal entitlement, proportionate to the population and accessible to all. The urgency is clear: without bold reform, India risks not only a health crisis but a social crisis, where the very temperament of its youth is reshaped by neglect. The danger is not distant; it is already visible in the impatience, aggression, and civic indiscipline that mark everyday life.

Unless we wake up to reality, the decline may become irreversible. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and inhumane."

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

As wars, pandemics and supply chain disruptions due to climate change become increasingly common, it makes all the more sense to invest in domestic capacity building.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'People were tired of corruption'

The 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections marked a defining moment in the state's political landscape...

I am in constant touch with the administrative authorities to address various issues and ensure better facilities for the people.

attractive and accessible tourist destination.

Q: The BJP has received a landslide mandate in the polls, and the hills have shown an overwhelming support to the party. What message do you think the people have given? Do you think the region will get cabinet representation?

A: The people placed their trust in the BJP because they wanted a change from corruption, crime, and the failures of the previous government.

Q: Speaking of tourism, Kursong has immense tourism potential - what steps do you and your party plan to take to develop it as a major tourist destination?

A: Kursong has immense tourism potential, and tourism remains a major strength of the region.

Q: Winning with such a huge margin reflects strong public support - how are you feeling after receiving so much love from the people of Kursong?

A: It feels wonderful to receive such immense love and support from the people of Kursong.

Q: People have high hopes from you. What is your vision for Kursong's development, and what will be your top priorities from now on?

A: For Kursong, my key priorities are healthcare, employment, and tourism.

Q: What factors do you think led to the Trinamool Congress performing poorly in these elections?

A: There were several factors behind the Trinamool Congress' poor performance in these elections.



Q: Home Minister Amit Shah had assured during the campaigns that the long-pending Gorkhaland issue would be resolved. Now that the BJP is finally forming the government, do you believe there is a realistic possibility of a concrete political solution for the hills?

A: I truly believe and have full faith in the government that it will work towards resolving the long-standing issues of the Gorkha people.

The process has already been initiated. The interlocutor has visited the region, surveys have been conducted, and the matter is now nearing its final stages.

Q: Finally, what message would you like to give to the people of Kursong who have placed their trust in you?

A: I am truly honoured by the trust and support the people of Kursong have shown in me.

Grappling with a counterfeit reality

ARCHANA DUTTA

Recently, the New York State University in the US initiated a programme called 'NYU in real life'...

However, there is a parallel behavioural wave of 'digital minimalism' that is taking hold on American campuses.

expressed fear about cyberbullying, and a survey of about 2,800,000 young people (11-15 years) across 44 countries...

In India, where social media adoption is reportedly at its peak with average usage growing by 5.23 per cent from 2024 to early 2026...

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2024, revealed that only 57 per cent of children aged 14 to 16 use phones for education...

Dr. Anne Marie Albano, director, Columbia University Clinic For Anxiety and Related Disorders, has explained that social media tends to promote a 'counterfeit reality'...



media use among college students undermines academic performance through an emotional pathway whereby social anxiety leads to increased fear of missing out or FOMO.

When NYU professor Jonathan Haidt's research and landmark book 'The Anxious Generation' drew the world's attention to the mental health crisis among youth...

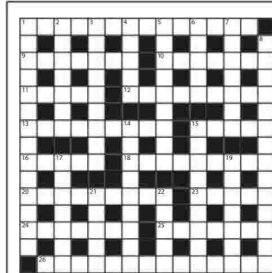
India's Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, mandates 'verifiable parental consent' for data processing for minors under 18...

While the world passes through an intense wave of digitised socialisation, many contend that legally imposed bans and restrictions cannot entirely address the emotional challenges faced by the youth.

How the experts came in possession of the officer's presence in the jail, is under investigation. The Rai Bahadur, a married man with a family, was 48 years of age.

(The writer is former Director General, Doordarshan & AIR, and former Press Secretary to the President.)

Crossword | No. 293469



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

AWARDED APRITISE
HONOURABLE GUNDE
L N E W S O G O M
S T I M M A M B E N
S I N D I A S
I N T I O D E S T R O V E R S
N E B U S S E D U
A B O U T D U C T I L S
A B A B S A P
L I X A W I L D P
D U I T E O U S E X P L O I T

ACROSS

- 1 Fun was had in bed coveting as newlyweds? (7,3)
9 Ignorant article in Le Monde about American conflict? (7)
10 Complain about name-dropping in club? (7)
11 Heather regularly spent years in Chad (5)
12 Lurking wild lion and tiger (9)
13 Eve may be one on board (5,4)

DOWN

- 15 Charlie meets unknown cleric (7)
16 Australian Funds prestigious award (5)
18 Revolutionary character runs for US (9)
20 Statesmen arranged financial enquiry (5,4)
23 Group included in ban on Etionians (5,4)
24 Urine 's a little vile (7)
25 The reverberation effect made on (9)

ACROSS

- 16 Australian Funds prestigious award (5)
18 Revolutionary character runs for US (9)
20 Statesmen arranged financial enquiry (5,4)
23 Group included in ban on Etionians (5,4)
24 Urine 's a little vile (7)
25 The reverberation effect made on (9)

DOWN

- 1 Keeps nursing old leader of French general legislature (5,7)
2 Joint that is primarily raunchy and more (5,7)
3 Mineral article absorbed by metal kitchen implement (9)
4 Live with women in small valley (5)
5 Careless man from Newcastle holds informal party (9)
6 Did with Henry the Fourth or the equivalent (7)
7 Dissension following trial (7)
8 Old description of Jerusalem (4,2,3,5)
14 Attending twice today (2,7)

DOWN

- 15 Chemical engineer defends right to telephone customers (9)
17 Important lady found in wreckage of Nazi car (9)
19 Enmity encountered in Tehran courthouse (7)
21 Vocal supporter for one who delivers babies? (7)
22 People in authority briefly entertaining computing tax (5)

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

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 30 May 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

IN commenting on the new rupee loan we recorded the opinion that the rush for conversion of 1926 bonds into the new scrip would leave little of the 25 crores for cash purchasers to pick up.

News Items

ALIPORE JAIL OUTRAGE

POLICE OFFICIAL KILLED

ONE of the most distinguished and courageous police officers in Bengal, Rai Bahadur Bhupendra Nath Chatterji, Superintendent of Police, Intelligence Branch, met with his death under amazingly tragic circumstances at the Central Jail, Alipore, yesterday evening.

The Superintendent had occasion to visit certain prisoners in the jail, and when returning along a passage from a ward he was attacked by a number of convicts who figured in a recent bomb case. They met, it is understood, were taking their evening exercise and, catching sight of the officer, whom they apparently recognized, they at once made a lightning and concerted attack on an Indian warder, who was in possession of the key of the door leading from a compound into the passage.

It was a matter of moments to open the door, and while a number of convicts held the warder, the remainder set upon the unfortunate officer. The warder, though hopelessly outnumbered, had the presence of mind to blow his whistle, which instantly set in motion the alarm system in the jail.

The factor, Mr. Ryan, immediately rushed to the scene and found the Rai Bahadur lying unconscious in a pool of blood. He had been stabbed with a lethal weapon, sustaining a grievous wound in his left eye. He was at once removed to the Presidency General Hospital, where he died shortly after admission without regaining consciousness.

How the convicts came in possession of the officer's presence in the jail, is under investigation. The Rai Bahadur, a married man with a family, was 48 years of age. He was awarded the King's Police Medal in 1917 and was subsequently promoted to the Imperial Services for his distinguished work. He had been in the front rank of the campaign against revolutionaries, and it is understood that, although he had known for years that his life was in danger, this fact had not caused him to waver in the slightest degree from what he held to be his path of duty.

His initiative and courage were demonstrated on a score of occasions during a career that brought him into contact with some of the cleverest criminal brains in the country. He was held in the highest esteem by his colleagues, both European and Indian.

It is a somewhat melancholy fact that the Rai Bahadur succeeded Rai Bahadur Basanta Kumar Chatterji, Deputy Superintendent of Police, who was assassinated, after the third attempt, about ten years ago at Bhowanipore.

At the General Hospital last night there was a most distressing scene when the Rai Bahadur's wife was informed of his death. Scores of police officers came to the hospital to pay their tribute of respect. The Rai Bahadur leaves six sons and three daughters.

The crime is so paralysed with the murder of Narendra Nath Goswain, the approver in the old Alipore Bomb case, who was shot dead in the jail by Sunilal Das and Satyendra Nath Bose, two of the accused in the case.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



كل الذين يكتمون عواطفهم
بتقآن، يتفجرون كالسيل إذا باعوا
(عبد المسنن)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
All those who can skillfully conceal their emotions burst like a deluge if they open up.
Ghada Al-Samman
(Contemporary Syrian writer and woman of letters)

Opinion

Another summer of humiliation for Palestinians

DAOUD KUTTAB



Daoud Kuttab is an award-winning Palestinian journalist and former Ferris Professor of Journalism at Princeton University.
@daoudkuttab

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

The King Hussein Bridge, the only point of entry or exit from the occupied West Bank, will probably experience severe overcrowding again this summer.

Students and families whose breadwinner works in the Gulf, Europe or the Americas usually come home to spend the summer holidays with their relatives in Palestine. And since the bridge is the only means of reaching Nablus, Bethlehem, Hebron and hundreds of villages in the West Bank, the importance of easy and dignified access becomes paramount at the hot, heavily used crossing on the border with Jordan.

Travelers face many problems, including extremely long delays and humiliating practices when making the crossing. The single biggest problem is the limited opening hours imposed by Israel.

A recent document issued by the Israeli Airport Authority exposes a layered,

discriminatory pattern that depends on which border crossing is used by which group of people. The opening hours at crossings used by Israeli Jews are longer than at those used by Palestinian citizens of Israel. The hours are even more restricted at border crossings used by Palestinians from the West Bank, and the worst hours and conditions of all are at the Rafah border crossings used by Palestinians in Gaza.

The fees for exiting the King Hussein Bridge from the Israeli-controlled side are more than double those of other crossings, the equivalent of \$80 per person compared with \$35 elsewhere. East Jerusalemites also have to pay an additional \$95 fee for a one-time exit permit. Jordan charges the equivalent of about \$14 to enter the country.

Having to spend hours waiting at the border on buses with one's family without sufficient access to water or toilet facilities makes the trip even more humiliating. And

while the Japanese government helped build a modern bridge over the little remaining water in the Jordan River, little has been done to upgrade the Jordanian facilities at the crossing.

Jordan has called for border crossings to remain open around the clock. In general, the experience on the Jordanian side is much better than on the Israeli side but it is sometimes unable to handle the sheer volume of incoming visitors and returnees. The handling of luggage on the Jordanian side is also chaotic and often humiliating, as officials check every single item entering the country. The provided luggage carts are at least four decades old, the ground is not level enough for the carts or cases with wheels to move smoothly, and unregulated workers who offer to help with luggage, and expect to be paid for doing so, make the experience unpleasant.

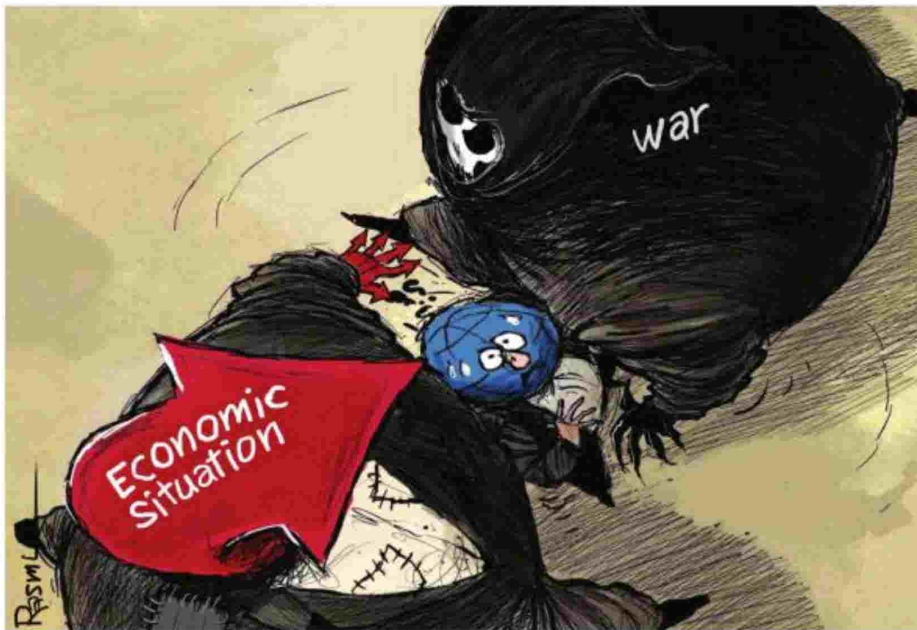
In recent months, Jordan, in cooperation with a local company that has a monopoly on the bus service, launched

an online platform through which people can register for VIP service at the border. When the crossing is very busy, however, the available spots fill up very quickly. An early problem of mass purchases by people who would sell the reservations on for a profit was resolved by requiring that reservations include a name and passport details.

Travel across the King Hussein Bridge is regularly described as the most humiliating issue affecting all Palestinians, and many visitors as well. Officials from the Palestinian government, who receive VIP service and do not pay to use the crossing, fail to raise the issue during public or private meetings with world leaders.

In fact, no officials, Palestinian, Jordanian or Israeli, give the issue of crossing the bridge, in either direction, the kind of attention it requires. And while American officials in Amman, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv can do a lot, as Ambassador Nides did, the issue is not a high priority for them.

No officials, Palestinian, Jordanian or Israeli, give the issue of crossing the bridge in either direction the kind of attention it requires



COURTESY: AMALIO HERRERA/AL-JARJAT

The government of President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam are walking a tightrope as they attempt to shepherd the country toward peace through rounds of direct negotiation with Israel

Hezbollah has invited Lebanon's occupiers to return

MOHAMED CHEBARO



Mohamed Chebaro is a British-Lebanese journalist with more than 25 years of experience covering war, terrorism, defense, current affairs and diplomacy.

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

Many in Lebanon are convinced that on March 2 Hezbollah effectively invited a renewed Israeli occupation in the south of their country, 26 years after Israel withdrew from its previous occupation.

Many of us were sure that Israel's withdrawal on May 25, 2000, would remove the *raison d'être* for the existence of Hezbollah and its caches of weapons. We did not know that Syria, and behind it the regime in Tehran, had a different agenda.

The 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel flared up after yet another Hezbollah incursion and kidnapping of soldiers tested Israel's resolve. Hezbollah, backed by the Assad regime in Syria and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, conspired to make Lebanon the spearhead of Iran's so-called axis of resistance that slowly began to extend from Baghdad to Beirut and Damascus to Sanaa.

However, in the years leading up to the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks on Israel by Hamas, southern Lebanon enjoyed a golden era in which money sent home by expatriates and expenditures by the UN mission filtered down to improve most people's living standards.

All of this came crashing down in the aftermath of Oct. 7 when Hezbollah, on the orders of Tehran, launched a war against Israel in support of Gaza. By the time a ceasefire was agreed in November the following year, Hezbollah's militia was broken. As if that were not enough, Hezbollah's support for Tehran has once again resulted in devastation in southern Lebanon.

The consensus in Lebanon now is that no one wants a war, and peace with Israel can be achieved without requiring any formal normalization of relations until a two-state solution to the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is in place.

The government of President Joseph

Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam are walking a tightrope as they attempt to shepherd the country toward peace through rounds of direct negotiation with Israel. This is taking place against the backdrop of continued meddling by Iran, and direct threats from Hezbollah that it will oppose the peace process violently if necessary.

Hezbollah's chief, Naim Qassem, last week urged the Lebanese government to abandon direct talks with Israel, potentially positioning a regional agreement between the US and Iran as Lebanon's only viable path to a full cessation of hostilities.

In his statement he echoed the Iranian rhetoric that only a deal between Tehran and Washington can save Lebanon, and once again rejected, with veiled threats, the idea of Hezbollah giving up its weapons, which is a key requirement for any successful agreement with Israel.

The degree to which Lebanon might manage to distance itself from Iran and

its proxies remains uncertain. It is ironic, though, that as Lebanon commemorates the 26th anniversary of the end of one Israeli occupation, there are some in the country who seem to remain hell bent on inviting the same occupiers back in.

Parallel to that, it is equally ironic that Israel is once again attempting something it tried and failed to do decades ago. Boots on the ground in Lebanon could not extinguish the Hezbollah flame then, and repeating the tactic now will succeed only supplying it with more oxygen at a time when the appeal of the group is waning among core supporters.

It is a bad situation when events conspire and result in the occupation of one country by another. However, it is unfathomable that a people might invite the resumption of an occupation, 26 years after their liberation.

Against such a backdrop, peace is likely to remain elusive in Lebanon until people start to learn from past mistakes.

Opinion

The other vulnerability in the Strait of Hormuz

ZAID M. BELBAGI



Zaid M. Belbagi is a political commentator and an adviser to private clients between London and the Gulf Cooperation Council.
X: @Moulay_Zaid

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

The war with Iran has exposed an uncomfortable truth about the global economy: It still runs through a handful of narrow waterways, and the digital layer that sits beneath them is dangerously fragile.

Submarine communications cables carry about 99 percent of intercontinental data and an estimated \$10 trillion in financial transactions each day, and a meaningful share of that traffic passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

This vulnerability has not gone unnoticed in Tehran; last month it published a detailed report mapping undersea internet cables and cloud infrastructure in the Gulf, and warned of a potential digital catastrophe should the conflict with the US escalate. It was a veiled threat against the region's digital backbone.

To Iran, subsea cables represent an almost ideal target because they are difficult to defend and expensive to repair, and they underpin a vast share of global commerce. Damaging them, or even threatening to do so, imposes costs on adversaries without requiring open confrontation.

Seven major cable systems pass through

the Strait of Hormuz, of which only two, Falcon and Gulf Bridge International, are within Iranian territorial waters. These routes account for less than 1 percent of global bandwidth but provide the primary connectivity for the Gulf states and are a significant artery for India.

The real play by Iran here is not to actually cut the cables but to hold the repair infrastructure hostage. On March 12, Alcatel Submarine Networks, the French

state-owned company contracted to lay Meta's 2Africa Pearls cable, issued "force majeure" notices for operations in the Arabian Gulf, effectively suspending maintenance in waters adjacent to the conflict zone.

This means the 2Africa Pearls Gulf extension, which was scheduled to go live this year and connect to Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan and India, is now on hold indefinitely. Networks are being forced to reroute through older systems that are less secure and more easily intercepted.

Tehran's moves to turn the Iranian seabed into a licensing jurisdiction relies on this dynamic: Pay protection fees or accept that future falls will go unrepaired indefinitely.

In trading environments where

milliseconds can determine outcomes, even small spikes in latency can wipe out hundreds of millions of dollars within days.

The market is also unusually concentrated. Hyperscalers such as Meta, Google and Microsoft now fund as much as half of all new cable projects, leaving global routing dependent on a small group of private-sector actors. Terrestrial alternatives, analysts warn, would not be able to fully absorb the required volume if major Gulf systems were taken offline.

Tehran already operates one of the most centralized internet-control systems in the world, with sophisticated shutdown and filtering mechanisms coordinated through national border gateways. Within hours of the Feb. 28 strikes by the US and Israel, the capacity of

Iran's own internet system dropped to just 4 percent of normal, the largest national-scale internet blackout ever recorded.

This domestic apparatus reflects a deep institutional understanding of connectivity as a strategic tool for control. The extension of this logic offshore, through a new permit regime, raises the prospect that Tehran could apply its onshore legal framework to the seabed.

The consequences of this data

sovereignty would be significant. Operators working under Iranian jurisdiction could in theory be compelled to provide backdoor access to traffic, comply with state-directed censorship protocols or expose cryptographic keys to avoid asset seizures or localized blockades. Espionage and bulk data interception would become structurally easier.

What Iran is doing is weaponizing connectivity with the aim of raising insurance premiums in the Gulf, increasing uncertainty among international firms, and forcing boardrooms to calculate the costs of prolonged regional instability. In the long term their goal is more ambitious: to convert geography into permanent leverage.

For the Gulf states, a decade of digital sovereignty has been approached as a question of where data is stored, with localization laws and sovereign clouds treated as proof of autonomy. Iran has just demonstrated that territorial control counts for little when the digital traffic feeding it must cross a strait in which a hostile neighbor can intercept it.

The country threatening these cables is the one that has spent the longest time learning to live without them, and this asymmetry is what the region must now plan for.

To Iran, subsea cables represent an almost ideal target because they are difficult to defend and expensive to repair

Operators working under Iranian jurisdiction could be compelled to provide backdoor access to traffic

Turkiye's bridge between NATO and the Gulf

SINEM CENGİZ



Dr. Sinem Cengiz is a Turkish political analyst who specializes in Turkish relations with the Middle East.
X: @sinemcngz

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

In 2004, when Turkiye hosted the NATO summit in Istanbul, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative was launched to strengthen political and military ties between NATO and the Gulf states.

The ICI was launched in the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq that changed the region's security order and led to the improvement in Turkiye-GCC relations. Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE

formally joined the initiative, while Saudi Arabia and Oman have not officially joined, but have taken part in ICI activities.

In 2012, the UAE became the first country in the region to open a permanent mission to NATO headquarters. Then a NATO-ICI Regional Center was established in Kuwait in 2017 to act as a hub for security training and military education between NATO and its GCC partners. NATO also signed an agreement with Kuwait in 2016 to facilitate the movement of NATO personnel and forces through Kuwaiti territory.

In 2025, NATO officially opened its first liaison office in Jordan, reflecting the alliance's growing strategic interest in the region and its desire to deepen

engagement with regional states.

Regional tensions have accelerated NATO's engagement with Middle Eastern states. The Gaza war, in particular, has intensified concerns over regional instability, while the US-Israeli war with Iran and concerns over the Strait of Hormuz have further highlighted the importance of NATO-GCC cooperation.

Turkiye has been a crucial NATO member since 1952 and has its second-largest military after the US. Its policies closely align with the interests of the Arab regional system.

Within this context, Ankara seeks to play an active role in NATO's outreach efforts across the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf. In doing

so, Ankara aims to strengthen its strategic position within NATO by serving as a bridge between the alliance and Middle Eastern countries.

Therefore, the upcoming NATO summit in Ankara carries significance beyond symbolism. It comes at a critical moment of geopolitical transformation. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan attended a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Sweden this week, where

he shared Turkiye's expectations for the summit and briefed allies on Ankara's efforts to preserve NATO's unity and strategic coherence. ICI member states are expected to attend the summit at the foreign minister level.

NATO itself faces challenges in adapting to evolving global security dynamics. The alliance faces issues of internal cohesion, declining military capabilities among some European members and the gradual strategic shift of US attention from Europe toward the Indo-Pacific. Yet, the alliance continues to play a critical role, particularly regarding energy security and maritime trade routes.

At the same time, the GCC and other regional states face threats not only from Iran, but also Israeli military actions and unpredictability of US policies in the region. The tensions surrounding the Strait of Hormuz during recent regional confrontations have further shown the need for NATO to strengthen cooperation with the GCC states.

However, there is a growing need to redefine the aimed regional security framework. NATO could become an important partner in a new regional security architecture in the region. However, for this to

happen, the ICI must evolve beyond bilateral engagement with the individual GCC states and develop a more comprehensive strategic partnership with the GCC as a sub-regional bloc. Recently, GCC Secretary-General Jassem Al-Budaiwi said that last year marked a milestone in NATO-GCC cooperation, as the NATO-ICI Regional Center in Kuwait recorded its highest level of activity since its establishment.

As GCC states seek to strengthen their defense capabilities in response to regional challenges, the partnership between NATO and the GCC states could emerge as an effective mechanism within a future regional security order. Having said that, the Turkiye summit, in my opinion, could serve as a good opportunity for Saudi Arabia and

Oman to formally join the ICI, as their participation has become increasingly important amid regional tensions.

With the potential inclusion of Saudi Arabia and Oman in the ICI, alongside Turkiye's support for both GCC and NATO defense capabilities, a more comprehensive collective partnership could emerge — one that is capable of addressing regional security challenges, protecting shared interests and expanding areas of defense cooperation.

Regional tensions have accelerated NATO's engagement with Middle Eastern states. The Gaza war, in particular, has intensified concerns over regional instability

Ankara seeks to play an active role in NATO's outreach efforts across the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf

srmq
Saudi Research & Media Group

Established in 1987 by
Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz

CEO
Jomana Rashid Alrahis

ARAB NEWS

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

Founded in 1978 by
His Highness Sultan bin Abdulaziz

Editor-in-Chief
Faisal J. Alhassan

Deputy Editor-in-Chief
Noor Osama Nugall

ARAB NEWS WELCOMES
FEEDBACK FROM READERS

Letters sent from within the Kingdom should include the writer's name, address, phone and ID numbers. E-mails from readers abroad should include a name and city. Letters should be mailed to P.O. Box 478, Riyadh 11411, Saudi Arabia. Tel: +96612128000 • Fax: +96611410071 • E-mail: general@arabnews.com

EDITORIAL: general@arabnews.com
MARKETING: marketing@arabnews.com

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440078

PRINTED AT: HALA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 File; Iran 200 R; Egypt L.E. 3; India 12 Rs; Indonesia 2000 R; Japan 250 Y; Jordan 250 File; Kuwait 200 File; Lebanon 1000

L1 Morocco 2 D; Oman 200 P; Pakistan 15 Rs; Philippines 25 P; Qatar 2 QR; Singapore \$3; Syria 20 L; Thailand 40 BHT; UAE 2 AED; UK 50 P; US \$150; Republic of Yemen R 50; Sudan 25 P.

SRPG AND AFFILIATED AGENCIES

JEDDAH: Tel: (966-12)263-6200, Fax: (966-12)263-6228. RIYADH: Tel: (966-11)212-8000, Fax: (966-11)442-9094. DAMMAM: Tel: (966-13)835-3838, Fax: (966-13)834-0489. ABU DHABI: Tel: (971-2)661-5999, Fax: (971-2)661-7595. CAIRO: Tel: (202-3)748-2775, (202-3)748-2695, (202-3)338-8654, Fax: (202-3)749-2884, (202-3)749-2895. MOROCCO: Tel: (212-5)37292-618, Fax: (212-5)37083-918. JORDAN: Tel: (962-6)553-7101, (962-6)551-7102, (962-6)553-9409, Fax: (962-6)553-7103. LONDON: Tel: (44-20)7831-8161, Fax: (44-20)7831-2310.

ADVERTISING:
SAUDI RESEARCH AND MEDIA GROUP
KSA: +966-11-294 0000
UAE: +971 4 3916500
E-mail: svs@srmg.com
Website: www.srmq.com

DISTRIBUTION AGENT
TOLL FREE: (966)920-244-0078
Head Office: (Riyadh), P.O. Box 62718, Riyadh 11585
Tel: (966-11)448933, Fax: (966-11)212774
E-mail: info@saud-distribution.com
Western Region: Tel: (966-12)653-0908
Eastern Region: Tel: (966-13)847-3568
Southern Region: Tel: (966-17)221-8693
Northern Region: Tel: (966-16)324-3070
Dubai: Tel: (971-4)309-8503, Fax: (971-4)309-8504
Abu Dhabi: Tel: (971-2)673-3553, Fax: (971-2)673-3354
Kuwait: Tel: (965)483-4922, Fax: (965)483-4716
Manama: Tel: (973-3)707770

SUBSCRIPTION
Head Office: (Riyadh)
P.O. Box 22304, Riyadh 11495
Tel: (966-11)442933 Fax: (966-11)442955
TOLL FREE: +866-800-244-0078
E-mail: info@arabmediaco.com
Web: www.arabmediaco.com

PRINTING CENTER
Riyadh: P.O. Box 212
Riyadh 11363, Tel: (966-11)2657000
Fax: (966-11)2659000
Sales: Tel: (966-10)4708907
Fax: (966-10)4708928
www.halaprntpack.com

DISCLAIMER
Views expressed by writers
in this section are their
own and do not necessarily
reflect Arab News' point of view.

Par Ridder
General Manager

Mitch Pugh
Executive Editor

Chris Jones, Editorial Page Editor

Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

Stacy St. Clair, Managing Editor

DIRECTORS OF CONTENT

Amanda Kaschube, Sports and Audience
Todd Panagopoulos, Visuals

EDITORIALS

Johnson's Roman retinue meets the Chicago pope

It's a Roman holiday for Mayor Brandon Johnson and a cross section of Chicago's new elite.

Forty-six. That strikes us as a retinue more fitting for the likes of a presidential delegation than a mayor.

But this is no ordinary overseas trip. The mayor made a much-anticipated visit Thursday to the Vatican for a conversation with the Chicago pope. The meeting of these two high-profile Chicagoans is a proud moment for our city.

Rome is beautiful year-round, but Rome in springtime is a city in its prime. No doubt the mayor and his guests will stroll along many a piazza and indulge in a healthy helping of cacio e pepe and gelato.

Pope Leo XIV offers a great source of hometown pride for Chicago in particular at a time when many outsiders malign our city, and has brought a sense of renewal and

Pope Leo XIV offers a great source of hometown pride for Chicago in particular at a time when many outsiders malign our city, and has brought a sense of renewal and energy to the American Catholic Church more broadly. Reporters visiting the Eternal City to cover Johnson's tour have also shared accounts of Vatican City streets dotted with Chicagoans waving four-star flags. Johnson reportedly invited Leo to officiate Mass in Grant Park in 2027, an offer we hope the pope accepts.

energy to the American Catholic Church more broadly. Reporters visiting the Eternal City to cover Johnson's tour have also shared accounts of Vatican City streets dotted with Chicagoans waving four-star flags. Johnson reportedly invited Leo to officiate Mass in Grant Park in 2027, an offer we hope the pope accepts.

Johnson is not the first Chicago mayor to meet the pope. Pope John Paul II famously visited Chicago in 1979, meeting Mayor Jane Byrne, a fellow Catholic, on her home turf.

Mayors have also made the pilgrimage to Rome for other ceremonies.

Former Mayor Rahm Emanuel and a Chicago delegation traveled to Rome in 2016 to honor Blase Cupich as he was elevated to the College of Cardinals. World Business Chicago picked up the tab for the mayor and his wife and

a handful of officials, but not the others who joined him. Those guests relied on private or campaign funds to cover the cost of their trip. Notably, Mayor Johnson's press office told us the same was true this time around. "Non-City and non-WBC members of the delegation covered individual travel expenses," a spokesperson said, indicating that business, labor and faith leaders will be paying their own way. WBC said separately in a statement that funding for this trip came from private sector contributions.

Good. The mayor certainly wouldn't have gotten an indulgence from city taxpayers if that had not been the case.

Still, Johnson's trip to Rome is not without baggage, especially given its timing while Springfield has lots of unfinished business including where a certain football team plays future ball.

Johnson seemed eager to align himself rhetorically with Leo's moral language on war, immigration and social justice. But while the two overlap on some issues, City Hall and the Vatican remain very different pulpit.

The inclusion of CTU President Stacy Davis Gates, although hardly a surprise, also stood out given her union's long-running opposition to initiatives that benefit Catholic schools.

Still, we're on the side of Chicago re-emphasizing its status as a global city and we're all for making some Italian headlines that go beyond the usual bang, bang clichés that all Chicagoans who travel to Europe detest.

So peace be with the Chicago delegation, all 46 of them, and also with Chicago.

ON THIS DAY 36 YEARS AGO BETRAYAL ON THE GAS TAX

To those folks in burgeoning Hoffman Estates who have been counting on further widening of tangled, old, exasperating Algonquin Road: You have a little surprise coming. It probably won't happen.

To those folks in the booming Aurora-Naperville corridor who have been awaiting another stretch of relief on woebegone Illinois Highway 59 south of the Fox Valley shopping center. Same surprise.

And to all those folks throughout Illinois who have been reasonably placid about paying six cents more in gasoline taxes because of the promise of new roads, better roads, safer intersections and less traffic congestion: Your pennies are headed for heaven.

The Illinois Department of Transportation, which just a month ago trumpeted a massive, five-year, \$5.7 billion highway improvement program, is ready to scale back in a major way. The Algonquin Road and Illinois 59 projects... are among the scores of casualties.

Don't blame the messenger; the department has no choice but to prepare contingency plans. Blame leaders of both parties in the state Senate for an act of budget chicanery that is surprising even in Springfield.

The Senate voted to divert—steal might be a better word—\$1.5 million from the road fund for this year and put it into the budget for the state police. ... It also would violate the legislature's action last year to further restrict non-transportation uses of the road fund so more gas taxes can go to highways.

It is a shell game that gives legislators more flexibility in playing with the general revenue fund while avoiding dealing responsibly with Gov. Thompson's proposed \$26.3 billion budget. ... Amid perceptions that a monstrous tax revolt is brewing this election year, the easier, weak-kneed course is to raid a tax that was passed last year.

The consequences may be enormous. ... In the Chicago area, it means no work on Thorndale Avenue from Hanover Park to Itasca, a vital link in the proposed Elgin-O'Hare Expressway. It means no planning for the Fox Valley Expressway. ... And it will mean serious damage to Operation Green Light, the state's program to reduce traffic congestion in the suburbs.

Illinois drivers who have been paying the gasoline tax in good faith have been snookered. Their hope now lies in the House, which must reject this idiocy.

Tribune editorial board, May 29, 1990



Mayor Brandon Johnson answers questions during a news conference at City Hall where he talked about ShotSpotter on Wednesday. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Johnson keeps trying to convince Chicagoans they're wrong to want ShotSpotter back

The tired and in our view settled debate over the efficacy of gunshot-detection technology has re-emerged in the form of new research seized upon by Mayor Brandon Johnson, who famously ended the use of ShotSpotter in Chicago nearly two years ago over the fervent objections of a majority of aldermen.

The Johnson administration promised to replace ShotSpotter, which alerted Chicago police immediately to gunshots in parts of the city where gun violence happens all too frequently, after it ended the city's contract with the technology's owner, SoundThinking. But since then the process of identifying a new vendor and signing a contract has been painfully slow, betraying the mayor's lack of urgency.

The process is so slow that a City Council committee held a hearing earlier this month essentially to turn up the heat on administration officials, who offered no explanation for the molasses-like contracting process other than platitudes. That prompted one of those aldermanic ShotSpotter supporters, Finance Committee Chair Pat Dowell, 3rd, to wryly remark, "If I had a dollar for the word diligent, I could go buy a nice lunch today."

So it came as little surprise Wednesday when Johnson hailed a study just released by the Justice Center at the University of Chicago that concluded the ending of ShotSpotter led to modestly improved police response times to 911 calls in the six months after the technology was terminated. "To those who were obviously promoting fear and casting doubt on our effort to improve safety, this is clear evidence that we are clearly moving in the right direction," he told reporters on Wednesday.

So what exactly did this study examine? The research showed that in areas previously served by ShotSpotter police response times to 911 calls improved by a little over four minutes on average in the six months after the technology was turned off in September 2024 compared with the six months before. The authors surmised that police responded more quickly because they weren't "tied up" reacting to ShotSpotter alerts.

First, ShotSpotter was first installed in Chicago in 2012, so this is hardly a comprehensive data set. More importantly, as crime reporting website CWBChicago commented on X, the comparison was apples and oranges. Fall and winter emergency calls will naturally be fewer than in the spring and summer, when violence and accidents increase. So faster response times are more likely to be caused by the lower volume of calls than the absence of ShotSpotter.

The analysis doesn't get to the heart of the current ShotSpotter debate anyway. And neither do the mayor's comments.

The City Council members advocating for the return of gunshot technology don't claim it will reduce violent crime. And neither does this page.

The argument for gunshot technology is twofold. The most important is that in parts of Chicago where gunfire is a regular occurrence, all too often no one calls 911 when

shots are fired and so victims are left bleeding in the street for lengthy periods of time. CWBChicago has documented more than 80 such instances since ShotSpotter ended where people were shot and left unattended for many minutes or even hours. Many died.

The second is that even when police get a 911 call, the caller often doesn't have a clear idea of where the shots were fired, leaving cops searching for a victim and sometimes not finding them, particularly when it's dark. By contrast, ShotSpotter gives police instant and reasonably precise information on where shots were fired.

Does Johnson ever address these arguments in his frequent attacks on ShotSpotter? Not that we've heard.

Let's return to the source of this analysis. The director of the U. of C.'s Justice Project is a sociology professor named Robert Vargas. Here's how the university's website describes his research interests: Vargas "studies how research designs, funding incentives, and evidence-based paradigms can launder police and tech industry interests through the veneer of neutral science, examining which questions get funded, which metrics are privileged, and how these choice architectures shape policy and public imagination."

That's quite a mouthful. But on the question of ShotSpotter at least, an academic whose research focus is on how "police interests" "launder" their points of view seems, shall we say, a tad less than objective.

Contrast that with the compelling September 2024 analysis in the Tribune Opinion section by the highly regarded Crime Lab, also at the University of Chicago, which laid out how ShotSpotter helps reduce emergency response times to gun victims and saves lives. No one credible thinks of the Crime Lab as partisan or slanted.

Did Mayor Johnson shout out the Crime Lab's findings as he was preparing to pull the plug on ShotSpotter? Of course not.

Johnson likes to talk about leading "with what the data shows." But robust data that don't fit his prescribed views obviously aren't worthy of the same amount of discussion as the biased report he extolled earlier this week.

That brings us to the part of the ShotSpotter discussion that perhaps disturbs us most. In his removal of ShotSpotter and lack of urgency to replace it with similar technology, the mayor has subverted the will of a majority of Chicagoans, particularly those on the South and West sides whom he considers his political base.

There's a reason nearly all aldermen in the neighborhoods once served by ShotSpotter want some sort of gunshot detection technology back again: Their constituents want it.

As Ald. Peter Chico, who represents the 10th Ward on the Southeast Side, told WTTW, "My community wants this tool."

The mayor keeps trying to convince Chicagoans they're wrong to want what they clearly do. Officeholders who ignore the clear desires of their constituents eventually become ex-officeholders.

EDITORIAL CARTOON



X@Ramireztoons

michaelpramirez.com

MICHAEL RAMIREZ

OPINION

People walk on campus at the University of Chicago on Feb 20. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Even with generous financial aid, elite universities favor children of the wealthy

By **Prasad Krishnamurthy**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

My alma mater, the University of Chicago, recently announced that it will provide free tuition for students from families with incomes below \$250,000, joining a list of elite universities offering generous financial aid.

These measures are welcome, but it remains to be seen whether they meaningfully alter a status quo in which elite universities systematically favor the children of the wealthy. This favoritism is driven by legacy preferences, athletic recruitment and nonacademic ratings that reward expensive resume-building, yet elite universities remain reluctant to change these practices.

Admissions practices at these universities are a legitimate object of public concern. Less than one-half of 1% of Americans attend an elite private university, but these universities' graduates are disproportionately represented in our country's leadership. They account for 4 in 10 U.S. presidents since 1960, a quarter of current senators and two-thirds of Supreme Court justices since 1967. Their alumni also make up about 1 in 12 of the nation's top earners and 1 in 8 Fortune 500 CEOs. This advantage is not simply the

result of these universities selecting the best students. A recent study found that students admitted off the waitlist to an elite private university — for reasons unrelated to qualifications, creating a natural experiment — were 50% more likely to reach the top 1% of earners and three times more likely to work at a prestigious firm than similar waitlisted students who instead attended a flagship public university.

An elite-college degree isn't a guaranteed ticket to the top, but the odds are ever in the favor of these diploma holders. It should therefore trouble all Americans that, in the admissions race, wealthy applicants start several steps ahead. Students from families in the top 1% of earners are twice as likely to attend an elite private university as students with similar test scores from the bottom 95%, and students from the top 0.1% are 2.5 times as likely. These figures likely understate the true advantage because affluent families can afford test preparation services that boost scores in the first place.

Income provides an admissions advantage only at the very top of the income scale. Among students from families below the 95th income percentile with similar test scores, attendance rates at elite universities do not

increase with income. By contrast, flagship public universities show no similar income-based admissions gap.

What explains this advantage? Legacy preferences, athletic recruitment for niche sports and nonacademic ratings — all of which favor the wealthy — together account for about 70% of the admissions gap. The remainder reflects the fact that affluent students apply and enroll at higher rates.

There is little justification for privileging legacy applicants and recruited athletes in ways that favor the wealthy. Admissions should be based on demonstrated achievement and potential, not whether one's parents attended the university. Sports should broaden opportunity, not narrow it. On the other hand, many would question an admissions system based solely on academic test scores that ignores forms of achievement and potential those tests fail to capture.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to question how elite universities currently measure nonacademic merit. Among students with the same test scores, nonacademic ratings do not increase with income below the 99th income percentile. Yet students from the top 1% somehow receive substantially higher nonacademic ratings.

Students should not need to come from the top 1% to have meaningful opportunities to excel in music, debate, community service or the other activities these ratings are meant to capture.

This skewed pattern disappears for academic ratings: Among students with comparable test scores, the share receiving a high academic rating varies little by income, even at the very top. In other words, even students from the richest families do not appear to have an academic edge over students with similar test scores — but they do have a substantial advantage in acquiring other markers of merit.

If elite universities are serious about admitting students from across the economic spectrum, they should end admissions preferences for legacies and athletes and reform their system of nonacademic ratings.

The children of the wealthy already start life with substantial advantages. It is not the mission of universities to lock those advantages in place.

Prasad Krishnamurthy is a professor of law at the University of California Berkeley School of Law, where he teaches and does research in the area of financial regulation, antitrust and contracts.

CTU must put the brakes on excessive political activity and be considerate of its members

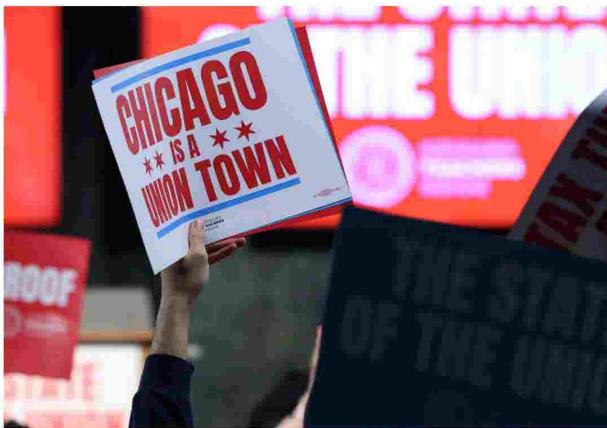
By **Froylan Jimenez**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

In these times, public school teachers and members of the Chicago Teachers Union have had to ask themselves a number of hard questions: What is the role of politics in education? How much political involvement is necessary to safeguard student education?

Last week, CTU members were asked to approve an amendment that would have changed the way union dues are structured. Essentially, it would have raised dues on much of the CTU's membership, and those dues would have been used to fund upcoming political campaigns. An overwhelming majority of union members voted no, opposing the increase in dues that would have been for political purposes. The vote delivered a resounding message from rank-and-file CTU members to the union president and other officials to press the brakes on excessive political activity that uses members' pay to bankroll political campaigns.

It was also a call from teachers and school staff that asked union leadership for empathy during difficult times. Families all over Chicago, including CTU member households, are struggling to pay expenses during record high inflation and increases in the cost of living. Rising prices make it hard to absorb any additional reduction in income.

Also, during consideration of the CTU proposal, CTU members asked: Where are my union dues going and how will they be spent?

Chicago Teachers Union members rally as their president, Stacy Davis Gates, speaks at CTU headquarters on Jan. 27. **JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Finding out that additional dues would be spent on the upcoming Chicago Board of Education election campaigns and mayoral race inspired clear opposition.

Last week, CTU members were also asked to vote on a measure that would have limited their ability to sue the union, such as using their dues for purposes without their consent. Legal action by members against the union is a last resort, which safeguards the

rights of rank-and-file members. This proposed limit to legal rights also indicates how much politics have become part of the CTU's leadership agenda.

There are those who believe that there is too much power at stake in the Board of Education elections and the mayor's reelection bid and that the CTU needs to fund candidates with the same political vision.

With elections for a full

year elected school board taking place in November, there is optimism that voters will put the right people in charge of Chicago public education. Yet to the CTU's leaders, nothing can be left to chance and allowing democracy to play out does not guarantee the right school leadership. In their view, Chicago voters should have the power to elect representatives who will serve the city's education needs — but under the proper

conditions, and those conditions are best structured with the guidance of CTU leadership and political allies.

The reason the CTU championed an elected school board was so Chicagoans would have the power of choice. But the message the CTU has delivered is that voters on their own can't be trusted.

CTU members should advocate and volunteer their time or money for the political candidates of their choice, but it should not be a requirement for members to foot the bill for political campaigns. Not only do all members not share the same political views, but also, teachers should focus on education. And the union should focus primarily on items affecting the classroom, member contract protection and fair school working conditions. The voters of Chicago, whether union or nonunion, should be trusted to collectively decide what the political future of our city will be.

The CTU is composed of educators who love to teach, and that should continue to be the union's main objective. While it is possible to both serve an educational and political mission, CTU members sent a clear message to union leadership: Future funding of political activity should have stipulations and limits, and union dues are not a blank check or a piggy bank for political elections.

Froylan Jimenez is a Chicago Public Schools civics teacher and a Chicago Teachers Union member.

OPINION

I witnessed our Ebola response in 2014. We are now seeing the costs of US aid withdrawal



Elizabeth Shackelford

In September 2014, I was working as a watch officer in the U.S. State Department's Operations Center, the 24/7 nerve center that monitors world events and responds to global crises. This meant I had a front row seat to the expansive U.S. government response to the Ebola epidemic that rocked West Africa that year. It was the biggest outbreak of Ebola so far with more than 11,000 deaths reported.

I was on the watch floor when we found out that an American doctor working on the response had contracted the disease in Sierra Leone, and the U.S. government was arranging to evacuate him back to the United States for treatment. That doctor happened to be my friend Ian Crozier. I'd been emailing with him about the crisis only days before. He would not have survived without the specialized care and facilities he was able to access at home.

As the current Ebola epidemic unfolds, I can't help but wonder what might have happened, to him and the world, if the United States had different leadership then. In a break with past practice, the current administration isn't even bringing affected Americans back home for treatment.

The withdrawal from the World Health Organization during the second administration of President Donald Trump; massive cuts to foreign aid; dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development, our country's flagship foreign assistance agency; and gutting of global health staff at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have put us and the world at far greater risk from epidemics like this one.

U.S. foreign aid funded detection and containment capabilities through community health workers in the region. It funded healthcare infrastructure, such as clinics, labs and testing facilities, and basic supplies, such as gloves, masks and other essential protection for healthcare workers. It funded nongovernmental organizations that worked in remote places to monitor, treat and manage illness. When USAID was dismantled, much of the



Workers offload medical and emergency supplies donated by the European Union to support front-line workers in fighting Ebola upon arrival at the national airport in Bunia, Congo, on Thursday. **MOSES SAWASAWA/AP**

global healthcare infrastructure across Africa died with it, leaving communities in vulnerable areas with little ability to effectively detect or contain infectious disease.

By withdrawing our funding, expertise and participation from the WHO, the United States also severely eroded the capacity of the global institution best positioned to respond to epidemics.

Even this administration seemed to understand that Ebola prevention should be an "America First" priority. During a Cabinet meeting last year, Elon Musk noted that Ebola prevention funding was "accidentally" canceled by his so-called Department of Government Efficiency, but assured the president and the public that it was quickly restored. "I think we all want Ebola prevention," he said. But that "mistake" was not in fact corrected. Funding for healthcare response in the region was gutted, and many experts in high-risk

outbreaks were pushed out of the government, leaving America ill prepared to act.

In 2014, the U.S. response involved billions of dollars, the deployment of nearly 200 USAID and the CDC experts, and 1,800 Defense Department personnel. The U.S. government worked closely with the WHO and countries across the affected region and the world. Existing U.S.-funded healthcare programs meant the human and physical infrastructure was already in place to enable early detection and facilitate effective response.

Even that highly coordinated international response had many shortcomings, but the lessons learned should have positioned the world to respond better to this crisis today. Instead, the global response has been delayed and hobbled. About 900 suspected cases and 220 suspected deaths have been tracked so far, but no one understands its real scale yet. Most prior Ebola outbreaks ended

before they reached this level.

This epidemic faces other serious complications. No approved vaccines or therapeutic treatments exist yet for this Ebola strain, and its long incubation period — two to three weeks rather than two to three days — facilitates the spread, since people who appear healthy can carry it longer and farther without detection.

The front lines of the epidemic are also the front lines of a war, making it harder to treat, and the region's porous borders make it harder to contain. At least three health facilities have been attacked so far, leading infected patients to flee. The rapid influx of new resources and officials in a region raised deep suspicion in the local population, and that suspicion itself remains an obstacle to treatment and containment of the disease.

This outbreak has spread from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Uganda, and officials

fear it may have already traveled beyond those two, since eight countries border the affected region. The Africa CDC is doing its best to organize a robust response, but its aim to raise \$319 million seems paltry compared with what similar outbreaks have needed in the past.

But the past was a very different operating environment for global healthcare. The question is whether this outbreak will serve as a warning that triggers the U.S. government to reinvest in global health while it still can, or if that warning will come too late.

Elizabeth Shackelford is a senior adviser for the Institute for Global Affairs at Eurasia Group and a foreign affairs columnist for the Tribune. She is also a distinguished lecturer with the Dickey Center at Dartmouth College. She was previously a U.S. diplomat and is the author of "The Dissent Channel: American Diplomacy in a Dishonest Age."

Voice of the people

Johnson a one-term mayor

Regarding the editorial "What's really at stake in the Pritzker-Johnson cold war" (May 24): Gov. JB Pritzker (once again) figured out that Mayor Brandon Johnson is a one-term mayor; Pritzker has no reason to satisfy Johnson. Johnson has seemingly accomplished the almost-impossible: Virtually everybody dislikes him. Except for the Chicago Teachers Union and maybe the Service Employees International Union, he has lost most of the Democratic electorate. Most of the City Council doesn't care for him, and Cook County cops don't like him. Downstate will always hate anyone from Chicago. He has offended many of the traditional power sources for a Black politician.

Johnson will attract very heavy primary opposition, and he will lose. Why should Pritzker or any Illinois politician help this lame-duck mayor? The governor just doesn't want to lose the Bears, and if he can attract enough Chicago state lawmakers to his cause (there are still goodies to hand out), Arlington Heights is a done deal.

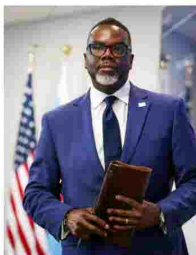
— Goodbye, Johnson!
— John A. Luther, Lombard

Pritzker, mayor need each other

Regarding the editorial, while I'm no fan of Gov. JB Pritzker, the governor may be frustrated with Mayor Brandon Johnson's poor decision-making and his hesitancy to make decisions.

Johnson's fiscal irresponsibility was never more on display than during the negotiations between the Chicago Board of Education and the Chicago Teachers Union, which resulted in heavy lobbying of Springfield for money for the union and schools. Indeed, no matter the city problem, Johnson seemingly falls back on claims of a lack of state financial support.

At the same time, while Pritzker may act irritated by Johnson's failure to make definitive moves to keep the Bears in the city, Pritzker's efforts regarding the team are probably more geared toward his political future. He clearly has his eyes on higher office.



Mayor Brandon Johnson leaves after a news conference at City Hall on Wednesday. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

While Pritzker has higher approval ratings than Johnson, neither politician is getting glowing reviews from city or state residents. The men seemingly do not recognize that they need each other. Their failure to play nice may cost them both in time to come.

— Terry Takash, Western Springs

Mayor keeps giving excuses

Enough with Mayor Brandon Johnson. It's one excuse after another. He's bad for business, public safety and Chicago's livelihood.

Between him and President Donald Trump, to quote "Annie: The Musical": "It's a hard luck life!"

— David Parris, Chicago

Stadium's effect on O'Hare

Gov. JB Pritzker is promoting a Chicago Bears stadium in Arlington Heights without fully addressing what it could do to one of Illinois' most important economic assets: O'Hare International Airport.

The proposed stadium site is near the already congested Interstate 90 corridor used daily by O'Hare travelers. On Sundays, traffic between downtown Chicago and O'Hare is already unpredictable. Adding tens of thousands of fans headed to and

from Bears games could significantly worsen congestion during peak airport travel periods.

Nearby suburban officials have repeatedly warned that traffic planning remains incomplete and that local infrastructure may be overwhelmed. Yet state leaders continue discussing public support for the project before releasing any comprehensive analysis of the impact on airport access, freight movement and emergency response times.

That omission matters because O'Hare is far more economically important to Illinois than a football stadium. Delays affecting business travelers, cargo operations and tourism would ripple across the regional economy.

The public also deserves honesty about cost. Bears officials have acknowledged that nearly \$1 billion in public infrastructure improvements may be necessary around the site. Roads, interchanges, rail access and police services will not pay for themselves.

The only realistic way this project proceeds at the scale being discussed is through heavy taxpayer support, new public borrowing or diversion of transportation funding from other priorities.

Before Illinois taxpayers are asked to subsidize a private NFL franchise, the governor and the Illinois Department of Transportation should release a full independent study examining how Bears-related traffic would affect access to O'Hare under real game-day conditions.

Illinois should not risk degrading one of the world's busiest airports to support a stadium deal.

— Thomas Schoendorff, Chicago

I will stop being Bears fan

If the Bears move out of Chicago, how can they still be the Chicago Bears? If the Bears are no longer the Chicago Bears, I will no longer be a Bears fan.

— Richard A. Winkler, Rodeo, New Mexico

Illegal conversion of guns

With only days left in the

current legislative session, Illinois lawmakers must stop delaying action on the Responsible Gun Manufacturers Act, HB4471, which addresses the growing threat of do-it-yourself convertibles.

Illegal "switches" added to handguns in just a few minutes turn those guns into automatic weapons, making shootings more deadly for all our communities.

In Chicago, police are recovering more of these modified handguns. DIY machine guns turn everyday conflicts, traffic stops and neighborhood disputes into far more dangerous and unpredictable situations. Survivors, students, volunteers and community members are asking for action.

HB4471 would help stop the future sale of firearms that can easily be converted into illegal machine guns.

The clock is running out. I'm a volunteer with Illinois Moms Demand Action, and we urge our lawmakers to pass HB4471. Gun violence personally affected my own family many years ago. I know intimately the lasting trauma innocent victims live with, and I know we all deserve to live free from the threat of these modified guns that serve no legitimate purpose in our communities.

— Linda Englund, Chicago

Opt into federal program

A federal program that gives a tax break to people who donate money to help students, including those who attend private or Catholic schools, is under discussion. Gov. JB Pritzker hasn't decided whether to opt in, and both sides are pleading their causes. This decision should not be left up to one individual, but to the parents involved.

The Invest in Kids program was allowed to sunset at the end of 2023 because our legislators did not even have the gumption to bring the issue to the floor. We cannot afford to have that happen

again.

One of the strengths of our country is our strong education system. Those parents who are willing to spend \$1,000-plus a month to give their children an education better suited to their child's needs are making our country stronger. They should be recognized for their willingness to add this additional monthly child-rearing expense to pay for their child's, and ultimately the country's, future.

After spending 40 years as a full-time teacher (23 years in the private and Catholic systems and 17 years in the public system), I observed that those students whose families were willing to add a tuition expense to their monthly budget fared better and were stronger students than those students whose parents were only marginally involved in classroom activities.

The federal tax credit scholarship program allows for a competitive school system, which benefits all students and ultimately our entire country.

It should not be discussed. Illinois should opt in!

— Mary Ann McGinley, Wilmette

Willie Wilson deserves praise

I would like to thank the Tribune for occasionally publishing op-eds by Willie Wilson.

His May 21 op-ed was excellent ("Are CPS graduates prepared for college and a shifting job market?"). As I read that piece, I realized that Wilson, first and foremost, has a great love for the great city of Chicago and all of the people who live in it. He should be the mayor. He presents a problem and then comes up with viable solutions. Every student graduating this year should read his suggestions for them.

Most importantly, Wilson is not afraid to say that he puts God first in his life.

— Kathleen Higgins, Evergreen Park

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.

Opinion

The New York Times

Our Cease-Fires Have Lost All Meaning

Rana Hanna

The author of the novel "Birds in the Rain," set during the 2006 war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah.

BEIRUT, LEBANON

ON THE morning of April 16, when the latest cease-fire was announced in Lebanon, I allowed myself — for a moment — to dream that it would lead to a lasting peace and that one day my sons would come home.

Like most Lebanese, I've been through this before. Maybe I should have known better. But in Lebanon, we meet each new cease-fire with blind optimism — as if it were the herald of a conflict's end instead of what it actually is: an admission ticket to the next war.

Since independence in 1943, Lebanon has been a party to at least seven internationally brokered cease-fires. We have lived through the long civil war of 1975-90 and conflicts between Israel and Hezbollah in 1993, 1996, 2006 and 2024. These wars, interspersed with internal political and financial crises, have inflicted large-scale physical and psychological damage on the Lebanese

people and resulted in waves of emigration. Our cease-fires have lasted days, months and sometimes years. But inevitably, before we know it, we are cast into a state of war, yet again, and are talking of cease-fires, yet again.

A Lebanese cease-fire is neither war nor peace, signed on paper and not in effect, covering selective territory. On the Lebanese side, the parties that sign are often not the parties that instigated the violence. The state binds itself to agreements on behalf of an actor it can neither compel nor control. A Lebanese cease-fire is a document about the cessation of violence that leaves intact every internal mechanism that produced it.

The latest agreement is a case in point. Hezbollah shot rockets into Israel to avenge the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during the Israeli-U.S. war on Iran, Hezbollah's main backer. Israel responded with all its might, hitting targets in Beirut, razing — and eventually occupying — several villages in southern Lebanon and killing hundreds of Lebanese. But it was the Republic of Lebanon that signed a cease-fire brokered by the United States, which called for Lebanon to take "meaningful steps to prevent Hezbollah" from attacking Israel. The

Lebanese government had made a similar pledge in 2006, and again in 2024, despite the Lebanese Army's having little ability to take on Hezbollah.

Empty cease-fires are, of course, not unique to Lebanon. Short-lived truces in Russia's war on Ukraine, and often-broken ones in the Gaza war and in the war against Iran, have shown how cease-fires get stripped of their meaning. President Trump's statecraft in his second term has made cease-fires instruments of crisis management, not conflict resolution, according to Gopi Krishna Bhamidipati, at the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy in Washington.

But the problem predates the second Trump presidency. A November 2024 cease-fire agreement — which also stipulated that Israel stop offensive operations on Lebanese territory against the Lebanese state and that the Lebanese Army retain sole control of weapons in the country — was negotiated by seasoned diplomats serving under President Joe Biden. That truce officially lasted for 15 months, during which time the United Nations documented more than 7,500 Israeli violations of Lebanon's airspace and nearly 2,500 ground violations,

In Lebanon, a truce is simply an admission ticket to the next war.

and the killing of at least 197 civilians. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which was signed to end the 33-day war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, under the auspices of President George W. Bush, was punctuated with violations for two decades.

When the latest cease-fire was announced, I thought that things would be different. The Lebanese government, after being a bystander in past cease-fires, was finally acting on its own behalf. Hezbollah, the Shiite militant and political organization that wielded great power in Lebanon, was not speaking in our name. We had new leaders, competent, young, technocratic. The Lebanese state, technically still at war with Israel since an armistice was signed in 1949, was openly talking of peace, a taboo subject until now.

It seemed that we finally had a seat at the table, so perhaps we were no longer the meal.

On that morning of April 16, I had hopes of finally existing under a sovereign Lebanese state that would be capable of providing peace, security and, eventually, prosperity for all its citizens — something few previous governments have been able to offer.

I dared to imagine that my three children, studying and working separately in three different countries, would soon find the stability to have careers and decent lives in Lebanon. Their childhoods had been constantly disrupted by random explosions, political assassinations, road and school closures — just as mine had been.

Within hours of the announcement, the roads to the south, which had borne the brunt of Israeli attacks, were clogged. Hundreds of thousands of people, after weeks of living on the streets in the rain and in bitter cold, shared my hope and were returning to their villages, some to just the bits of homes left after this latest round of fighting.

But sure enough, the fighting resumed within days. Since then, more people have been killed as a result of Israeli strikes, including medics and a journalist, and Israel's destruction of Lebanese villages has continued unabated, the whir of the drones over Beirut incessant. Both Israel and Hezbollah have publicly acknowledged continued operations across, and within, Lebanese borders.

The cease-fire — an order to stop the firing of weapons — has again lost its meaning. Even after an agreement was recently reached to extend the 10-day cease-fire in April, the attacks continue and have now intensified.

We Lebanese are great at hoping, but we are also great deniers. We do not downsize when our children leave the country, because we keep hoping they will return — never mind that the violence and dysfunction in recent years have meant that they rarely do.

We, the Lebanese people, are not absolved from the failure of cease-fires. For years, every internal faction has fought over what it perceives to be its vision of the country: Lubnanuna — our Lebanon. We refuse to face the reality that our divisions are at least as much to blame for the state's weakness as any external actor, and quietly adapt to every incremental negative change. We are at once the ostrich with its head in the sand and the frog in the water on the stove. We are too traumatized and too divided to imagine a common future together.

I want things to be different. Having lived all my life with war as the backdrop, I am hesitant to believe that things could change. But I need to. A cease-fire in Lebanon that ends the need for future cease-fires would have to happen on two planes.

We would have to sign a peace treaty with our neighbors, and we would have to sign another with ourselves. We would have to agree that the country is bigger than any of us: that we are its custodians, not its owners.



PETER VAN AGTMAEL/MAGNUM PHOTOS

It's Becoming Impossible to Know How Your Kid Is Doing in School

Ariel Kalil and Derek Rury

Dr. Kalil is a professor of public policy at the University of Chicago. Dr. Rury is an assistant professor of economics at Oregon State University.

NEARLY nine in 10 parents in the United States believe that their child is performing at or above grade level in reading and math. Many, if not most, of them are wrong.

Actual proficiency rates among eighth graders are 30 percent in reading and 28 percent in math, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or N.A.E.P. The gap between grades and test scores is particularly pronounced in schools serving higher proportions of low-income students, according to a 2023 study.

This problem has gotten worse over the past 15 years or so as grade inflation has increased. Between 2010 and 2022, average high school grade-point averages rose significantly — especially in math, to 3.32 from 3.02.

Meanwhile, standardized testing — one of the few independent checks on schools — is being undermined. Under federal law, states must administer annual standardized tests in math and reading in grades three through eight. But several states have recently lowered the score a child needs to be deemed "proficient," producing big gains on paper without any change in the classroom.

Grades are going up and test scores are going down.

Wisconsin redesigned its assessment, and English proficiency in the state increased to 48 percent from 39 percent. Illinois and Kansas have followed suit. In more than half of the states, proficiency rates on state reading tests now exceed the rates on national tests by 15 percentage points or more, and in some states the gap is much larger.

The federal government is making the problem only worse. In 2025, the Trump administration gutted the Education Department, which is behind the national test. Although some reports indicate that the agency has begun to rebuild, certain assessments have already been scaled back.

In other words, if you are a parent of school-age children, you can be paying close attention to their performance, and there is still a good chance that you do not really know how much they are learning.

There's another problem when it comes to understanding how well your child is doing in school: Parents tend to overweight grades when they think about whether their child needs more support. In 2025, we conducted an experiment in which we presented over 2,000 parents with scenarios in which a child's grade and test score pointed in different directions. Then we asked them to estimate the time and money each scenario would require for academic support like tutoring.

In scenarios where grades were high, many parents saw no reason to act — even

when test scores were low. If a child had an A in math and a test score at the 30th percentile, parents were more likely to act as if everything were fine. But when grades were low and test scores high, they responded. The change was modest, but the pattern consistent: On average, parents were willing to pay 14 percent more to fix a drop in grades than they were to fix a comparable drop in test scores.

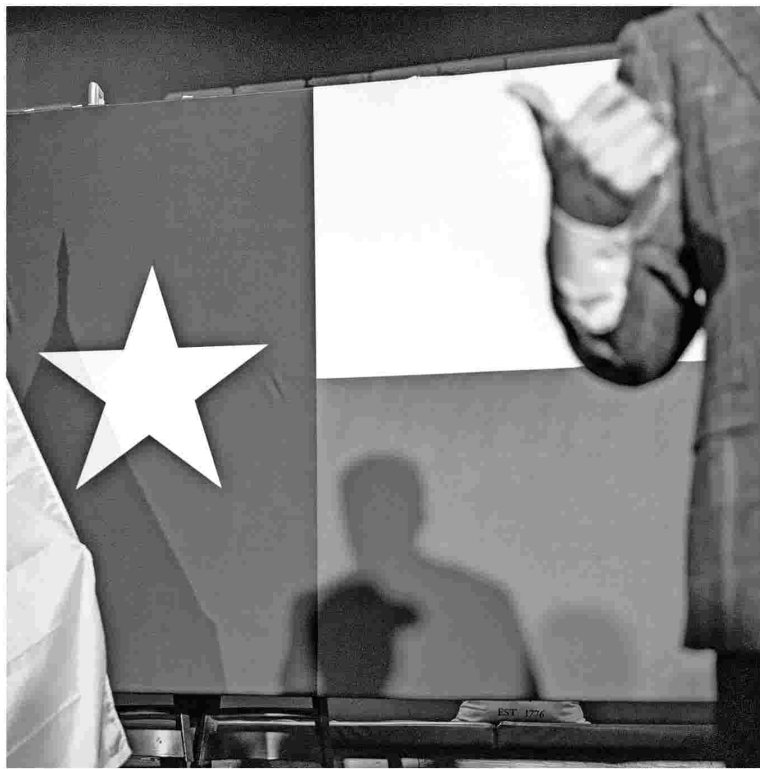
Parents are not inattentive. But grades arrive more often — through report cards and teacher communications — and are far easier to understand than test scores. Standardized test scores come once a year, often in formats that even well-educated parents find confusing. And many parents don't believe test scores are reliable measures of learning. When we surveyed parents about their beliefs, about 40 percent said they thought standardized tests were biased, and nearly 30 percent said test scores mostly reflect family income rather than academic ability.

It is true that both grades and test scores have limitations. Grades bundle achievement, effort, behavior and teacher judgment, with no common standard across classrooms; test scores measure a narrower slice of what matters, but on a common scale. At their best, standardized tests give parents a measure of what their children have learned, whether they are learning at the expected rate and where they stand relative to other children — a measure

that doesn't depend on which teacher they have or which school they attend. State standardized tests also report whether a child has met grade-level proficiency benchmarks.

Reversing grade inflation is the most direct fix for helping parents understand how their children are doing in school, but it requires the kind of broad institutional change that moves slowly. So far, no state has taken it on. In the meantime, states and districts should resist efforts that make the problem harder to see. They should maintain rigorous proficiency standards and do more to help parents understand what the results mean. For example, states could require that standardized test results be included on report cards alongside grades, with clear explanations of what proficiency levels mean.

For parents who want to know what's really going on: Ask your children's teachers directly whether they are attending at grade level. If your school uses benchmark assessments like MAP, request those results. When test scores and grades tell different stories, take the test scores seriously — they may be the more honest measure of what your child knows. And if your children's school is one where nearly every student gets an A, treat that as a warning, not a reassurance. When grades and test scores diverge, that gap is information: perhaps the most important information you will receive about your children's education that year.



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE CONVERSATION | FRANK BRUNI AND BRET STEPHENS

Big Swells of Rancor Are Capsizing America

Bret Stephens: Hi, Frank. Did President Trump just hand Democrats a gift as big as Texas?

Frank Bruni: I sure hope so. And I'm betting that James Talarico — Texas Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate, who now gets to face the despicable, execrable and (naturally) Trump-endorsed Ken Paxton in the general election — has a very, very wide smile on his face.

Bret: Much as there is much to detest about Paxton — and as much as I think Republicans were fools to cashier John Cornyn, the reasonable and experienced incumbent — I'd be shocked if he loses in November: Texas is nearly as red as California is blue. And Talarico has baggage of his own: He's not as popular as he needs to be among Black voters, and comments of his like "God is nonbinary," whatever the theological merits, just aren't going to help him politically.

Frank: Well, aren't you the definition of a buzzkill? Can we not have just one week, just one day, just a few fleeting hours in which we imagine that Talarico — who seems to be a transcendently decent man in an abysmally indecent age — becomes the first Democrat in a generation to win statewide office in Texas and denies the kleptocrat in chief a Senate majority during the second half of his ruinous second term? Can you not give me that, Bret?

Bret: I'll give you that Democrats now have a chance in Texas, when previously they had none. I also think that Paxton's unfortunate ascent in state politics is a good reminder of why parties tend to become dangerous to themselves when they go for years without facing meaningful political opposition from the other party. Something similar may be happening in Los Angeles right now with the mayor's race and the rise of Spencer Pratt ahead of next month's primary.

Bruni: I can tell you want to pivot to the Democrats' excesses and woe, and I will follow you westward to L.A. in a bit —

Bret: Oh, come on.

Frank: But not before we linger a minute longer on what Trump's endorsement of Paxton and Paxton's primary victory over Cornyn (by nearly 30 points!) say about Republicans. An overwhelming majority of Republican officeholders compete with one another to prostrate themselves more sycophantically before Trump, and Paxton trounced Cornyn along those lines: As Texas' attorney general, he filed lawsuits in 2020 to challenge Joe Biden's victories over Trump in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. And on Jan. 6, 2021, he spoke at the rally in Washington just before the mob stormed the Capitol.

Sheer narcissism and blunt transactionalism drive Trump's assessment of character. Unfeathered fealty to Trump is virtuous; even occasional, minor defiance is intolerable. That — not the Democrats' failure to provide meaningful political opposition — is the immoral moral of this story.

Bret: As my rabbi's rabbi used to say, you're 100 percent right. Now let me tell you why you're also 100 percent wrong.

Frank: That's some unkosher arithmetic.

Bret: Talmudic math, Frank. Anyway, didn't you recently write a column lamenting Graham Platner's rise in Maine but saying you'd vote for him — despite his record of wretched social media postings and a Nazi-themed tattoo — on the theory that Trump must be opposed at all costs? Well, Texas Republicans have now done what Maine Democrats just did: They

chose ideological purity over moral decency, political extremism over moderation, and now the rest of the country may have to suffer for it.

Frank: While I understand the point you're making, I must say that the word "purity" in proximity to the name Paxton is jarring.

Bret: Pure in the sense that sulfuric acid can also, I suppose, be pure.

Frank: I'm not comfortable with putting Platner and Paxton in the same pontoon, but you're right that they reflect some of the same larger dynamics, one of which is illustrated by this statistic from the Tuesday returns in Texas: Only about 8 percent of registered voters (Texas has open primaries) showed up, as Cornyn pointed out in his concession speech. Primary elections are often dominated and decided by the extreme elements of each party, and we end up with nominees — and then elected representatives — who are resistant to compromise, bad at consensus and unrepresentative of most Americans.

Bret: I wonder what would happen to our politics if a requirement for voting in a general election was to have also voted in a primary, asking ordinary voters not only

Is the dream of turning Texas blue a real possibility this year?

to decide the winners but also to select the candidates. But can we get back to Los Angeles?

Frank: Do you you have a timeshare there, or are you just trying to rack up frequent-flyer miles?

Bret: I love L.A. more than I care to admit. But my question to you is: Does Karen Bass deserve re-election?

Frank: In the abstract, probably not. Her performance and record are unimpressive. And in terms of the Los Angeles wildfires, she violated a cardinal rule of governance: Get the natural disasters right. (Did no one learn anything from President George W. Bush and Hurricane Katrina?)

But elections are choices among imperfect and sometimes unappealing options. And while Pratt, a former reality television star, has given powerful voice to Angelinos' understandable discontents, he has no experience and, from the evidence we've seen, a shaky grip on policy. He's also one of those internet-era candidates surfing big swells of rancor. Big swells of rancor are not serving America well. You could even say they're capsizing it.

Bret: There's always a risk that a political neophyte like Pratt will have no idea how to work the municipal system if he gets into City Hall — that is, he won't know how to translate charisma into competence. Something similar, I think, happened to Arnold Schwarzenegger when he rode a wave of popular discontent into the governorship of California and then sort of floundered in the job.

But Los Angeles is a great American city that happens to be a mess right now, and it — along with the Democratic Party that has ruled it like a fief for decades — could stand to be shaken and stirred. As Jefferson said, "A little rebellion now and then is a good thing."

Frank: So is a big martini. Sorry, your "shaken and stirred" brought me straight to cocktail hour.

Bret: On a less unsober note, Frank, you spent a couple of years as The Times's Vatican correspondent. (Nice gig!) Any thoughts on Pope Leo's new encyclical on artificial intelligence?

Frank: I'm fascinated by both the fact of it and the rapid attention to it. The Roman Catholic hierarchy has so often been so far behind the (towercase) times, and here's Leo hopping on a profoundly challenging, rapidly evolving issue precisely when people are most panicked by it. With this encyclical and with his upbraiding of Trump about the Iran war, the pope is asserting the church's relevance and claiming headlines in a fashion that's not a foregone conclusion, given how many Catholics don't typically concern themselves with the Vatican's edicts. Your feelings about him, Bret?

Bret: Mi piace questo papa. He seems approachable and wise, serious but not self-serious. And it's entirely appropriate for someone in his position to tackle an issue like A.I., because technology isn't morally neutral. In the 18th century, a technological innovation, the cotton gin, made slavery immensely profitable for slaveholders, setting the stage for its westward enlargement and the Civil War that followed. In this century, we've seen how social media leads to antisocial behavior. Artificial intelligence raises even greater concerns than social media. I was especially struck by one line in the encyclical, in which Leo writes of the "paradox of material progress and anthropological regression." I'll think of that every time I hear of college students having A.I. write their term papers for them.

Frank: It's a great phrase. I'm starting to regard Leo as our country's retort — on the global stage — to Trump. We're watching the first American pope redeem the worst American president. One man is eloquent, earnest, measured, big-minded. The other is trying to steal \$1.776 billion from taxpayers so that he can give financial rewards to unhinged conspiracy theorists who bloodied police officers at the Capitol on Jan. 6. The saintly versus the sordid.

Bret: Someone please make a T-shirt with Leo's face on it and a caption that reads, "Americans: We don't all suck." Sold at airport kiosks everywhere.

Frank: I promise to buy 1,000 of those and, if they come in really small sizes, even hand them out as christening gifts for infants who, by dint of nursing, are technically sucking.

Bret: Speaking of A.I.: Several commencement speakers this graduation season have been booted by graduates for raising the subject. A happy exception is Steve Wozniak — a founder, with Steve Jobs, of Apple — who gave a talk at Grand Valley State University in Michigan and spoke of a different kind of A.I., "actual intelligence." He was met with a huge cheer. Anything you recommend to our readers to enhance theirs?

Frank: Yeah. Good old-fashioned books. I was moved and delighted by our Times colleague Alexandra Jacobs's article this week about a new biography of Marilyn Monroe, "Marilyn and Her Books: The Literary Life of Marilyn Monroe," by Gail Crowther. It not only underscored how pointless and wrong it is to reduce any person to a unidimensional stereotype but also paid tribute to reading as an act of self-improvement and self-empowerment.

Bret, get a load of this statement that Monroe once made and that Alexandra quotes: "If you are ignorant, books won't laugh at you." How great is that?

Bret: Brilliant. Norma Jean was no boob.

LETTERS

Trump's Retribution Comes to Texas

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Cornyn's Loss Further Rankles Republicans in Senate" (news analysis, May 28): President Trump's successful intervention in Republican primaries across the country indicates that the United States no longer has an independent conservative political party.

On the right side of the political spectrum there is only a Trump party, which is characterized not by specific policies or a coherent political philosophy but rather solely by loyalty to Mr. Trump personally.

Politicians who show insufficient fealty to the leader risk being purged from the party, even after having spent decades promoting conservative policies.

JAY GELLER
SHAKER HEIGHTS, OHIO

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Paxton Ousts Cornyn, Solidifying Trump's Grip on G.O.P." (news article, nytimes.com, May 26):

Ken Paxton didn't just out Senator John Cornyn, the incumbent; he crushed him by 28 percentage points in the Texas Senate primary Tuesday. While this was another win for Donald Trump as he continues his campaign of retribution, Mr. Paxton's victory could cost Republicans a vital Senate seat in November.

Mr. Paxton, the scandal-ridden Texas attorney general,

is a terrible candidate. The only thing going for him is Mr. Trump's endorsement. James Talarico, the Democratic candidate for Mr. Cornyn's seat, is a bright, young and extremely popular Texan who is in a dead heat with Mr. Paxton in early polling. Mr. Talarico is considered the best chance for Democrats to win a Senate seat in Texas since Lloyd Bentsen in 1970.

For Republicans, this race may turn into the most expensive in the nation, depriving the G.O.P. of funds it will need in other razor-thin races in states like Maine and Alaska.

HENRY A. LOWENSTEIN
NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:

After John Cornyn's loss in the Texas Republican primary, I would urge Republican politicians who value honesty and oppose corruption to consider running as independents rather than conceding the field.

A significant number of conservative voters feel abandoned by their party's current direction. An independent candidacy would offer them a meaningful choice at the ballot box — one grounded in integrity rather than loyalty to any one faction.

The voters who believe in honest governance deserve representation. Someone must be willing to step forward and provide it.

EUGENE GANNON, BROOKLYN

Outrage Over an Investigation of E. Jean Carroll

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Justice Dept. Is Said to Open Criminal Inquiry of E. Jean Carroll Over 'Trump Lawsuits'" (news article, nytimes.com, May 28):

Reports that the Justice Department has opened a criminal investigation into E. Jean Carroll, whose civil suit against Donald Trump resulted in a substantial judgment, should trouble every American who cares about the rule of law. The supposed basis for this investigation is that Ms. Carroll inaccurately stated that she had no outside funding for her legal expenses. At worst, this is a technical discrepancy with no meaningful bearing on the merits of her case.

Let's be honest about what is happening. This is not about justice. It is about retribution. Mr. Trump has long demonstrated that he views federal law enforcement not as an independent institution but as an extension of his personal will and whims. Anyone who challenges him — politically, legally or even rhetorically — risks becoming the target of state power deployed for his benefit.

There is no serious expectation that this investigation will lead to charges, let alone a

conviction. But it's the process itself — the stress, the cost, the public scrutiny — that's the punishment. It is meant to send a message of intimidation: Cross this president and you will pay.

This is not how a healthy democracy behaves. It is how autocrats operate. Americans must recognize the danger in normalizing a president who uses the Justice Department as a weapon against private citizens. If we fail to push back now, we may soon find there is no line left to defend. It's time for ordinary citizens to rise, speak up, push back and resist the autocratic impulses and behaviors of Donald Trump.

KEN DROW
SWARTHMORE, PA.

TO THE EDITOR:

What an obscene abuse of power! Talk about the weaponization of the government! A citizen (Donald J. Trump) is found liable for sexual abuse and defamation, and he is ordered to pay his victim (E. Jean Carroll) a total of \$88.3 million. Now, as president, he turns "his" Justice Department on his brave 82-year-old, cooking up ways to make her life miserable and conceivably buying himself time so that he'll never have to pay her.

He should fork it over now (he certainly has made billions since the court mandated that amount), and if his slush fund goes through, E. Jean Carroll should demand and receive an additional \$88.3 million for all she has suffered.

SARAH CRICHTON, BROOKLYN

Mets and Knicks

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "If You're a Yankees Fan, I Don't Want to Hear From You," by Devin Gordon (Opinion guest essay, May 27):

As a lifelong Mets fan, I share Mr. Gordon's pain and hopes for another miracle by the fall. As a psychiatrist, I feel some guilt about the emotional distress I feel following the Mets, considering that the people I treat have far more serious or important problems.

In the past weeks, I found the perfect medicine for me: the Knicks. I remember the excitement in New York when they won their first championship in 1970, just months after the Mets' first one in 1959. Like the Mets, the Knicks have repeated that feat only once — and long ago.

For my own sanity, I need to take a brief break from the currently unwatchable Mets and continue to enjoy, with their long-suffering fans, the thrilling run of the Knicks.

JEFFREY B. FREEDMAN
NEW YORK

Religion and A.I.

TO THE EDITOR:

"The Atheist and the Machine God," by Ross Douthat (column, May 10), led me to think that in a future shaped by advanced artificial intelligence, religion may not diminish but instead acquire renewed relevance. Religion may gain new footing, not as a retreat from science, but as a response to it.

The more fully human cognition is modeled, the more attention may turn to what cannot be captured in those models: my subjective experience, moral awareness, spiritual longing, private thoughts, feelings and awareness that cannot be fully explained by biology or any other means.

Far from being displaced by technological progress, religious thought could be reasserted as a framework for interpreting what machines cannot verify or reproduce. Faith, ritual and metaphysical belief may function less as inherited tradition and more as a conscious affirmation of human distinctiveness in an increasingly synthetic world.

Paradoxically, the advance of artificial intelligence may intensify rather than dissolve questions of meaning, purpose and transcendence, leaving religion positioned not at the margins of modernity, but directly at its center.

STEVE WENICK
VOORHEES, N.J.

Last Day To Join Private Channel. **Closing entry for new members Now.**

◆ Indian Newspaper

- 1) Times of India
 - 2) The Hindu
 - 3) Business line
 - 4) The Indian Express
 - 5) Economic Times
- And more Newspapers

◆ International Newspapers channel

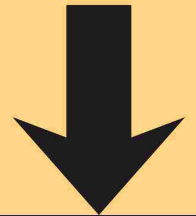
[European, American, Gulf & Asia]

◆ Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

◆ English Editorials

[National + International Editorials]



Click here
to join

◆ Lifetime validity at just 19 Rupees 

Trust me... this will be your best purchase of 2026

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Britain's expanding 'lost generation'

Report on youth joblessness should be a priority for whoever leads Labour

Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government is often criticised for commissioning endless reports and reviews rather than forging ahead with policies. But former Labour health secretary Alan Milburn's landmark report on the 10m UK young people who are not in employment, education or training (Neet) sheds genuine light on the problems of an emerging "lost generation". It deserves to be heeded — and to survive any transition to a new Labour premier as a priority for a revamped government.

Britain's Neets problem is a moral as well as economic issue. On present trends it will swell from a million 16- to 24-year-olds now to 1.25m within five years, creating a long-term drag on growth and finances. At 12.8 per cent of the age group it tops any EU country

except Romania and is three times higher than that of the Netherlands. It is not new — the rate has barely fallen below 10 per cent in 25 years — but it is becoming stickier. Six in 10 Neets today have never had a job, up from four in 10 in 2005. A decent portion did well at school: 15 per cent have degrees; nearly 30 per cent have good GCSEs.

The problem is worsening as ill health becomes a main reason for young people being out of work or education; a quarter are inactive due to sickness or disability, often primarily mental health. Some in older generations may scoff at Milburn's insistence, based on months of interviews and focus groups, that these are not work-shy "snowflakes". Survey work, he says, showed 84 per cent wanted to find a job or training; many had fired off countless applications, often met by silence.

But there are clearly many structural barriers on the road to employment. Apprenticeship starts for young people have dropped by 35 per cent in a decade.

Entry-level jobs in hospitality or retailing have contracted sharply. The decline of Saturday or holiday jobs means many young people chasing dwindling openings are not work-ready. And the welfare system is skewed towards locking them into benefits instead of helping them into jobs.

It is an unfortunate reality, too, that current government policies have exacerbated the problem — as Milburn admitted at the report launch. Raising youth minimum wages, boosting employee rights and lifting employers' National Insurance contributions have deterred employers from hiring young people. A rethink is needed, though the NICs increase would be a very big fiscal measure to unwind.

Although Milburn's recommendations will come later this year, the outlines of what else needs to happen are already clear. Vocational training, which suits many young jobless and provides skills many employers want, needs to be expanded. A more joined-up

Six in 10 Neets today have never had a job, up from four in 10 in 2005. A decent portion did well at school: 15 per cent have degrees; nearly 30 per cent have good GCSEs

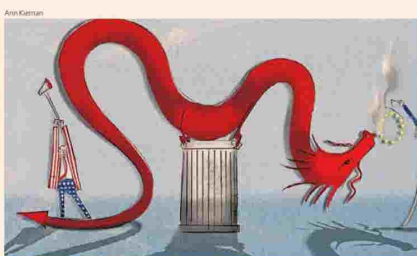
approach is required across government departments and locally: the successful Dutch "youth guarantee", for example puts responsibility on local authorities to work with schools and colleges, employers and unions to improve outcomes for the young.

Employers need to be incentivised to take on more young people, and collaborate in training and work experience programmes. Perhaps the thorniest issue, though, especially for a "soft left" Labour government headed, say, by current Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham, will be welfare reform.

The system must shift from one that traps young people on disability benefits for fear of losing their financial safety net to one that supports them into training or the workplace. More modest reforms triggered a backbench rebellion and a Starmer U-turn last year. But if any Labour government truly wishes to reboot the UK economy, taking the steps to get "lost" young Britons into work would be a good place to start.

Opinion Economics

Why Europe must embrace tariffs



Soumaya Keynes

spent years feeling smug, criticising the Trump administration for blowing up the rules-based trading system. It seemed clear that China's economic model was causing problems elsewhere, but equally clear that chaotic unilateralism was the wrong approach. Better to play with allies and file a big, boring dispute at the World Trade Organization, accusing China of foul play.

It's time to move on. Sadly, navigating today's era of economic conflict by appealing to the rule book is like turning up to a knife fight with a Scrabble manual. You might feel principled complaining that "stabbing your opponent" isn't fun and certainly won't deliver 50 bonus points. But you'll still lose. Since the game has changed, so must the strategy. Which for the EU means turning to trade barriers — and tariffs.

Appealing to the rule book today is like turning up to a knife fight with a Scrabble manual

Europe's challenge is both tumbling German industrial production since 2018 and, more recently, particularly soggy Euro area exports. No doubt expensive energy and cumbersome EU regulation have played a part. But so has China's mighty export machine. In a recent paper, Sander Tordoir and Brad Setzer point out that Chinese export outperformance has been matched by Euro area underperformance. In industries where China's export market share has risen over the past few years, German output has been particularly weak. China's overall imports have barely grown over the past five years and, since mid-2025, it has been selling more capital goods to Germany than it has been buying.

In the short term, China's export surge benefits consumers in the form of cheap stuff. But there are at least three reasons to worry. First, there is the political risk associated with massive job dislocation. Second, a shrivelled industrial base could be harder to expand in a military emergency. And third, the Chinese don't appear to be interested in the safety of mutual interdependence. So relying on their manufacturers could leave Europe vulnerable to coercion.

The case for trade barriers is as a signal to companies and consumers that buying so much from one place is

risky. Proposals are already swirling in advance of a European Commission meeting on May 29. They include regulations to push companies towards a more diverse set of suppliers, or quotas or duties where supply is too concentrated. The Industrial Accelerator Act being negotiated could also limit access for Chinese companies to public procurement or discriminate against them when handing out subsidies. Tordoir and Setzer themselves suggest a US-style Europe "Section 301" power, which would allow the EU to investigate and lash out against China's "economy-wide distortions". They also propose that any revenue from new tariffs could go to trade-war veterans.

Some — most notably the Germans — aren't yet convinced that they should be resorting to the violence of trade barriers so wholeheartedly. Part of that is undoubtedly because pressure from multinational companies eager to benefit from China's export platform. (In a trade war, combatants don't always co-operate.)

Critics can also point to America's battle wounds. Tariffs raise prices for importers and consumers, and harm manufacturers by restricting access to cheap inputs. Uncertainty over trade barriers can crush investment; narrowly applied restrictions can reorganise supply chains without affecting fundamental economic dynamics. ("I know the instructions are in Mandarin but it's from Vietnam, promise!") Most ominously, as they have threatened, the Chinese could retaliate.

Learning the right lessons from the Trump administration means applying trade barriers calmly, methodically and in co-ordination with others. My own preference would be to tie any tariffs to import surges or high import concentration, rather than a Trump-style trade investigation. And if possible, stay open to trusted trading partners while making it clear that they need to act too, to prevent diversion of Chinese supply to third markets. (Or maybe I'm just a wimpy Scrabble player.)

The problem of retaliation is nastiest, though the EU may have ways of defending itself — if it can muster the political will. A paper by Tobias Gehrke outlines ways the EU could hit back, which include restricting China's access to speciality industrial inputs, or restricting Chinese ownership of EU port terminals.

Again, it's grubby and there's a good chance it backfires spectacularly. But sweltering in a knife-proof vest is meant to be less fun than engaging in wordplay. What's the alternative? The EU could well conclude that it can't act because the short-term costs are too high. In which case it will have given in to coercion both now and later.

soumaya.keynes@ft.com

Letters

EU cannot let short-term narrative dictate Arctic energy policy

The Financial Times reported in April that the EU is weighing up whether to drop its opposition to new Arctic oil and gas drilling as part of its upcoming Arctic policy review ("Energy crisis spurs rethink by Brussels on new drilling in the Arctic", Report, April 25). This comes amid attempts by the oil and gas industry to rebrand Arctic oil and gas expansion as "energy security".

You write that "a policy reversal would most benefit Norway, a non-EU member, which is the second most active country in developing an oil and gas industry in the Arctic after Russia."

Burnham and the case for a land value tax

Regarding Jonathan Portes' column on the "three ways a new Labour leader could change the politics of growth" (Opinion, May 26), any new UK prime minister must confront non-existent economic growth, a massive post-2008 transfer of wealth from workers to asset owners, and the tight grip of bond markets on sovereign policy.

Andy Burnham, the leading contender, has rightly highlighted that land is "underused". As an asset accounting for 60 per cent of "UK net worth", land wealth is starkly unequal: half of England is owned by less than 1 per cent of the population, while over a quarter of households in Makersfield, the Lancashire constituency where Burnham is seeking to win a by-election, own none at all.

Tax reform is critical to fund progressive social care and council house building. Fortunately, the bond markets Burnham has promised to placate by sticking to borrowing rules and avoiding hikes on productive taxes (like work and enterprise) need not be spooked. While taxes on trade and labour shrink economies, taxing land assets does not have the same adverse impact.

History demonstrates that a substantial land value tax (LVT) stimulates productive activity and drives economic growth via three clear mechanisms.

First, it allows the replacement of economically damaging taxes. Second, it encourages the efficient use of land, repairing a broken market. Third, it almost immediately redirects investment away from speculative wealth extraction, like rent, and into the real economy where useful goods and services are created.

Burnham has indicated he would not go "straight to" a land value tax. But given its ability to foster growth while maintaining fiscal responsibility, we must ask: why not, Andy?

Murad Qureshi
Chair of Labour Land Campaign,
London NW1, UK

The carried interest debate overheard in the Vineyard

May I add a Martha's Vineyard tax compliance story to Rana Foroohar's examples from Manhattan and the Hamptons ("Just stop moaning and pay your taxes", Opinion, May 25)?

One summer afternoon at an estate on Oyster Pond (the fifth of this person's homes, as I recall), I was reading at the other end of a room while two other guests, both Democrats and formerly of Lehman Brothers and various PF firms, were talking about carried interest. They solemnly agreed that it was unfair, that really they should be paying more in tax. They

But petroleum interests in Norway and the EU can't change the fact that Norwegian gas from the Arctic has only accounted for 5-4 per cent of yearly EU gas imports since 2022, according to data from the Norwegian Offshore Directorate and European Commission.

Arctic gas is not a pillar of European energy security — it is a marginal contribution being used to justify a major policy shift.

The EU must also remember that new projects approved today would reach European markets before the 2040s. On the Norwegian continental

shelf, developments typically take around 15 years from discovery to production, and in the Arctic the average is closer to 18 years.

Even a new gas pipeline from the Barents Sea would in all likelihood not be operational before 2035.

The long-term problem facing Europe is not a lack of gas, but the risk of investing in infrastructure that will be underused or stranded. Expanding supply weakens the incentives needed to scale up renewables, storage and energy efficiency — the foundations of long-term energy security. Finally, there is an environmental

Email: letters.editor@ft.com
Include daytime telephone number and full address
Corrections: corrections@ft.com
If you are not satisfied with the FT's response to your complaint, you can appeal to the FT Editorial Complaints Commissioner: complaints.commissioner@ft.com



equally solemnly agreed it was up to Congress to change the rules and of course they would be happy to comply, but in the meantime it was out of their hands. It's only now occurred to me that they knew I was listening to their performance and naive enough to be taken in by it.

Karen Christensen
Great Barrington, MA, US

Race for AI infrastructure — here's how it might end

Joachim Klement is right to question the economics underpinning today's AI investment frenzy (Markets Insight, May 21). Too much of the market still treats AI as a scale race where whoever spends the most wins.

I'm pleased to see that logic is starting to break down. Inside actual companies, most AI projects are failing because the operational reality is messy. The workflow wasn't redesigned. The data is fragmented. Nobody trusts the outputs enough to automate decisions. Governance gets bolted on later. Cost shows up in places nobody modelled. The system works great in a demo and then struggles the second it hits real complexity.

That's the part of the market I think people are underestimating.

Infrastructure will keep scaling. But over time, more of the enterprise value will accrue to the companies that know how to make AI operate reliably inside the chaos of real businesses.

Yes, there's irrational exuberance in the infrastructure race, but that doesn't mean AI itself is a bubble. It means the market has been rewarding spectacle over execution.

Eventually, investors will stop asking who trained the biggest model and start asking who built something companies can depend on.

Ingrid Curtis
Chief Executive, Sparq,
Atlanta, GA, US

'Better an insincere peace than a sincere war'

Gideon Rachman provides us with a trenchant overarching critique of the varied strategic and economic blunders that have continued to define the ongoing joint American-Israeli military campaign against Iran ("Iran is beating Trump at the art of the deal", Opinion, May 26)

Rachman quotes the former US ambassador to Israel Daniel Shapiro who interjected a note of realism when he observed Trump is so boxed in that accepting a bad deal that opens the Strait would be a better option than continuing the war.

This politically pragmatic voice for peace is but a slightly less idealistic variation and echo of Rabbi Jacob Isaac Horowitz's words, the seer of Lublin (1745-1815) whose advice was: "Better an insincere peace than a sincere war."

Toby Zanin
Toronto, ON, Canada

The SpaceX IPO and its gravity-defying valuation

In March 2000, I was part of the syndicate selling the lastminute.com IPO to institutional investors.

The new era enthusiasm was infectious. We all thought it was going to the moon. When the price range was raised at the last moment, it began to feel a bit overcooked and you could sense confidence start to ebb — and so it proved to be when trading opened in the shares, the peak of the dotcom bubble.

A quarter of a century on, valuations once again defy gravity. "SpaceX's value will hinge on assumptions as IPO looms", *Lex*, May 22). Unquestionably, SpaceX has stellar credentials. But I wonder if perhaps this IPO might also prove the moment of hubris which defines the peak of the current cycle?

Michael Hufton
London SW17, UK

A curious chart choice

In Martin Wolf's article ("The infantilism of an 'ungovernable' Britain", Opinion, May 25) you published a chart which I have seen many times before.

It shows UK GDP (in this case) from 1971. It overlays a trend line from the start to 2007 and we are invited to lament the disappointing growth subsequently.

In what sensible world would you extrapolate through the peak of an unsustainable lead-fuelled bubble? Poor analysis leads to poor policies; and the implication that we could somehow all have been much richer "if only" leads to much dissatisfaction among the infantile voters.

Oliver Streets
London W14, UK

If you thought state aid rules were strict ...

The Big Read article "How Europe learned to love subsidies" (May 25) is only partially true since Brussels only loves those that come from within. The article does not talk about the way the EU deals with the subsidies granted by external powers, namely through the recent Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR). Unusually in EU circles, this regulation reached unanimous consent.

Introduced due to concerns around Chinese and Russian companies, it has become a powerful enforcement tool. Among other obligations, it forces any company bidding for an EU public contract to disclose the amount of foreign contributions not only it received but its whole supply chain received over the past three years. Failure to comply can lead to fines up to 10 per cent of global turnover.

This creates a much stricter framework than that of state aid rules in the EU. The true objective behind this new piece of legislation, regardless of EU talks about transparency and a level playing field, is to discourage foreign companies from participating in these procedures.

It seems like the bloc is stacking protection on protection: more subsidies from insiders and more barriers against those that come from abroad. Dare we ask how this is supposed to strengthen European competitiveness?

Tomás Espuny Carreño
Maastricht, The Netherlands

Oh, for a Reliant Robin

I share Robert Shrimley's disdain for the big horrible car, the evil tax disincentives and the rest ("Is my SUV large enough?", *Spectrum*, April 25).

Furthermore, it may be amusing to note that the existence of potholes in our roads is the result of consumers turning to vehicles unforeseeably heavier than those in use at the time the standard-issue road was invented.

So the emergence of the SUV is not only an insult to our taste, but is having an outsized impact in eroding our built environment. In short order, we'll all be out looking for tank treads on our 10-ton "carillas" as the humble, sophisticated, thinking man's Smart car goes the way of the Reliant Robin.

Laurence Russell
London N5, UK

Correction

● In today's FT Wealth, a photo shows Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi, rather than his brother Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who is the Manchester City owner.

Opinion

BP should never have made Manifold chair

BUSINESS

John Gapper



Albert Manifold wasted no time stamping his authority on BP after becoming the UK energy company's chair last October. He soon replaced its chief executive, slimmed down its board of directors, refocused on oil and gas from renewables and shook the place up. "It's the Albert Manifold show," said one investor.

The Manifold show abruptly lost its main character this week as he was ejected by BP's board due to "serious concerns" over his behaviour, including accusations of bullying. "BP chair removed" was the headline on the announcement, which cited "unacceptable" conduct. It was as blunt as he can be himself.

Tensions in corporate boardrooms

are common, along with resignations of chairs or chief executives who lose in power struggles, but this is an unusually personal and public showdown. Manifold decried BP's "false narrative", saying that he was removed "without warning and without explanation" after BP's board met to consider staff whistleblower complaints.

He is not one to take criticism lying down: "I do not accept... that lies can be told about me," he said in a statement. Whatever happened, it is plain that BP's board should not have appointed him in the first place. It was no secret that the former chief executive of the Irish building materials group CRH was a dominant leader accustomed to being in full control.

His style worked well for CRH during his decade in charge, as the company transferred its primary listing from London to New York and its valuation surged. But BP is a larger and more complex enterprise in a different industry and he had not been a non-executive chair before. "I've never known a company take such a risk," said one City adviser to whom I spoke this week.

That was a widespread view as investors and executives of other companies mulled the affair. "This farrago does not fill one with confidence about the governance of BP," said one shareholder. The mood would be different if the company were stable but it has replaced two chief executives and two chairs in three years in a struggle to improve its performance.

Energy group's board took an optimistic gamble on his appointment without taking sufficient care

Some of the blame lies with Dame Amanda Blanc, chief executive of the insurance company Aviva. Blanc is senior independent director of BP's board and led the search for a successor to Helge Lund, BP's former chair. Announcing Manifold's selection last year, she praised his "relentless focus on performance". He turned out to be rather too relentless.

BP needs much of the medicine that Manifold prescribed, and the board was initially happy to recruit a tough change agent to remedy its drift. It suffered for a long time from a surfeit of vision and a paucity of operational focus, and was under pressure to improve matters from the activist hedge fund Elliott Management.

But one headhunter this week asked whether it did its due diligence. Manifold never had the aptitude to be a non-executive chair in the classic style of the UK corporate governance code. Rather than heading a board that oversaw its chief executive's strategy, he set his own direction, while recruiting Meg O'Neill from Woodside Energy as the new CEO.

There is a fair argument that the UK's system, with its division of power between non-executive chairs and chief executives, and balancing role for the senior independent director, is fussy and risk-averse. The imperial power of the combined chair and chief executive at many US companies, while open to abuse, has not done the US economy much harm.

But that was not the job description,

and BP now has a tough and determined chief executive in O'Neill. Blanc herself pulled off an impressive turnaround at Aviva and recently offered fulsome praise to George Culmer, its modest and effective chair: "The strength of relationship between chair and CEO is the bedrock [of] high performance."

Manifold calls the idea that he wanted to act as executive chair of BP "nonsense" and he did not get much chance to build a strong relationship with O'Neill, who started work in April. He must now repair his damaged reputation and so must BP's board, which looks like it jumped impetuously into an optimistic gamble on his appointment without taking sufficient care.

For UK governance aficionados, the affair shows the power of the senior independent director when things go wrong in the boardroom. Having led the search for Manifold on BP's nominations committee, Blanc is in line to do so again for his replacement. She should ask herself whether that is a good idea. BP needs a better outcome this time.

john.gapper@ft.com

Wirecard CEO's long detention violates his human rights

Kai Möller

Few public figures provoke as much hostility as Markus Braun, former CEO of defunct German payments company Wirecard. Understandably,

sympathy for someone accused of directing a fraud that led to billions in losses is in short supply. But my experience as a human rights lawyer has taught me it is in cases like these, where a person has already been convicted in the court of public opinion, that the risk of human rights violations is high and their protection matters most.

Last month, Braun's defence lawyer and I filed an application to the European Court of Human Rights arguing that nearly six years of detention for Braun involves a violation of his right to a trial within a reasonable time, his right to effective review of detention and the presumption of innocence. The decision to make an application to the European court was made following the German Federal Constitutional Court's refusal to hear the case.

Braun vigorously asserts that he is innocent but one does not need to take a view of his innocence or guilt to be shocked by the length of his detention. He was arrested in 2020 and the trial, still ongoing, started in 2022. This duration of detention before and during a trial is virtually without parallel across western democracies for white-collar defendants, with the single exception of a case from Poland where the European Court held that six years of pre-trial detention violated the European Convention on Human Rights.

Of course, detention is often neces-

After nearly six years, the presumption of innocence has been hollowed out and 'balanced away'

sary where there are risks of reoffending, flight or evidence tampering. Nevertheless, it is always problematic because it involves the state depriving a person of his or her liberty prior to a verdict. This tension becomes more acute the longer the detention lasts.

Detention before and during a trial that amounts to a substantial share of the expected sentence is not compatible with a functioning presumption of innocence: it is punishment under another name. German courts would disagree and invoke the principle of proportionality – a balance between the suspect's presumption of innocence and the interests of law enforcement – to determine whether continuing detention is justified. But after nearly six years, the presumption of innocence has been hollowed out and "balanced away".

In Germany, the damage that lengthy detention inflicts on the presumption of innocence and the fairness of the trial is compounded by a structural feature of the system itself. The presiding judge, together with the two other trial judges, who periodically authorise and review its continuation, are the same judges who will ultimately decide the defendant's guilt or innocence. Although their decision can be appealed, this situation nonetheless creates a deeply problematic psychological dynamic.

A judge who has ordered a defendant's imprisonment and reaffirmed that order at successive intervals faces, at the close of trial, an implicit reckoning: an acquittal would amount to a retrospective acknowledgment that years of incarceration were unwarranted. This creates the risk that every piece of evidence, every contested inference, every ambiguity will inevitably be filtered, whether consciously or not, through a disposition that favours conviction.

While it is obvious to me that almost six years of such detention violates Braun's fundamental rights, it is evidently not obvious to the German courts. Such divergent perspectives highlight the necessity of protecting human rights, domestically and internationally. If Braun succeeds before the European Court, this will help Germany address a blind spot in its criminal justice system. And such a victory would also remind us of the value of an institution that can hold states to account for abuses of power that domestic actors are unable to see.

The writer is a professor of human rights law at LSE and co-counsel for Markus Braun before the European Court of Human Rights

Farage is facing his own menace on the right

POLITICS

Robert Shrimley



If you don't spend your days on the site we once knew as Twitter, it is entirely possible that you have never heard of Rupert Lowe or his embryonic party Restore Britain. If, however, you linger on X you cannot avoid him, not least because he enjoys the support and algorithmic patronage of Elon Musk.

Lowe, a wealthy businessman, was one of Nigel Farage's new Reform UK MPs until he was thrown out, possibly because he, rather than his leader, was enjoying the Muskal benediction. At first he seemed just another in a long line of rivals turned into roadkill on the Farage freeway. But unlike others he has the wherewithal and online support – at least as important as X are his 1.2m Facebook followers – to fight back.

And the fight is personal for him. He depicts Reform's leader as a weak compromiser. Where Farage tiptoed towards his party's policy on deportations, Lowe talks cheerfully about removing "millions" of people.

Now, Restore is showing signs of breaking out from its digital realm and Lowe's Norfolk stronghold. It is garnering enough interest to threaten Reform's chances against Labour's Andy Burn-

ham in June's Makerfield by-election. Focus groups and anecdotal evidence suggest a surprising degree of support.

After decades of menacing the Tories from the right, Farage is facing his own threat from the fringe. And Lowe is using Farage's attention-seeking playbook to build traction. It would be funny if it weren't so troubling.

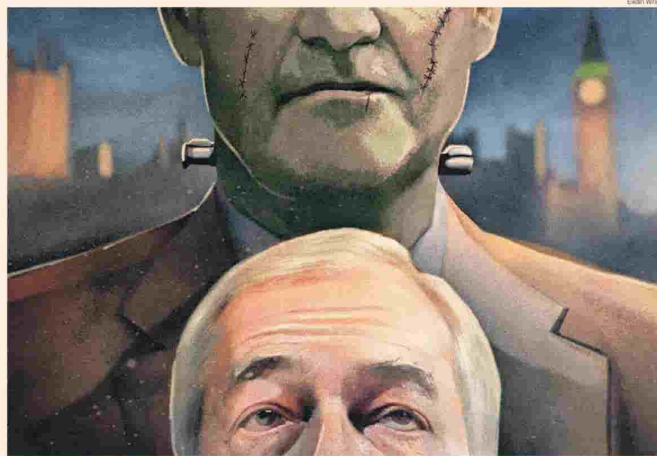
It is still early days, not least in Makerfield. But Farage and his allies are visibly rattled, especially by the support from Musk. If Lowe keeps them scared it could have wider consequences, not least by forcing Farage into a strategic choice he has worked hard to avoid.

Restore's pitch is a more hardline offering, one even more hostile to immigrants in both rhetoric and detail. It draws enthusiasm from openly racist and antisemitic white nationalist groups – the kind who once flocked to the far-right British National Party.

The more of a threat it appears, the greater the pressure on Farage to match its approach to shore up his base. And Reform's policies, toughened in the past year, are already pretty hardline. It proposes deporting not just criminals or illegal entrants but also legal migrants yet to secure citizenship, who claim benefits or fail to meet income thresholds.

But Farage has managed to tread a line, policing his boundaries by refusing to work with far-right figures such as Tommy Robinson. He has Muslims in prominent party roles though Reform evinces strong anti-Islamic prejudice.

Farage argues that he is the safety valve that destroyed Britain's far right.



Ewan White

But he also knew their supporters would probably vote for him anyway. Reform is not doing so well that it can afford to lose too many of them if they find a purer alternative home.

Lowe's threat is akin to that posed by Eric Zemmour to Marine Le Pen in France, though with a less forgiving electoral system. Farage does not fear being superseded but in a world of multi-party politics even a small split could cost him seats. In 2010 the BNP secured at least 5 per cent in 71 constituencies. If Lowe equalled that he could deny Farage many target seats. So what do do?

For all its current ascendancy and electoral success, Reform appears stuck in the mid-to-high twenties in the polls. Recent elections have also shown voters rallying round other parties to defeat

So far he has avoided choosing between Reform's two faces. Restore Britain could threaten that

Farage. The next election may come down to whether the key issue for voters is ousting Labour or blocking him.

For now Farage can dismiss Restore as a vote-splitting one-man band. But if it gains ground he must decide whether to move right to counter it. Immigration is his cornerstone issue. He dare not cede it to a rival. And Farage's instincts default towards more hardline positions when he is worried.

Until now Farage has pursued a wider strategy of combining revolution with reassurance, convincing voters not to fear him. He wants to be seen as both a better Conservative Party and a radical new force tearing down the old system.

With no serious threat to his right, Farage has focused on reassurance, talking of Reform as a "centre-right" party. He has promoted high-profile Tory defectors despite the unease of older members. Chasing Lowe risks alienating moderate voters. So far Farage has avoided choosing between Reform's two faces. Restore could threaten that.

A confident Farage would hang tough and bet on squeezing Lowe at a general

election. He could treat it as an opportunity, using Restore as a decontamination chamber to make his own party look less extreme, proof that he remains within the, admittedly shifting, boundaries of political decency. Even defeat in Makerfield can be used as a warning against splitting the right vote. But he would have to hold his nerve.

Opponents of Farage will welcome the prospect of his vote fracturing, of the revolutionary right eating itself. Lowe could be the best thing to happen to Labour since universal suffrage. But it comes with a cost. The boundaries of debate have already changed sharply. Anti-immigrant, particularly anti-Muslim, sentiment is open and normalised. Reform and the Tories have already moved significantly, both adopting deportation strategies. A buoyant Restore could shift them further.

Much will depend on how frightened Farage feels. But the last thing a polarised nation needs is a new bidding war on the anti-immigrant right.

robert.shrimley@ft.com

The Pope disrupts Silicon Valley

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



Pope Leo was perturbed. The speed of change was dizzying. The elements of conflict were unmistakable: the vast expansion of industry, the marvellous discoveries of science, the changing relations between employers and workers, the enormous fortunes being made amid mass poverty and prevailing moral degeneracy. The gravity of the situation "fills every mind with painful apprehension", he wrote in his landmark papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things) in 1891.

Exactly 135 years later, the current Pope Leo, who chose his papal name in honour of his predecessor, issued his own encyclical echoing similar fears about the disruptive power of technology and the urgency of a moral

response. His letter, *Magnifica Humanitas* (Magnificent Humanity), focused on safeguarding the human in the time of AI. Everyone must benefit from the digital transformation, he said, while no one should be reduced to "productivity", "cognitive performance" or "mere data". AI should therefore be "disarmed" and must not become an instrument of "domination, exclusion or death".

The encyclical is worth a considered read. But three points in particular leap out.

First, the Pope is not antagonistic to technology. Indeed, he embraces it. Besides being a fan of Duolingo and Wordle himself, the Vatican uses AI to provide translations of his homilies in 60 languages. He acknowledges that AI can accelerate scientific progress and improve life for all. But he argues that it is not morally neutral and must be designed within an ethical framework from its inception. "Let us not be afraid to get our hands dirty on the 'construction site' of our time," he wrote.

Second, no matter how novel the technology, humanity should always

strive to preserve precious human values. (You would expect that one from the Pope.) AI systems may present themselves as objective but they reflect and reinforce ideological biases and power structures. Given the concentration of corporate power and the possibilities of exploiting personal data to create a new form of digital colonialism, the Pope rightly fears that innovation can become an accelerator of injustice.

He is grappling with the serious challenges of AI in ways that the US president is choosing to ignore

Third, the world's most influential American spiritual leader, who holds sway over 1.4bn Catholics, is grappling with the serious challenges of AI in ways that its most powerful American secular leader, the US president, is choosing to ignore. Shortly after the Pope issued his 42,300-word letter, Donald Trump scrapped a minimalist executive order

that would have subjected frontier AI models to testing before their release.

The participation of Chris Olah, a co-founder of Anthropic, in the presentation of the encyclical shows that at least some in Silicon Valley are prepared to engage in the debate. Olah warned that every frontier AI lab – including Anthropic – operated within a set of incentives and constraints that sometimes conflicted with doing the right thing. "We need moral voices that the incentives cannot bend," he said.

Other tech bros, though, are already brushing off the papal message. As they see it, Silicon Valley is disrupting the divinity industry, just like all the others, and it is natural for the Vatican to defend its turf.

Yet the Pope showed he was prepared to mix it up a bit, too. He attacked both the transhumanism and posthumanism that are developing cult-like followings in some AI circles. And in a classy piece of papal trolling, he quoted Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*, a text more resonant than the Bible for many technologists, on the nature of responsibility. That appeared squarely aimed at the

US military drone and data companies Anduril and Palantir, which both take their names from JRR Tolkien's works.

Addressing the dangers of killer robots, the Pope warned that AI risked lowering the threshold for violence, rushing military commanders into acting on threat predictions and reducing victims to data. His clear red line was that it is not permissible to entrust lethal decisions to artificial systems. To many, the Pope's reflections will appear unworried, but that is part of his job. And that only made his final appeal more telling in his call for "authentic realism". Idealists tend to bend the facts to confirm their worldview. Cynics despair of any positive change, believing that force will always prevail.

But authentic realists do not give up on changing the world for the better. Instead, they painstakingly persist in pursuing the common good through credible institutions, verifiable guarantees, patient negotiations, conflict prevention and the protection of civilians. Amen to that.

john.thornhill@ft.com

COMMENT

Editorials

South China Sea not the arena for extra-regional actors to flex muscles

The recent incursion by the Dutch frigate HNLMS *De Ruyter* into waters around China's Xisha Islands, compounded by the violation of China's airspace by a helicopter, necessitated a firm response from the Chinese People's Liberation Army Southern Theater Command. Through verbal warnings and electronic jamming, the Chinese side effectively expelled the vessel, demonstrating its resolve to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As a spokesman for China's Ministry of National Defense said, the blatant provocation and meddling by the extra-regional country in the South China Sea deserve serious condemnation. The Dutch side's behavior infringing on China's territorial sovereignty and sea and air security, violated international law and the basic norms of international relations, undermined the peace and stability of the South China Sea, and could have caused a serious misunderstanding and misjudgment.

Yet, the latest incident was merely the tip of the iceberg. The Report on the Military Activities of Non-US Extra-Regional Countries in the Western Pacific in 2025, released on Tuesday by the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative, paints a troubling picture. Extra-regional countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Canada and Australia, increased the frequency of their military activities in the Western Pacific last year.

The report said about 200 warships from 18 external countries operated in the region last year under the excuse of exercising "freedom of navigation" or safeguarding a "free and open Indo-Pacific", with their military aircraft flying over 20,000 sorties. One does not have to be a military expert to recognize that such a high frequency raises the risk of escalation.

The South China Sea is increasingly used as a venue for geopolitical posturing, where countries from outside the region present a show of force to align with the "Indo-Pacific" strategy of the United States with the aim of containing China.

The involvement of countries from outside the region, such as the Netherlands, is not a demonstration of naval prowess; it is a provocative act

aimed at undermining the trust and cooperation that regional countries are painstakingly trying to maintain.

Extra-regional countries may not fully grasp the risks of their aggressive behavior, but their actions have the potential to set off a chain of events that escalate into conflict, which no party desires.

There is a glaring hypocrisy in the actions of these countries. While they claim their missions are about promoting "freedom of navigation" and "maritime security", their intrusion into China's territorial waters is intended to weaken international maritime cooperation. Instead of fostering a collaborative environment to maintain peace, these extra-regional actors are creating divisions and mistrust among regional countries. This divisive approach seeks to hamper efforts to build a cohesive regional framework for addressing the myriad challenges facing the South China Sea.

China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations member countries are accelerating their steps in negotiating a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, aiming to usher in lasting peace and stability in the waters. On May 21, they convened the 26th ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The parties attending the meeting affirmed the positive progress made in the consultations on the COC and agreed to work toward its early conclusion. To continue advancing the COC consultations, China and ASEAN countries also held the 55th meeting of the Joint Working Group on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea last week.

The provocative actions of non-regional countries in the South China Sea will only consolidate China's resolve to defend its rights and interests. If they continue the dangerous moves, the cost will be borne not only by themselves but also by regional countries.

Peace and stability in the South China Sea can only come from dialogue and cooperation, not from reckless showboating that risks tripping the wire of confrontation.

Secessionists' 'word game' belies their anxiety

Recent remarks and actions by the secessionist-minded Democratic Progressive Party authorities of China's Taiwan region once again reveal their persistent attempts to distort history, confuse public understanding and advance their separatist agenda under various guises.

From the repeated claim that "Taiwan has never been ruled by the People's Republic of China" to renewed rhetoric advocating "Taiwan independence", the essence of these moves remains unchanged: seeking to undermine the one-China principle and obstruct the historical trend toward China's national reunification.

At a recent news conference, Chen Binhua, spokesman for the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, reiterated the unequivocal truth that Taiwan has been an inseparable part of China since ancient times. Although the two sides of the Strait have yet to achieve reunification, China's sovereignty and territorial integrity have never been divided. The two sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China with the Government of the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate representative of the whole of China.

Historical facts and international law provide no room for distortion. The Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation and United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 all confirm China's sovereignty over the Taiwan region.

Any attempt by the DPP authorities to confuse the concepts of "jurisdiction" and "sovereignty" is merely a political trick designed to fabricate a false basis for separatist activities.

The recent separatist rhetoric by Lai Ching-te, head of the DPP authorities, as evidenced by his May 20 speech marking the second anniversary of his tenure, in which he falsely portrayed his authorities as the "protector of regional peace and stability", further exposes the dangerous nature of the DPP authorities' agenda. These remarks appear to be less an expression of confidence than an anxious attempt to test the boundaries of external support, particularly from the United States.

These performances by Lai — including his brazen denial that he is pursuing "Taiwan independence" — are all reactive responses to external shifts. US President Donald Trump's recent remarks concerning the Taiwan region might have shattered the fantasy of some "Taiwan independence" seekers, as

some observers say. "We're not looking to have somebody say, 'Let's go independent because the United States is backing us,'" Trump said in an interview following his state visit to China from May 13 to 15. After that, the US suspended certain arms-sale arrangements to the island, leading to a sense of strategic unease among the Lai authorities.

Against this backdrop, the so-called "Formosa Alliance", a political group long advocating "Taiwan independence" on the Chinese island, issued an open letter indicating its willingness to consider participation in cross-strait negotiations under conditions such as "Taiwan people govern Taiwan" and "a high degree of autonomy".

Such rhetoric does not represent a genuine embrace of national reunification. Rather, it reflects the growing anxiety among some separatist groups, as they realize that the space previously granted to them by external forces is narrowing. Their proposal attempts to disguise separatist intentions with new packaging while continuing to challenge the one-China principle by imposing political preconditions.

As Chen emphasized, any proposition that seeks to pursue "Taiwan independence" under the banner of "autonomy", "two Chinas", or "one China, one Taiwan", fundamentally runs counter to the shared interests of the Chinese nation. No matter how such ideas are repackaged, they cannot alter the reality that "Taiwan independence" is a dead end.

Beneath the great lengths the separatist forces go to in a bid to disguise their agenda lies a recognition that, amid the overwhelming comparative strength and development momentum of the Chinese mainland, their secessionist fantasies lack both legitimacy and practical viability.

Under the political foundation of adhering to the one-China principle and upholding the 1992 Consensus, the Chinese mainland remains willing to strengthen cross-strait economic and trade cooperation, expand people-to-people exchanges and deepen integrated development to benefit compatriots on both sides of the Strait.

The future of Taiwan lies in China's national reunification, and the well-being of Taiwan compatriots depends on the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. No external force can stop the historical trend toward China's reunification, and no separatist scheme can shake the common aspirations of the Chinese people on both sides of the Strait.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

Takeaway from Sino-German economic relations for Brussels

When Germany's Economic Affairs and Energy Minister Katherina Reiche arrived in Beijing this week with a 40-member business delegation, she carried a message Brussels would do well to heed before its Friday debate on new trade restrictions targeting China's alleged "overcapacity".

Germany, Europe's largest economy and its industrial engine, understands something increasingly lost in Brussels' geopolitical rhetoric: Europe's prosperity is deeply intertwined with China's market, supply chains and innovation ecosystem.

The European Union cannot safeguard against what it deems "unfair practices" by damaging its own export industries or blocking channels of cooperation with the world's second-largest economy. It is arithmetic. China and Germany conducted roughly 250 billion euros (\$290.20 billion) in goods trade in 2025 — accounting for about 33.2 percent of China-EU trade that year, with China remaining Germany's largest trading partner for several consecutive years. Around 5,000 German companies operate in China. German investment in China exceeded 7 billion euros in 2025, reportedly up nearly 50 percent from the previous year and the highest level in four years. At the same time, Chinese investment projects in Germany surpassed those from the United States. These are the numbers of two major economies adapting to a more competitive but still mutually beneficial relationship.

Chinese Vice-Premier He Lifeng and Commerce Minister Wang Wentao used their respective talks with Reiche on Wednesday as opportunities to deepen industrial integration. Both emphasized the compatibility between China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) priorities — digitalization, green development and industrial upgrading — and Germany's Industry 4.0 ambitions and low-carbon transition.

That convergence is real. Europe's green transition, from electric vehicles to renewable energy grids, depends heavily on access to competitively priced Chinese technologies and critical materials. Reiche acknowledged what many European politicians hesitate to say publicly: China has become one of the world's major industrial and innovation centers in robotics, artificial intelligence, batteries and renewable energy. Europe can either engage with that reality or try to fence it off. Some people in Brussels seem tempted to do the latter.

The European Commission's toolbox — from expanded safeguards to broader trade-defense mechanisms and restrictions on Chinese technology suppliers — risks confusing competitiveness with protectionism. Such measures may offer short-term political advantages, but they will inflict long-term economic costs on Europe itself, especially on export-oriented economies such as Germany.

European restrictions on high-tech exports to China artificially suppress European exports while inflating the "imbalance" Brussels now condemns.

Nor should China's manufacturing strength be reduced to "overcapacity"

or "subsidies". Much of the cost-performance advantage of Chinese products comes from scale, relentless competition, infrastructure efficiency and rapid innovation cycles that benefit European consumers and industries enormously at a time of high energy costs and sluggish growth.

Europe did not become a technological powerhouse by shielding itself from competition. It succeeded by embracing openness, fostering industrial ecosystems and competing vigorously. If the EU hopes to remain relevant in the ongoing tech revolution, it must redouble its efforts to foster rather than retreat behind regulatory walls.

That requires reciprocity from both sides. China is committed to providing a fair and nondiscriminatory business environment for European companies operating in China, something the German business leaders accompanying Reiche acknowledge. Similarly, Chinese companies deserve nondiscriminatory treatment in Europe.

Reiche's visit, following German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's earlier trip to China, suggests that Berlin still sees dialogue as preferable to confrontation. The broader EU should resist allowing strategic anxieties to override economic self-interest.

Europe does not need to agree with China on everything to trade successfully with it. But it does need to remember that prosperity, especially in difficult economic times, is usually built through win-win cooperation and managed competition, not through fear of either.

— LIYANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

New rule to support settled migrant workers

Editor's note: The State Council has issued a new guideline aimed at gradually increasing basic public services for residents without a local household registration. Shi Yulong, director of the Research Center on Xi Jinping's Economic Thought, and Gao Guoli, director of the China Center for Urban Development, explained why such measures are necessary. Below are excerpts of their comments as reported by the People's Daily. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

This guideline helps better align the allocation of public service resources with the scale, structure and needs of permanent residents. It will also help rural populations who migrated to cities integrate into the urban environment.

It outlines measures across key areas such as education, housing, social security, medical insurance, employment and social assistance, addressing the pressing concerns of permanent residents without a local hukou. This initiative is important for promoting these people's equal access to basic public services and advancing the people-centered new urbanization strategy.

By the end of 2025, some 130 million rural migrant workers were residing in urban areas. Some of them live with their children and elderly family members. Their primary concerns are stable employment, children's education, housing and social insurance.

A large number of such people live and work in cities for extended peri-

ods while their household registrations remain elsewhere. Ensuring that they have equal access to basic public services where they live is essential for improving the quality of urbanization.

The implementation of the guideline will help stabilize these people's expectations, allowing them to settle down and pursue a promising future, thus translating the vitality generated by population mobility into stronger domestic demand.

Cities and counties that see a net inflow of population generally have sound economic foundations and abundant job opportunities. They host a large number of rural migrant workers and people moving between cities, leading to a strong demand for public services, including basic education and housing. But the supply of these services often falls short.

These regions need to balance the fairness, accessibility and sustainability of public services that are short in supply, and work toward their tiered supply. The duration of a person's

employment and residence in the area should be a main criterion for the provision of these public services.

On the other hand, cities and counties witnessing a decline in their population usually have weaker industrial bases and insufficient capacity to create jobs. In some of these regions, public service resources are at risk of underutilization.

These areas should focus on forecasting the total number of permanent residents, the demographic structure and mobility trends, and on continuously improving the construction, operation and management of service facilities to ensure that resources are efficiently allocated.

Given the varying fiscal capacity and the number of migrants across regions, authorities should take proactive but measured steps when expanding basic public services to residents without local household registration. This approach will help them maximize their efforts without overstressing their resources.

CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

China Daily
15 Huxin Dongjie Chaoyang District,
Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366
editor@chinadaily.com.cn
Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631
ads@chinadaily.com.cn
Subscription: +86 400-699-0203
subscription.chinadaily.com.cn
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

China Daily UK
90 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chinadailyuk.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
Unit 1818, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan
Praya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2388 3111
editor@chinadailyhk.com
editor@chinadailyasia.com

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036
+1 212 537 8888
editor@chinadailyusa.com

China Daily Africa
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254 (0) 20 622 9920 (Nairobi)
editor@chinadailyafrica.com
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

VIEWS

Hun Kim

Mobilizing private capital to scale digital infrastructure

Digital infrastructure is the backbone of economic growth, but investment in this space has been uneven.

Many developing economies are struggling to expand basic digital connectivity while preparing for the artificial intelligence era, resulting in a double digital divide: inadequate basic access for hundreds of millions, compounded by growing gaps in AI readiness.

Limited affordable broadband connectivity, unreliable digital services, insufficient access to essential devices, and unstable electricity supply are long-standing challenges faced by developing economies.

Despite increasing investment in AI infrastructure worldwide, the foundational connectivity network needed for AI readiness remains underfunded.

Internet access directly correlates with national development levels.

High-income economies have achieved near-universal internet access, at around 94 percent, but low-income countries have reached only about 23 percent. This disparity not only slows AI adoption but also exacerbates inequity by denying AI's benefits to those without basic connectivity.

Investment tends to focus on capital-intensive, top-tier digital assets such as data centers, cloud and AI infrastructure while foundational connectivity remains underfunded. This gap risks widening rather than narrowing societal and economic inequality.

Multilateral development banks should view digital infrastructure not as a discrete asset class but as an interconnected ecosystem with multiple layers: the foundational layer, the enabling layer, the cloud layer, and the application layer.

Private capital naturally gravitates toward segments with predictable demand, scalable operations and bankable returns, such as the cloud layer.

However, in rural and low-income areas, there is not enough commercial incentive for network expansion, a problem exacerbated by fragmented regulation, uncertain licensing and limited institutional capacity.

Thus, digital inclusion becomes more of a financing and coordination challenge.

Development stakeholders must structure risk frameworks that enable private capital to scale while strategically and efficiently deploying public resources to support segments currently unviable for market investment.

A credible enabling environment requires stable and transparent rules, predictable licensing and reliable legal protection.

Multilateral development banks, or MDBs, help borrowing members build this credibility by standardizing fragmented regulations, strengthening local institutional capacity and reducing political and regulatory risks.

When the enabling environment is credible and sustainable digital service demand is secured, the private sector can deliver impact at a scale far exceeding investments traditionally led by the public sector.

Without these conditions, even well-designed projects may remain unbankable, leading to underinvestment in regions with the greatest development needs.

India and Indonesia illustrate how infrastructure sequencing and capital structure design can drive inclusive digital expansion. India prioritized foundational connectivity, leveraging state-directed and quasi-public models to build nationwide infrastructure,

including rural broadband access.

As market scale deepened and digital adoption accelerated, the government rolled out incentives, including long-term central tax exemptions, state electricity duty exemptions, concessional power tariffs, and single-window fast-track regulatory clearances to mobilize private investment.

This created a virtuous cycle: broad connectivity fueled adoption, adoption strengthened demand, and demand directed private capital to higher-return digital assets.

In Indonesia, where terrestrial networks incur high marginal costs to reach remote communities and project economics deteriorate rapidly beyond major urban corridors, catalytic development finance played a pivotal role in early connectivity expansion.

A notable example is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank's non-sovereign support for Indonesia's Multifunctional Satellite Public-Private Partnership project, which connected underserved regions overlooked by commercial financiers.

As Indonesia's digital market matured, data-center expansion shifted toward more bankable sites and structured partnerships that derisked investments.

These instances show that success depends less on choosing a "one-size-fits-all" technology and more on aligning infrastructure sequencing, incentive frameworks and risk allocation across the entire digital ecosystem.

Three dimensions will shape the future of digital infrastructure scaling in Asia: expanding beyond bankable segments to close the access gap, building enabling ecosystems and enhancing collaboration between MDBs.

Robust regulatory frameworks are essen-

tial for scaling digital public infrastructure.

MDBs should align efforts to catalyze private investment, not compete with it. By pooling expertise, resources and risk appetite, MDBs can accelerate the development of bankable projects and expand access to digital infrastructure for the next billion users.

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank adopts a layered, ecosystem-driven approach that prioritizes technology-enabled infrastructure for the AI era while advancing inclusive growth.

It supports commercially viable backbone networks, broadband expansion and data centers and attracts private investment to underserved communities.

It also partners with governments to build digital public infrastructure through policy modules and implementation templates.

Asia's digital infrastructure gap should be seen as an investable opportunity, not a

cost burden.

The central problem is not a lack of investor interest in digital infrastructure but a concentration of capital in the compute layer that overshadows foundational connectivity.

To bridge this gap, it is essential to align the roles of different stakeholders.

Governments should establish credible, inclusive regulatory frameworks and strategically invest in segments unviable for market delivery.

The private sector needs to innovate and scale investments where demand exists and risks are priced transparently. MDBs have to convene stakeholders, derisk projects, and reduce transaction costs to accelerate the development of bankable projects.

With coordinated action, Asia can narrow the double digital divide and expand digital opportunities to the next billion users, unlocking inclusive and sustainable growth for decades to come.

The author is the chief partnerships officer of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY



Chen Weihua

The author is a China Daily columnist. chenweihua@chinadaily.com.cn

China-Serbia ties a good example for the world

The five-day state visit to China by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic from May 24 to 28 was the best reflection of China's diplomatic principles, including the long-standing Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence — mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

The grand reception Vucic received in Beijing shows that China is committed to treating all countries, regardless of size, with equal respect.

This was further highlighted when President Xi Jinping awarded Vucic the Friendship Medal at the Great Hall of the People, the highest honor bestowed on foreign nationals by China.

Vucic is a deserving recipient of the medal for his significant contributions to promoting China-Serbia friendship and advancing bilateral ties.

The medal is also an appreciation for Serbia's independent foreign policy as a sovereign nation in international affairs.

Having spent nearly seven years in Brussels covering the European Union, I understand the pressure Serbia faces from the EU.

Maintaining an independent foreign policy that does not fully align with Brussels is challenging for any national leader, especially for Serbia, an EU candidate country since 2012.

Unlike some other major powers, China has never interfered in the internal affairs of Serbia or any other country, always treating them with full respect and equality.

Unlike many EU leaders, Vucic has consistently urged diplomatic solutions to end the Russia-Ukraine conflict. He has also advocated closer cooperation with China.

He used Serbia's positive experience to illustrate how the partnership with China has brought concrete benefits to ordinary people, workers and families.

It sends a clear message to other European countries that de-risking or protectionist strategies do not serve anyone's interests.

During my visits to Serbia, I witnessed the active participation of Chinese companies in the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest railway and various other infrastructure projects.

The more than 20 cooperation documents signed this week between the two governments will take bilateral cooperation to a higher level.

The two countries aim to tap the huge potential by aligning China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) and the Serbia 2030 national development agenda.

Unlike some other major powers, China has never interfered in the internal affairs of Serbia or any other country, always treating them with full respect and equality.

The same principle is reflected in China's decision to grant zero-tariff treatment from May 1 to exports from 53 African countries with which it has diplomatic relations.

It is worth noting that the agreement signed between China and Serbia to promote the implementation of China's four global initiatives — on global development, global security, global civilization and global governance — is extremely significant not just for the two countries but also for the entire world.

These initiatives aim to rally the international community to address many acute challenges facing the world today and make it a better place for every country.

That is also why Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his address at a meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York on Wednesday, emphasized the need to reinvigorate global development cooperation to strengthen mobilization, and revitalize global governance platforms to enhance their capacity for effective execution.

It's no secret that China and Serbia are quite different in culture, history, religion, political systems, and the size of their territory, population and economy.

They are also more than 7,000 kilometers apart. But that does not prevent the two countries from developing a strong mutually beneficial relationship based on equality and mutual respect.

It's a partnership that serves as an exemplary model of international relations.

Chen Xiancai

DPP disguising separatist agenda as democracy

Taiwan leader Lai Ching-te has recently been peddling his so-called "green democracy" rhetoric.

By placing "democracy" at the center of his narrative, he is trying to inject an ideology-driven binary framework of confrontation into cross-strait relations and the geopolitical situation in the Taiwan Strait.

This exposes his intention to involve external forces in manipulating the Taiwan question on the international stage.

A closer look at Lai's rhetoric shows that the Democratic Progressive Party's "green democracy" is essentially "Taiwan independence" in disguise.

In a recent speech, he repeatedly claimed that Taiwan stands at the "frontline of democracy," thus creating an atmosphere of confrontation across the Taiwan Strait.

By bypassing the core legal issue of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and drawing ideological lines in the name of "democratic values," the DPP authorities are once again using their familiar tactic of attempting to "internationalize" the Taiwan question.

Lai's actions are nothing but an attempt to pursue separatism under the banner of democracy. In doing so, he hollows out the true meaning of democracy itself.

His "green democracy" rhetoric, a political trick long used by the DPP, is riddled with double standards.

The DPP authorities present Taiwan as a vulnerable party in order to win international sympathy.

For example, in his speech, Lai mentioned the so-called flight obstruction incident during his recent visit to Eswatini, using it to portray himself as a "victim" of "rule-breaking," while accusing the Chinese mainland of "interfering with civil aviation order."

But the DPP authorities ignore the fact that the international community widely upholds the one-China principle. Their attempt to create "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" is itself a challenge to the existing international order.

Lai not only unilaterally tests the red line broadly recognized by the international community, but when his attempts meet resistance, he turns around and accuses others of breaking the rules.

In other words, when rules serve its political interests, the DPP loudly calls for respect for order.

But when those same rules stand in the way of its separatist schemes, it labels them political pressure. If this is not double standards, what is?

"Green democracy" is harmful to Taiwan. In his speech, Lai dragged the semiconductor and artificial intelligence industries into political confrontation and called for the building of so-called "democratic supply chains." Technological devel-

opment and global trade have always depended on market rules and comparative advantage. Yet Taiwan's core industrial strengths are now being forcibly tied to specific political camps in an attempt to build exclusive technology barriers.

This move not only violates the principles of free trade, but also drags the global semiconductor supply chain into geopolitical rivalry.

The DPP authorities claim they are contributing to global economic prosperity, but in reality they are making the global technology industry bear the cost of tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

Worse still, they are turning the economic lifeline on which Taiwan residents depend into a bargaining chip against reunification.

Using bloc confrontation to interfere with market operations will inevitably weaken Taiwan's long-term industrial competitiveness. In the end, it is the Taiwan economy and residents of the island who will pay the price.

"Green democracy" is also deeply hypocritical. Lai loudly promotes Taiwan as a "beacon of democracy" and talks about "freedom," but since taking office, the DPP authorities have deliberately stirred up social conflict and division on the island.

They have even imposed "green terror" on groups and individuals who support cross-strait exchanges, dialogue and

peaceful development.

By creating social division and targeting political opponents, the DPP is seeking to consolidate its power base.

The outside world can see the true nature of its so-called "green democracy." Once the rhetorical disguise of Lai's "green democracy" is stripped away, the historical context of cross-strait relations is clear, and the direction of development is beyond doubt.

The one-China principle is the political foundation for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Once this foundation is removed, no amount of military equipment or "democracy" rhetoric can bring lasting security to Taiwan.

People on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are bound by blood. Only by promoting the peaceful development of cross-strait relations and deepening integrated development in various fields can the real interests of Taiwan residents be served.

Separatist schemes that go against the trend of history have no realistic support. Blind faith in external promises and polished rhetoric will ultimately collapse before the tide of history.

It is time for the DPP's "green democracy" farce to end.

The author is the director of the Center for Taiwan Studies at Xiamen University. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.