



West Asia on fire

India should oppose the U.S. attempt to widen the war to the Indian Ocean

Six days after the unprovoked, illegal Israeli-American war against Iran began, West Asia has descended into chaos. When U.S. President Donald Trump launched the war, killing Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, other leaders and at least 160 schoolchildren, he called on Iranians to overthrow the Islamic Republic and take over state institutions. That did not happen. Iran retaliated by targeting Israel as well as American bases, assets and missions in the Persian Gulf region. Satellite image-based analyses suggest that Iran has struck communication and radar structures at seven U.S. military sites. Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group, also joined the war with rocket attacks on northern Israel. In Iraq, pro-Iran militias have struck American assets in Erbil and other areas. The U.S. has confirmed that at least six service personnel were killed and three fighter jets were lost in Kuwaiti "friendly fire", according to the Pentagon. On March 4, the U.S. expanded the theatre of war to the Indian Ocean by torpedoing an Iranian warship, *IRIS Dena*, off Sri Lanka, killing at least 83 personnel. The ship was in the region for last week's International Fleet Review off Visakhapatnam. If Mr. Trump and his ally Benjamin Netanyahu believed that Khamenei's killing would lead to a collapse of Iran's government, the result has instead been an all-out regional war.

Neither side has shown any willingness to step back. U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth said on Wednesday that the conflict could last up to eight weeks. Ali Larjani, Iran's security chief, has ruled out talks with the U.S. and American media have reported that Washington is considering arming ethnic Kurdish militias in Iran's northwest to provoke internal unrest. This is a dangerous game. It appears that Mr. Trump launched the war without an exit strategy. As the Iranian state and its institutions show no signs of cracking, the U.S. has turned to massive bombardment and the prospect of fuelling civil strife in a country that it promised to "liberate" from clerical rule only days ago. If the war drags on, Mr. Trump is likely to face growing domestic resistance, with sections of his far-right base already calling it "Israel's war". For India, rising oil and gas prices will add to the burden on its economy, while a widening war could threaten the economic and physical security of the millions of Indians living in the region. New Delhi, which initially did not condemn the assassination of Khamenei, the leader of a friendly country, should take a more emphatic stand against the war and work with other powers to de-escalate the conflict. India should also strongly oppose U.S. attempts to bring the war to its backyard.

One for all

The DMK has managed to keep a major alliance partner happy

After the drama that lasted over a month over the issue of seat sharing for the Tamil Nadu Assembly election, the ruling DMK and its long-standing ally, the Congress, have done well by reaching an understanding without leaving room for rancour. Senior party leaders including Mallikarjun Kharge, P. Chidambaram and Kammoji helped both sides iron out their differences. The deal is now key for the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA) to finalise seat-sharing with other constituents, as the Congress is the coalition's second-largest member. Given that the DMK is negotiating with more smaller parties than before, the Congress should consider the allotment of 28 Assembly seats and one Rajya Sabha seat a fair deal. In the 2021 polls, it contested 25 seats, 16 lower than the DMK tally. But, significant political changes in the State happened as almost all anti-BJP parties have rallied behind the DMK since then. Although the Congress and the DMK have contested elections together since 2016, with much success, the presence of the fledgling Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), led by actor Vijay, in the fray had prompted some Congress leaders to suggest aligning with the TVK which was open to a coalition regime — an idea not acceptable to the DMK and its traditional adversary, the AIADMK. Being a new force, it could offer more seats to the Congress than the DMK, along with power sharing. Apart from questions about the probability of success of such an electoral tie-up, Congress-DMK ties cannot be merely viewed in terms of numbers or the pursuit of power sharing.

The national party knows well the importance of the regional party in its scheme of things to improve its position, at the all-India level, if not get back to the original strength. In the general elections in 2019 and 2024, the SPA defeated the AIADMK and the BJP. Besides, the DMK, which its firm against the idea of a coalition government, swiftly fulfilled the Congress's demand for Rajya Sabha seats — now and in 2022; in contrast, Jammu and Kashmir's National Conference had, last October, offered a Rajya Sabha seat to the Congress despite unfavourable numbers. Along with its ability to transfer the most number of votes from Scheduled Castes and religious minorities in Tamil Nadu's southern districts, the DMK requires the Grand Old Party to flag, at the national level, issues concerning States in general and Tamil Nadu in particular, as the BJP-led Centre tries to limit the space for States. The Dravidian major and its leader, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, deserve commendation for having managed the allies well, with no grievances apparent. With a strong alliance in place, the SPA retains an edge over the AIADMK-led National Democratic Alliance in the State (it includes the BJP) despite anti-incumbency and a strong challenge from the TVK.

A selection of articles on the Editorial and Opinion pages, curated for International Women's Day on March 8

Transforming representation into real change by 2029

In 2029, India will have the most gender-representative Parliament in its history. The Women's Reservation Act will reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha for women — the largest single expansion of political representation this country has ever legislated. This moment has been decades in the making. If the next three years are squandered, it will not deliver what it promises.

There is an immediacy Representation without an agenda is just presence. The women who walk into Parliament in 2029 will change what gets discussed only if the issues that matter to them have already been named, fought for, and demanded loudly enough to become political priorities. That work cannot begin in 2029. It has to begin now. And there is no issue more urgent, more invisible, or more ready to be addressed than this: India lacks a policy framework for elder care that clearly accounts for women — and there is no political tradition of demanding one.

Gauri is one of millions of women in India for whom this is not a policy abstraction. Her eighty-three-year-old mother lives alone in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, ageing the way most Indian women do: quietly, trying to hold on to her innate dignity, with almost no support from the state. Gauri travels back when she can, handling immediate emergencies and worrying about the rest — like so many daughters and daughters-in-law who hold two worlds together simultaneously. What keeps Gauri up at night is not the exhaustion. It is the recognition that she could end up ageing like her mother the same way. And she is done accepting that quietly.

What Gauri wants, for her mother, and for herself, is a state that builds the guardrails for women to age with dignity. She wants elder care



Barkha Deva

works on policy for dignified ageing and elder care

Parliament 2029 must transform women's lives, with its representatives well aware of what guardrails women need to age with dignity

treated as public infrastructure, not private misfortune. And she wants to know that when she votes in 2029 for the most representative Parliament this country has ever elected, its representatives will already know what she needs.

An ageing India

India is ageing faster than its public conversation acknowledges. Over 100 million Indians are already above 60 years; that number will cross 250 million by the year 2040. Women will outlive men by four to five years on average, but those extra years have a compounded disadvantage: lower lifetime savings, broken employment histories, no assets in their own name, and no caregiver when they need one the most. The National Policy for Older Persons (1999) and the Indra Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme address the elderly through a lens of poverty and health, with no gender dimension. Ageing women are simply not a category the systems in India are built to recognise.

The cost of that invisibility is written in the numbers. A study, in 2023, in the journal *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, estimates that 8.8 million Indians over the age of 60 are living with dementia today, a number expected to nearly double by 2036 — with women disproportionately affected, more likely to be living alone when cognitive decline sets in, and less likely to have anyone looking out for them. This is what a state that never designed elder care around women actually produces. Parliamentary records reveal why it persists — the Parliamentary Questions database has virtually no questions on ageing women, there are no private member Bills, or

committee attention. What Maharashtra showed recently is that the state can move quickly when it chooses to recognise the realities of women's lives. In January 2026, the State launched menopause clinics across 580 government facilities, backed by decades of advocacy. The result was that over 31,000 women came forward in five weeks.

They had been waiting, in silence, for the State to name their reality. Elder care and dignified ageing wait for the same decision.

The need for insight

Political parties are already preparing candidate pipelines for the reserved seats. But fielding women is not the same as changing what Parliament talks about. The women and men who will make the Parliament of 2029 count are those who arrive having read the room — who understand that representing women means representing the full arc of their lives: not just the years of careers and children, but the decades that follow, when every gap the state has ignored becomes a daily reality. That understanding must be built into the candidate, the campaign, and the manifesto — through a census that captures age- and gender-disaggregated data, budgets that report elder care spending transparently, and parties that make dignified ageing a political commitment before the election, not after.

When Gauri votes in 2029, she will be thinking about all of this. She will be thinking about her mother, and about whether this Parliament, the most representative in India's history, can build the country that women like her were promised. Three years is enough time to get this right. We cannot afford to get it wrong.



Protecting women's rights amid conflict and instability

International Women's Day is once again in our midst. Observed globally on March 8, the day has evolved from its early 20th century labour roots into a leading platform for deliberating on women's rights, celebrating achievements and demanding concrete action toward gender equality. Officially recognized by the United Nations (UN) in 1977, the day continues to serve as both a celebration and a call to action.

Rights, justice and action

For 2026, the UN has chosen "Rights, Justice, Action: For All Women and Girls" as the global theme for International Women's Day. While these words resonate powerfully, affirming women's rights to equality and justice, the reality remains far from supportive of translating this theme into a practical programme. The unpleasant truth is that this ambitious call for action is against the ominous backdrop of a world marked by conflict, displacement, economic instability and political uncertainty. Multiple wars and conflicts are raging in several parts of the world.

Relentless targeted attacks by warring nations have already claimed so many lives and caused the destruction of several strategic locations. Those killed include a large number of women and children. What is worse, instead of de-escalation, we are witnessing a hardening of positions on all sides, with no early cessation of hostilities in sight.

What do these conflicts portend for living conditions and rights of women and children?

Gender equality is not a privilege but a fundamental human right. But it is easier said than done, more so in a world facing multiple crises in which women and children are the most vulnerable. Research and field studies have clearly established that women and girls suffer disproportionately in wars. Conflict and



Archana Ramasundaram

retired from the Indian Police Service as a Director General of the Sashastra Seema Bal, a central armed police force. She has also served as Member, Lokpal of India

insecurity dramatically escalate incidents of gender-based violence, food insecurity, restricted mobility or forced displacement, disruption of families, loss of livelihood, breakdown of social support systems and lack of access to health care and education. Women trapped in conflict zones are also targeted as a strategy of war. Rape and sexual violence against women have been committed during wars since ancient times to subjugate and humiliate the enemy.

Many women also suffer mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. The side-lining of women in peace talks and reconstruction processes further reduces their chances of addressing these problems.

Promises but no progress

Acknowledging the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the UN Security Council, on October 31, 2000, unanimously adopted the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It was affirmed in this historic resolution that women must be protected during conflicts and included actively in peacebuilding processes. Yet, the gap between commitments and implementation continues to remain wide. While a few countries have developed national action plans to implement Resolution 1325, no tangible change is noticed on the ground.

In fact, the conditions for women and children have worsened over these decades. Inequalities have become more acute in many places, with wars and political instability further weakening the institutions for the protection of women. The UN Secretary-General Report on Women, Peace and Security for 2025 categorically states that the world is experiencing the highest number of

active conflicts since 1946, resulting in unprecedented risks and suffering for women and girls. The report adds that nearly 676 million women live within 50 kilometres of deadly conflicts, the highest level since the 1990s. Civilian casualties among women and children quadrupled when compared to the previous two-year period. Conflict-related sexual violence increased by 87% in two years.

Moreover, despite overwhelming evidence that women's participation makes peace more durable, they remain largely excluded from decision-making. In 2024, nine out of 10 peace processes had no women negotiators, with women making up just 7% of negotiators and 14% of mediators globally. This is despite the research consistently showing that peace agreements are more durable when women are meaningfully involved in these processes.

Rights require action

Women, being important stakeholders as well as victims of war, should be given equal opportunity to participate in talks and other processes. Women's collectives and global bodies should also play a more action-oriented role instead of confining themselves to slogans and conferences. Women and children in conflict zones should be protected from violence and sexual exploitation. In fact, helping them with food, education, health care, financial assistance and also emotional support is the duty of other stakeholders as well.

This underscores why the 2026 emphasis on rights and justice is both urgent and essential, making International Women's Day more than a calendar date and a reminder that protecting women's rights amid conflict and instability is a collective responsibility.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ship sinking, implications

The destruction of an Iranian warship by a U.S. submarine near Sri Lanka is a complete violation of international law (Front Page, March 5). The ship was returning from a peaceful naval exercise hosted by India, which is supposed to be a neutral party. Sri Lanka also maintains a policy of neutrality. This is absolutely unprovoked action against the Islamic Republic, even if justified on the pretext of wartime action.

Vijaya Segara Ramsait,
Courtallam, Tenkasi, Tamil Nadu

Without disguising his glee at the sinking of the Iranian vessel, U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth boasted that Iran was under the illusion that the vessel was safe in international waters. It was clearly an act of military overreach. The U.S.'s claim that this war is being fought in the interest of Iranians is belied by the fact that over 1,000 Iranian civilians have lost

their lives to the war. The deadly strike on a school has claimed the lives of innocent students. If it is not an act of inhumanity, what is it? Washington speaks of "regime change" in Tehran. By the same logic, Tehran must also have the right to speak of "regime change" in Washington. In any case, it is a collective failure of our world that there has been no worldwide movement against war and for peace at a time when a dangerous war is playing out in West Asia. The United Nations Organisation has become powerless to prevail on world powers, in the present context, the US and Israel, to de-escalate and opt for diplomacy.

G. David Milton,
Maruthanchand, Tamil Nadu

The reported sinking of the Iranian vessel inevitably acquires political meaning when viewed alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Israel and his visible warmth with

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Even if operationally unrelated, the timing reinforces the perception that India has tilted toward the U.S.-Israel axis in the confrontation with Iran.

For decades, India's West Asia policy has rested on careful balance — engaging Israel for defence cooperation while civilising ties with Iran for energy and connectivity. That equilibrium now appears strained. Symbolic gestures in a region already aflame inevitably carry geopolitical weight. To some geopolitical observers, the episode may even appear as further confirmation of a tightening U.S.-Israel strategic axis shaping the present conflict, with other regional actors reduced largely to spectators.

Some analysts go further, suggesting that India risks appearing marginal to the unfolding Gulf crisis. Despite its proximity and deep stakes — energy security

and the safety of millions of expatriates — New Delhi's diplomatic role has been muted. The challenge is not merely optics but restoring credibility as a balanced and consequential regional actor.

M. Jameel Ahmed,
Mysuru

The audacious attack on an Iranian ship in the Indian Ocean, in territory that is near to Sri Lanka, is proof that the U.S. has scant regard for the rights of countries such as India and Sri Lanka over their territorial waters. The torpedo attack by a submarine again puts it beyond the pale of doubt that U.S. submarines are prowling through seas and oceans.

C.V. Aravind,
Bengaluru

The incident highlights growing militarisation in the Indian Ocean, a region vital to South Asia's stability. India's silence is striking, given its role as the largest

resident power and self-styled "net security provider". Unchecked military actions by extra-regional powers threaten freedom of navigation under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and risk turning the Indian Ocean from a zone of cooperation into a theatre of confrontation.

This also challenges India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, which seeks stability and collective security. A measured diplomatic response, emphasising restraint, transparency, and adherence to international law, would protect India's interests and reinforce its credibility.

Balancing ties with the U.S. and Iran while asserting India's strategic position is essential to prevent the Indian Ocean from becoming another arena of great-power rivalry.

Rajesh C.R.,
Bengaluru

Seat sharing talks

The amicable conclusion of seat-sharing talks between the ruling Dravidian Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Indian National Congress in Tamil Nadu has put an end to speculation about a possible rift between the two allies.

Although the Congress does not enjoy a substantial vote base in Tamil Nadu, except in pockets such as Kanniyakumari district, its secular credentials and national stature could reinforce the alliance's campaign narrative. The DMK has been projecting the contest as one between its secular coalition and the divisive politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party at the Centre. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has demonstrated his political acumen.

M. Jayaram,
Sholvandan, Tamil Nadu

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Is the Supreme Court doing enough to tackle hate speech?

PARLEY



Shahrulkh Alam
advocate practicing at the Supreme Court



Haris Beeran
advocate and Raja Sabha Member of Parliament

In February 26, the Gauhati High Court issued notice to Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma after hearing a batch of petitions seeking criminal prosecution against him for alleged communal and divisive speeches. The petitioners had initially approached the Supreme Court (SC) with their complaints but a three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India, Surya Kant, remarked that whenever elections approach, the Court tends to become a political battleground, and consequently directed the petitioners to approach the Gauhati High Court. Earlier in January, another Supreme Court Bench indicated that hate speech matters pending before the Court since 2021 would be closed. The Bench, however, clarified that the parties remained free to pursue other legal remedies, including approaching the High Courts (HCs). Is the Supreme Court doing enough to tackle hate speech? Shahrulkh Alam and Haris Beeran debate the question in a discussion moderated by **Aaratrika Bhaumik**. Edited excerpts:

What is hate speech, and what makes its criminalisation so difficult in practice?

Shahrulkh Alam: Hate speech does not always take the form of explicit incitement to violence. More often, it operates as a prejudicial discourse that marginalises particular communities. This in turn, makes the task of defining hate speech for the purposes of criminalisation inherently difficult. Not every divisive expression can attract penal consequences. The threshold for criminal sanction must be higher. Further, the analysis of hate speech cannot be divorced from questions of power – its harm lies not merely in the content of the speech but in the unequal social hierarchies within which it operates. Hate speech entrenches a democratic deficit because it is typically directed at groups that are already socially or politically vulnerable, thereby reinforcing existing patterns of exclusion.

Haris Beeran: The difficulty in criminalising hate speech lies partly in the role that perception plays. Hate speech does not always manifest as direct incitement to violence. It often operates through dog whistles – statements deliberately framed with a degree of ambiguity that allow speakers to claim plausible deniability. The impact of such speech is shaped not merely by what is said but also by how it is perceived. This ambiguity makes it difficult to delineate clear thresholds for criminal liability.



Seeking redress: A protest against alleged irregularities in the SIR and Assam CM's remarks on Bengali-origin Muslims, in Guwahati, on February 7. PTI

Should hate speech be treated as a constitutional tort?

SA: Yes. Even in instances where there are open calls for violence through speeches, the response from the state and its functionaries is often conspicuously absent. When the state repeatedly fails to respond to such speech, a constitutional tort provides a basis to hold it accountable. The principle underlying this approach is that where the state's inaction results in harm, it must assume responsibility – by acknowledging that failure or by compensating those who have been wronged.

HB: The growing prevalence of hate speech is closely linked to the conduct of the ruling dispensation. Electoral strategies increasingly rely on the deployment of communal rhetoric to capture public attention and secure electoral dividends. When such rhetoric emanates from the highest levels of political leadership, lower-level functionaries inevitably seek to emulate what they perceive to be the expectations of their leadership. The problem is further compounded by the absence of a credible institutional response. State authorities, such as the police, and even bodies like the Election Commission of India (EC), often fail to intervene effectively. As a result, hate speech ought to be recognised as a constitutional tort. Such an approach would enable courts to fix accountability and award compensation.

How effective has the Supreme Court's intervention been?

HB: In 2018, in *Tehseen Poonawalla vs Union of India*, the SC laid down detailed directions to curb mob lynching and prevent other hate



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SHAHIRUKH ALAM

crimes, including the appointment of nodal officers in the States. This was followed in 2023 by a further direction requiring States to *suo motu* register FIRs in cases of hate speech. Despite these directives, what we continue to witness are flagrant violations. While it may be difficult for the Court to monitor compliance in every instance, it ought to initiate contempt proceedings against State officials who fail to act. The Court is also vested with powers under Article 142 to pass orders necessary to do "complete justice" and to protect vulnerable communities. Yet, the Court has at times been reluctant to exercise these powers. For instance, it declined to take action against Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma over his communal remarks and instead relegated the petitioners to the High Court. The Court bears a constitutional responsibility to intervene.

SA: The SC's prior directives on hate speech are being observed more in their breach than in their observance. It was precisely for this reason that petitioners urged the Court not to close the hate speech proceedings and instead treat them as a continuing mandamus. Such an approach would have ensured that the matter remained under the Court's supervision, allowing it to monitor compliance and intervene whenever breaches occurred. However, the Court closed the proceedings. More importantly, it is evident that law enforcement authorities are frequently failing to act even in cases involving the most virulent forms of hate speech. This reflects a clear abdication of constitutional duty. It is also crucial for the Court to recognise that the problem of hate speech cannot be framed as a dispute between equals. In reality, hate speech is fundamentally about power – about dominant groups using speech as a means to exclude and silence those who are more vulnerable.

Should India introduce specific criminal provisions on hate speech, as recommended by the Law Commission?

HB: Dedicated provisions may be welcome, but

the real challenge lies in their effective enforcement. India already possesses a range of legal provisions capable of addressing hate speech. For instance, the Representation of the People Act, 1950, contains provisions that empower the EC to act against candidates who resort to hate speech during election campaigns. Yet, in practice, there is little evidence of these powers being exercised with any consistency. Unless the political climate changes, the politics of hate will continue to persist.

SA: Even if penal provisions on hate speech were introduced, their application would remain vulnerable to arbitrariness. The law in its current form is often insufficiently attentive to the social and political contexts within which such speech operates. While some forms of speech may merely offend or hurt sentiments, other forms of incendiary rhetoric can deepen democratic deficits by further marginalising communities that are already vulnerable. At the same time, it would be misguided to look to the law alone for solutions. What is required is the building of a broader social consensus that resists falling prey to stereotypes, tropes, and propaganda directed at targeted communities.

Could the Karnataka Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill, 2025, serve as a precedent for a central law on hate speech?

SA: Although well-intentioned, my reservation about the Bill is that it fails to adequately recognise the discriminatory dimension of hate speech. Its emphasis remains on injury, offence, or disharmony – concepts that are typically framed as law-and-order concerns, rather than on the structural realities of discrimination and marginalisation that hate speech often produces. A further concern is that several of the Bill's definitions are overly broad, creating the risk of arbitrary application.

HB: The Bill must first be enacted and then tested through implementation. Its effectiveness can only be assessed once it begins to operate in practice. There are certain conceptual gaps in the current formulation, particularly in the definition of hate speech, which does not adequately address issues such as discrimination. These limitations have to be addressed through subsequent amendments.



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The systemic invisibility of women's midlife health

Sathya Sriram

India's focus on women's health during their child-bearing ages has been one of its most significant public health achievements. The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) has fallen from 362 per 1,00,000 live births in 2000 to about 80 per 1,00,000 in 2023. Through the National Rural Health Mission and subsequently, the overarching National Health Mission (NHM), several initiatives expanding institutional deliveries, skilled birth attendants, better antenatal and post natal care have enabled these outcomes. This work is still ongoing, since access to safe pregnancy, childbirth and reproductive autonomy is highly variable across the country.

However, women's health does not conclude when childbearing years pass. The decades that follow, when autoimmune conditions emerge, perimenopause begins, cardiovascular risk and cancer incidence increase, receive far less structured attention. In policy, practice and perception, these years remain largely invisible.

As India's disease burden shifts to the increasing prevalence of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), women in their 30s and 40s are experiencing higher rates of chronic diseases, such as hypertension and thyroid disorders, with 106 per 1,000 women reporting at least one NCD compared to 65 per 1,000 men.

Health and social blindspots

The invisibility of women's midlife health is embedded in the way medicine diagnoses and treats disease. For example, women experience heart attacks differently from men, with symptoms such as fatigue, nausea, anxiety or back pain rather than the classic chest pressure or pain. When the widely communicated default symptom profile is male, women's emergencies are likely to be misread or detected late. Some midlife conditions that are more prevalent among women, such as autoimmune disorders, frequently present as generic symptoms like fatigue, cognitive fog, and diffuse pain, and are therefore not often investigated clinically. Historically, conditions that affect women differently and disproportionately have received less research attention and therapeutic innovation. The speculum, used widely in gy-

naecological examinations, has not evolved since it was first invented in the 19th century.

These blind spots extend to the design of objects and spaces in everyday life. Women are biomechanically different from men, carrying their centre of mass lower in the body. Yet chairs and desks at the workplace, protective equipment and rehabilitation devices are designed around a male default. In addition, the social realities of women delaying medical help, prioritising family responsibilities, and dismissing early symptoms further reinforce this invisibility, resulting in late diagnoses and more complex treatment.

Addressing these invisible aspects of women's health needs a shift from focusing narrowly on specific stages to adopting a life-course approach, which recognises the impact of early exposures, lifestyle factors and social determinants over time. India has been laying the foundation for a life-course approach by extending Health and Wellness Centres beyond maternal services to include prevention and management of chronic diseases. Population-based screening for breast and cervical cancers by the NHM is a step towards recognising the health risks that emerge in midlife. Broadening the program to include conditions such as anaemia and autoimmune disorders

along with greater awareness of the symptoms could significantly strengthen early detection and care for women. However, the promise of these programmes will depend on the deployment of sufficient frontline capacity and resources. As India strengthens its pharmaceutical and medical device innovation ecosystem, there is an opportunity to address long-standing gaps in women's health research and diagnostics.

For generations, women have been conditioned to prioritise the health of their families before their own. True to this Women's Day's theme, "Give to Gain", one must encourage vigilance among the women in our lives to pay more attention to their bodies. Investing in women's health is more than an act of equity. It is an investment from which families, workplaces, and the economy stand to gain.

Sathya Sriram is a healthcare strategist with over two decades of private and public sector experience



PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Raging flames



Holy embers: The ritual of Holika Dahan in Chennai. It is usually performed a day before Holi, and involves lighting a bonfire around which people gather to perform prayers and offer grains. It symbolises the victory of good over evil. It is also a seasonal marker, as it heralds the arrival of spring and the end of winter. RKG/R

FROM THE ARCHIVES *The Hindu*

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 6, 1976

Move against BBC film on Asian immigrants

London, March 6: A British Labour member of Parliament has denounced as "abominable, racist and fascist", the film on Asian immigrants shown on British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television last Saturday and demanded the scaling back of BBC's Director-General, Sir Charles Curran.

Mr. Sydney Bidwell, who represents Southall, told a press conference last night that the film was a concoction by the National

Front and could not do race relations any good. "We will not leave it alone. The protest will rumble on and grow", he said, "after talks he and a representative delegation had with senior officials of the BBC."

The delegation consisting of the President of Indian Workers Association, Mr. A.S. Rai, General Secretary, Mr. M.S. Padda and Mr. Kadri, General Secretary of the standing conference of Pakistani organisations said the BBC tried to defend its programme by saying it was in the interests of free speech.

After failing to persuade BBC not to repeat the programme scheduled for this Saturday the Indian Workers Association decided to move the High Court for an injunction to bar BBC from proceeding with its programme.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 6, 1926

Bats as preventive for Malaria

Dr. C.A.B Campbell, of Texas, has put forward the proposition that the bat is the most effective enemy of mosquito and claims that by artificial means he can make conditions suitable for the breeding of bats that they would be able to reduce mosquitoes so greatly as to make them a negligible factor in the area in which the bats operate. Mr. H.F. Carter, the Ceylon Government Medical Entomologist was not at all sanguine as to the efficacy of this method.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Nominal Gross State Domestic Product of Maharashtra

46.22 in ₹ lakh crore. Maharashtra's economy is the country's largest with a nominal GDP estimated at ₹46.22 lakh crore in 2024-25, which is expected to grow to ₹51 lakh crore as per the Economic Survey 2025-26 tabled in the Assembly. Maharashtra accounts for the highest share of about 14% in India's nominal GDP, it said. PII

Number of seafarers and passengers stuck in the Gulf

35,000 Since war erupted on Saturday, the UN's International Maritime Organisation has recorded seven incidents involving ships in the region that have resulted in two deaths and another seven people wounded. They said that around 20,000 seafarers and 15,000 cruise ship passengers are stuck in the Gulf. APF

Motorists booked for drunk driving during Holi in Delhi

1,200 Delhi Traffic Police booked more than 1,200 motorists for drunk driving during a special enforcement drive on Holi, with the highest number of such violations reported from the western range, an official said on Thursday. According to data, a total of 3,725 were penalised for other traffic violations. PII

Number of new electric sub-stations to be built by A.P.

200 Andhra Pradesh Energy Minister G. Ravi Kumar said the State government is spending ₹6,000 crore to build new electric sub-stations. The Minister said the initiative includes 200 sub-stations in places experiencing excess power load. 33/11 KV sub-stations are being sanctioned across the State where the demand is high, he added. PII

Income declared by the ruling BJP in FY2024-25

6,769.14 in ₹ cr. The BJP declared an income of ₹6,769.14 crore in FY 2024-25, the highest among national parties, while the Congress was a distant second, declaring an income of around ₹918.28 crore, said a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms. PII

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The legality of U.S.-Israel strikes on Iran

U.S. Israel launch strikes on Iran as a 'pre-emptive' response to an imminent threat, raising questions about the legality of the use of force under the UN Charter; missile strike on a girls' primary school raises concerns over violations of International Humanitarian Law, particularly the principles of distinction, proportionality, precaution

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartik Singh

As the U.S. and Israel launched coordinated strikes across Iran, reports have surfaced that a missile had hit a girls' primary school in the southern city of Minab, killing around 150 people and injuring nearly 100. Many of the victims are believed to be schoolchildren. UNESCO has condemned this as a grave violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), or the 'laws of war', which is designed to limit the human suffering caused during 'armed conflict' by imposing restrictions on the 'means' and 'methods' of warfare. Attacks on civilian objects such as schools and hospitals, and on civilians, especially children, are prohibited under IHL.

Legal justification

On February 28, Israel and the U.S. launched strikes on Iran, framing the operation as a 'pre-emptive' response to what they described as an imminent threat. Importantly, the UN Charter was created in 1945 following the devastation of World War II to save future generations from the "scourge of war" and maintain international peace and security. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits all member states from threatening or using force against the 'territorial integrity' or 'political independence' of another state. Under the Charter, only the UN Security Council may authorise the 'use of force' against a member state in response to breaches of international peace. The sole exception is Article 51, which permits the 'use of force' in self-defence, but only in response to an actual armed attack.

Under this legal framework, neither Israel nor the U.S. can plausibly claim to be exercising the right of self-defence against Iran under Article 51, whether individually or collectively. Notably, Iran has not recently attacked either state, and any earlier threat has long dissipated. In the absence of an ongoing armed attack, the 'use of force' cannot be justified as self-defence. At most, the argument rests on preventing a potential future Iranian attack – nuclear or otherwise – under the theory of "anticipatory" self-defence in response to an imminent threat. Yet many scholars argue that international law does not recognise a right to use force in self-defence against an attack that has not yet occurred. Nevertheless, even under the broadest plausible theory of "anticipatory" self-defence, the use of force against Iran would be lawful only if three conditions were met: first, that Iran's leadership had decided to attack the U.S. or Israel; second, that it possessed the capability to do so; and third, that the 'use of force' was necessary now because this was the last window of opportunity to prevent that future attack.

However, the "anticipatory" self-defence argument appears even weaker today. The U.S. strikes in June 2025 had already substantially degraded Iran's capacity to develop a nuclear weapon. President Donald Trump had claimed that Iran's nuclear programme had been "obliterated". Since then, no evidence has been presented to show that Iran reconstituted its programme, formed the intent to build a weapon, mounted it on a ballistic missile, and prepared to use it against the U.S. or Israel.

Furthermore, neither regime change nor the protection of populations (Iranians) from mass atrocities by the Iranian government finds any basis in



Amid ruins: People and rescue workers search through debris following an Israeli strike on a school in Minab, Iran, on February 28. REUTERS

international law or the UN Charter as a lawful justification for the 'use of force'.

IHL violations

While morals and ethics in conflicts have deep historical roots dating back to ancient Greek, Roman, Indian, and Chinese civilisations, they were codified in their modern form, i.e., IHL, by the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and complemented by other treaties and customary law. IHL protects the wounded, sick, prisoners of war, and civilians while restricting brutal weapons and methods of warfare.

Unlike the UN Charter, which addresses the legality of starting a war (*ius ad bellum*), IHL governs how wars are fought (*ius in bello*) and ensures humane conduct regardless of the war's initiation. It regulates the conduct of hostilities based on four core principles: 'distinction', 'proportionality', 'military necessity', and 'precaution'.

When the missile hit the girls' school in Iran, the 'principle of distinction', which requires that 'combatants' and 'military targets' be clearly separated from 'civilians' and 'civilian objects' such as schools, hospitals, places of worship, and public transport, was blatantly transgressed. Importantly, if there is any doubt about whether a target is military or civilian in nature, it must be presumed to be civilian.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child further reinforces this protection by recognising children as rights-bearing individuals and requiring States Parties, under Article 38(4), to take all feasible measures to ensure the protection and care of children affected by armed conflict. Similarly, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines the

intentional targeting of civilians and attacks on buildings dedicated to education as war crimes. However, it must also be noted that civilian objects, including schools, may lose their protected status if they are used for military purposes and thereby become military objectives. For instance, a school functioning as a military base, artillery site, or command post could fall within this category. So far, however, there is no evidence that the school in Minab, Iran, was being used for military purposes or that it was deliberately targeted.

Proportionality and necessity

The key question, therefore, is how the strike should be assessed under IHL if the school was not intentionally targeted but was instead damaged as collateral harm from an attack directed at a nearby Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps facility, as some reports suggest.

In this regard, IHL recognises that civilian objects may be incidentally affected during attacks on military objectives. However, such incidental harm to civilians or civilian objects is lawful only if it satisfies the requirements of 'proportionality', 'precaution', and 'military necessity'.

In such circumstances – where a civilian object like a school is located near a military objective and is struck during an attack – the legality of the operation turns on whether the expected harm to the school and the children present was excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from striking the intended target.

Equally crucial is whether military commanders took all feasible precautions to minimise civilian harm, such as verifying the target, assessing the

presence of nearby civilians or civilian infrastructure, selecting weapons capable of limiting collateral damage, and timing the strike in a manner that reduces risks to non-combatants.

Role of international law

In a world where states increasingly resort to force against one another, critics often point to frequent violations of international law as evidence of its irrelevance. Yet this conclusion misunderstands how international law functions. While breaches do occur, sometimes brazenly, they remain exceptions to an overwhelmingly compliant pattern of behaviour. The everyday conduct of diplomacy, international commerce, civil aviation, maritime navigation, environmental agreements, arms control arrangements, and treaty obligations continues to operate largely within the framework of international law.

Its significance lies not in perfect compliance but in its ability to demand justification. Through its argumentative and normative practices, international law compels those who wield power to account for their actions before a global audience.

This system of accountability may be imperfect, but it ensures that departures from legal norms can be identified, scrutinised, and condemned. The challenge today is not the absence of law, but the need for states to comply with it rather than bend it to politics. For when bombs fall on classrooms and playgrounds, it is not only lives that are lost; it is the quiet extinguishing of futures that had barely begun to exist.

(Kartik Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi)

THE GIST

Under the UN Charter, only the UN Security Council may authorise the use of force against a member state, with self-defence permitted only in response to an actual armed attack.

Civilian objects such as schools and hospitals are protected under International Humanitarian Law, which regulates the conduct of hostilities during conflict.

International law compels states to justify the use of force and seeks to limit human suffering by regulating the means and methods of warfare.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



A still from Haq, JUNGLE PICTURES/YOUTUBE

Hindi cinema and the changing meaning of conjugal relationships

Contemporary Hindi cinema shows the crisis of conjugal relationships through stories of infidelity, violence, abuse and legal disputes, with films such as *Haq* revisiting debates on Muslim women's rights and triple talaq

Dev Pathak

Contemporary Hindi cinema has made the crisis of conjugal relationships dramatically visible with props and plots on legality. Conjugal rights is contested from the perspectives of infidelity, violence, and abuse within marital relationships. The latest example is the elegantly curated Suparn Varma film *Haq* (2025). The film is premised on the famous Shah Bano case, which began in 1978 and continued till 1985. The consequent debates on Muslim women's rights and the anomalies of instant triple talaq remain relevant even today.

Haq sensitively renews interest in the social and legal entanglements within which the female protagonist's persistent pursuit of justice unfolds. Nearly five decades ago, B.R. Chopra's musically entertaining, high-decibel melodrama *Nikah* (1982) had also dealt with the problem of triple talaq. In both *Haq* and *Nikah*, there is a significant resonance of the female protagonists' clamour for a healthy conjugal relationship free from betrayal and abuse and conducive to gender equality.

Not just a film about Muslim women and social-legal complexities, *Haq* joins a range of popular Hindi films that aim to make a statement on conjugal rights and the crisis that besets it. An instant reminder is Gulzar's politically charged drama *Aandhi* (1975), which portrays an estranged wife and husband, essayed by Sanjeev Kumar and Suchitra Sen, persistently longing for an ordinary conjugal life. The *Aandhi* song "tere bina zindagi se shikwa" summarises the whole tale. No less significant was J. Om Prakash's musical hit *Aap Ki Kasam* (1974), starring Rajesh Khanna and Mumtaz, and Gulzar's poetic masterpiece, *Ijazat* (1987). Both delivered a melancholic recapitulation of the

breakdown of conjugal rights on the grounds of infidelity. Songs like "zindagi ke safar mein" in the sardonic voice of Kishore Kumar, or "mera kuch saman" in the deep husky lilt of Asha Bhosle, continue to haunt us melodiously even today.

In a historically long trajectory, Hindi cinema has shown the vulnerability of conjugal romance. Four decades ago, when popular Hindi cinema was dominated by remakes of films from South India, there were series of social dramas on the strengths and weaknesses of married life. T. Ramarao delivered a straightforward tale of infidelity and the consequent rupture in conjugal life in *Ek Hi Bool* (1981).

Cinematic prototype of conjugal

A prototype of conjugal rights emerged in Hindi cinema from its early years. In the first quarter of the 20th century, Dadasaheb Phalke's classic *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) retold the well-known story from the Puranas. A perfect eulogy for the conjugal relationship, the story received umpteen cinematic versions in regional languages. The key theme of each version is the trust between a king committed to truth and Taramati, the king's devoted wife.

In Kannada cinema, there have been four versions of the same story since A.V. Meiyappan's 1943 production, which was also dubbed into Tamil. Moreover, there were cinematic recastings of the *Harishchandra Taramati* tale in Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bangla, and other regional languages. Suffice it to say that these innumerable cinematic returns to the tale set a pan-Indian template of conjugal rights with an archetypal halo.

Departing from this prototype, the fissures and fractures in conjugal rights resulting from marital disputes between wife and husband became more central in cinema in the second half of the 20th

century. A lesser-known film, *Biraj Bahu* (1954) by the maestro Bimal Roy, was based on the famous novel by modern classical litterateur Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. The film underlined the patriarchal moral judgment on the infidelity of a wife that upsets conjugal relations.

A Guru Dutt classic dealing with conjugal rights was *Mr. & Mrs. 55*. In spite of its solid argument based on the then-passed divorce Bill in India, the film ingeniously persuades us to believe in the love, care, and empathy associated with post-marital conjugal rights. Most importantly, it serves as an early reminder of the negative consequences of societal interference between a wife and a husband.

On the other hand, Hrishikesh Mukherji's musical masterpiece *Abhimanyu* (1973) sharply critiques the toxic masculinity of a husband against an exceedingly successful wife. The estranged couple suffers from the consequences and eventually surrenders to the intimate power of conjugal rights, which helps mend their broken relationship.

Another Guru Dutt magnum opus, *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959), underlined the fraying of conjugal rights, resulting in the husband's quest for love and fulfilment elsewhere. To top it all, there is Basu Bhattacharya's trilogy on married life, namely *Anubhav* (1971), *Avishkar* (1974), and *Griha Pravesh* (1979). Each film in the trilogy provides a sensitive portrayal of the complexities caused by both physical and symbolic infidelity, where both partners suffer with a deep longing to talk to each other and find a resolution.

The sombre melancholia in the cinematic texture of the trilogy continued in Bhattacharya's last film, *Aastha* (1997). In between a tussle between infidelity and conjugal rights, the film shows a housewife

driven by aspirations in a consumerist society, committing infidelity. She eventually finds resolution through an enabling conjugal relationship with her husband. However, Mahesh Manjrekar's *Astitva* (2000) presents a counter-argument, depicting the violent abandonment of an unfaithful wife and the unequivocal collapse of conjugal rights. The trend continued in the 2000s, which witnessed a significant rise in the dexterous treatment of the complexities of conjugal rights in popular Hindi cinema. In 2007, Anurag Basu's masterpiece *Life in a... Metro* and Reema Kagti's *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Limited* offered a sensitive depiction of the hum and lull of conjugal romance.

Good old days and today

Such an abundance of cinematic engagement with conjugal relationships must be discerned in the wake of a weakening sense of conjugal rights in contemporary society. There are disturbing statistics of exceedingly rising cases of saddening separation, mushrooming misunderstanding, anguish and estrangement of the partners, also traditionally called wife and husband. Sadly, this shows a weakening of the family and adverse consequences on the mental health of the married couple and children.

In spite of our heightened critical awareness of the intricacies and anomalies of the institutions, we can seldom deny the significance that conjugal rights holds for us. In a volatile world seduced by desire, Hindi cinema, in its own ways, reminds us to navigate manifold genuine challenges and ensure that the beauty of conjugal rights does not metamorphose into a monstrous banality. (*Dev Nath Pathak teaches at South Asian University, New Delhi and is the author of the book, In Defense of the Ordinary*)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"Hi! Am I late?"
"You're right on time for a change."
"Thank goodness! That reminds me, the last time we met, you talked about how the English language is prejudiced against left handers."
"It's pro right handers and anti left handers."
"In what way is English...?"
"... are you willing to be my left hand man?"
"You can be someone's right hand man. But left hand..."
"Do you know what 'right hand man' means?"
"Of course I do. If I am your right hand man, I am the man you depend on for almost everything."
"If someone says you are his/her right hand man, it's considered a compliment."
"I plan on becoming some politician's right hand man when I grow up."
"You are likely to get involved in some scam or another."
"As long as I make money I am not bothered. Whose right hand man do you want to be?"
"I want to be my own man."
"Oh, you are one of those! Give me more examples of how the word right..."
"... just look at the words associated with the word 'right'. We have, for instance, the word 'adroit'.
"What?"
"A.d.ro.i.t. The 'a' in the first syllable is pronounced like the 'a' in 'china' and 'about'. The 'oi' is like the 'oy' in 'boy', 'toy', and 'joy'.
"The stress is on the second syllable?"
"The word is pronounced adROIT."
"But what does the word mean?"
"It means skillful. Someone who is adroit is skillful not only in the way he does things, but also in the way he thinks."
"Can I say that my Principal is adroit at flattering people?"
"Your Principal sounds just like my boss. He too likes to flatter people."
"Many people do. But tell me, what is the connection between 'adroit' and what we were talking about?"
"The word 'adroit' comes from the French 'a droir' meaning 'to the right'.
"And as time passed, the word changed its meaning."
"That's right. It began to acquire a positive meaning."
"Can you give me another example which...?"
"... how about the word dexterous?"
"Dex... What?"
"D.e.x.t.e.r.o.u.s. The 'ex' in the first syllable..."
"... is pronounced like the word 'ex'?"
"Exactly! The second 'e' is not pronounced at all."
"Not pronounced at all?"
"That's right! And that's why the word is sometimes spelt d.e.x.t.r.o.u.s. Without the second 'e'."
"I see."
"The final 'ous' is like the 'ous' in 'famous', and 'monstrous'. The stress is on the first syllable."
"But what does dexterous mean?"
"Someone who is dexterous is very skillful or clever with his hands."
"Skillful again?"
"If you want to become a painter, you need to be a little more dexterous."
"Does the word dexterous mean 'right handed' too?"
"Yes. The Latin word 'dexter' means 'right' or 'right hand'.
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THE DAILY QUIZ

Michelangelo was born on this day in 1475. A quiz on the Italian sculptor and painter who was one of the greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance:

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1

X is a sculpture by Michelangelo, carved out of one solid block of marble. It captures the moment when Jesus was taken down from the cross and given to Mary. It balances early forms of naturalism with the Renaissance ideals of classical beauty. Name X.

QUESTION 2

Michelangelo's most famous sculpture is arguably the statue of David. Where was it originally supposed to be located?

QUESTION 3

What does a salad made of mozzarella, tomatoes, basil, and

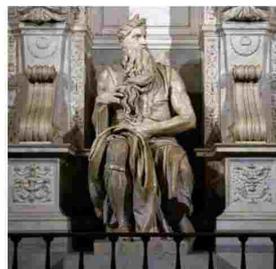
olive oil and the birthplace of Michelangelo have in common?

QUESTION 4

Michelangelo and X were commissioned to paint battle scenes in competition with one another, but neither of them finished their work. They were bitter rivals and criticised each other's works. Who is X?

QUESTION 5

On the Sistine Chapel altar wall, Michelangelo depicted himself as X. Identify X as one of the 12 Apostles of Jesus according to the New Testament.



Visual Question:

Who is this man, who Michelangelo chose to depict fondling his beard, with flowing hair, and horns?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Name this ancient Indian materialist school, which rejected the Vedas, denied the soul, and held that only what can be perceived through the five senses is real. **Ans: Charvakas/ Lokayata**

2. He was forced by the Roman Inquisition to publicly recant his support for Copernican heliocentrism and spent his final years under house arrest. **Ans: Galileo Galilei**

3. A countryman of the person in Q2, this person was also tried for heresy by the Inquisition for holding views such as the universe being infinite and having no centre or fixed boundary. **Ans: Giordano Bruno**

4. This Dutch philosopher was "expelled" from the Jewish community for equating God with Nature and treating the Bible as a human and not divine document, rather than the word of God. Name him. **Ans: Baruch Spinoza**

5. Not a heretic in the general sense of the term, but this scientist discovered that stars are primarily made of hydrogen and helium, but was pressured by Henry Norris Russell, an influential astronomer, to retract her finding, only to be proved right later. **Ans: Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin**

Visual: This physicist was persona non grata in his country, not for his scientific beliefs, but for his religious affiliation, despite being a Nobel Laureate. Name him and his community. **Ans: Abdus Salam/ Ahmadiyya community**

Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Sadhan Panda | M. Suresh Kumar

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

Word of the day

Irascible:

quickly aroused to anger

Synonyms: fiery, bad-tempered, irritable

Usage: His irascible nature made him difficult to work with.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/irasciblepro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /ɪrəsɪbəl/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS



Shock and Awe 2.0: Has China beaten a retreat?

China's Gulf diplomacy could end up under the Iran war's rubble even as its economy defies revival plans. Beijing has scaled back its GDP target. Its global power ambitions? Maybe not

This century's big story was supposed to be the rise of China amid a scramble by the US to secure a second 'American century', as the 20th was branded. Of late, though, Beijing's ambition seems to have lost some of the ballast imparted by President Xi Jinping's 2013 ascent to China's top. For all its ties with Iran and outreach to West Asia, heralded by a patch-up it brokered across the Gulf in 2023, China's role in the war that rages today is either negligible or invisible. A pre-emptive air campaign by the US and Israel to disarm Iran has not just trumped America's 'Shock and Awe' of 2003 against Iraq in ferocity, it threatens to leave Chinese diplomacy under the region's rubble as Tehran hits out at US-allied Gulf states. Back home, Beijing seems at a loss over how to revive its economy. On Thursday, it notched down its GDP growth target to a range of 4.5%-5%, its lowest goal since 1991. True, Xi talks about 'common prosperity' as a priority. Also, like any economy, China's gets harder to expand as it matures. Given how it derives its heft from economic success and fought to fend off trade adversity, however, China's air of resignation over its slowdown seems odd. Its pace of output growth, at an average of just above 5% over the past three calendar years, has lagged India's average of 7.3% from fiscal 2023-24 to 2025-26. The 'fastest growing major economy' race has been a no-contest since covid. Granted, the People's Republic's real rivalry is with the US, not us. Yet, to project power some day beyond its borders, or even across the Taiwan Strait, it needs all the dynamism it can muster.

and deeptech, with an energy transition and common prosperity as themes. Structurally, "internal circulation" remains a major goal—the hope that its economy can rely more on local commerce than global trade as it emerges above the \$20 trillion level (about two-thirds America's). While China's state-aided export thrust remains the stuff of legend, domestic drivers are proving hard to fire up. It has been unable to counter the ill effects of its long property slump, let alone reverse deflationary pressures, even as it faces trade turmoil and a potential war-led energy crunch. Internally, softening prices have been taking a toll. As of now, it has too much capacity in too many sectors. Its consumer price index was flat in 2025 and went negative in January, like its producer index has long been. Deflation does not just deprive businesses of pricing power, it nudges people to sit on their cash and put off discretionary spending for later. It also increases debt burdens in real terms and hits credit offtake. As for policy, stimulus efforts have only shown mild results so far. Last year, China cheapened credit, widened its fiscal deficit to 4%, doubled its 'trade-in' subsidy for retail purchases and issued extra bonds. But its GDP growth path refuses to look up, even as trade partners accuse it of exporting deflation.

On the global stage, could China be going back to Deng Xiaoping's dictum of "Hide your strength, bide your time"? Analysts who see it playing a long game suspect a tactical retreat on Beijing's part while it watches its archrival inflame West Asia, assesses America's tech edge and awaits a chance to 're-unite' Taiwan. Even if this is so, China's future role depends critically on how its economy performs. As the plot of this century's geo-rivalry thickens, we in India must keep events and strengths under close watch.

As the outline of China's 15th five-year plan (2026-2030) indicates, its key aim is to achieve "productive forces" of "new quality," code for AI

PARTHA SINHA



is a senior advisory professional.

Last quarter, in the middle of a polite marketing review, a chief financial officer (CFO) asked a question that landed with unusual precision. It wasn't whether the campaign was working or what the return on investment was. It was something quieter. More structural. More dangerous: "Why do we still need all of this?"

I've been in enough rooms to know this isn't a stray provocation. It arrives after the quarterly numbers, in that pause before someone suggests coffee. The chief marketing officer grows careful. The agency side avoids eye contact. The CFO, once a courteous participant in creative conversations, has stopped pretending she doesn't have an opinion. The industry calls it AI anxiety. That's flattering. Anxiety is what you feel before an exam you might still pass. What is underway is an architectural reckoning. We are arriving at it about 18 months late.

The line that aged badly: Not long ago, I was speaking on Generative AI to a room full of senior leaders. Midway through, a cele-

brated creative director leaned back and declared: "AI can do the dishes. I will continue to create." The room laughed. It was a good line. It also aged rather fast. Technology doesn't have to listen to dismissals.

What has emerged since aren't just smarter content-making tools, but Agentic AI systems that observe, decide, optimize and iterate—continuously, often in real time—without waiting to be asked. Artificial intelligence (AI) is not an instrument; it is now the operator. The old comfort was that the machine would always need a human to hand it a brief. That comfort is evaporating.

What's breaking: For decades, the agency model rested on scarcity: good creative judgment was rare and agencies packaged it. A client brought a brief. The agency retreated. Weeks later, a campaign emerged, wrapped in craft and presented with theatre. Effectiveness was measured after the fact. Inefficiency was tolerated because the output was presumed to be human magic.

Agentic systems don't just improve a step. They reject that sequence. They watch behaviour, test variants and learn what lands for which audience at which moment in the journey. When creative generation, media optimization, audience intelligence and performance feedback sit inside the same self-

GUEST VIEW

Agentic advertising: Why the ad agency needs to sit up

improving loop, effectiveness stops being a post-campaign PowerPoint presentation. It becomes a built-in feature of the system. That is not a "better agency." That is a new definition of marketing.

The arithmetic nobody wants to do: Then comes the arithmetic. Agentic systems are faster than agency workflow, cheaper than retainer structures and in a growing number of tasks, not obviously worse than handled work. In some areas, they are better.

This isn't because machines have developed taste, but because they run on what the industry long treated as supporting evidence rather than primary fuel: continuous, granular data intelligence. Human strategists spot a pattern once. Agentic systems find thousands at once and act on them before an insights deck can be formatted.

The CFO is not conducting a philosophical inquiry into the soul of creativity. She is doing arithmetic, which is getting hard to argue with.

What survives and what exits: So, is human judgement dead? No. Taste will matter. Cultural intelligence will matter more as content becomes cheap and what becomes scarce is the discernment to know what should exist at all. The ability to understand what a brand should mean in a particular society, at a particular moment, remains stubbornly human. But the comfortable middle is under pressure: work produced slowly; elegant decks that rarely meet the market; reverence for process over outcome; the old drawbridge line—"You wouldn't understand, it's a creative thing."

These are losing protective cover because no serious brand owner is happy with the idea that a "brand" is a mystical element that depends on the occasional brainwave of one maverick marketer or an inspired agency flourish delivered with an obnoxious production budget. The new expectation is deconstruction: marketing broken into measurable, improving

units—creative, media, audience and commercial intelligence all connected and all accountable.

Re-imagine the agency: The future agency will not survive by bolting AI tools onto an unchanged operating model. That is cosmetic surgery on a structural problem. The agency has to become something more demanding: an intelligence operating system that orchestrates multiple learning loops at once. Less a supplier of campaigns and more a platform that magnifies and coordinates distributed intelligence. The conductor, not soloist. More importantly, a platform, not performer.

This is a smaller role. It is a harder one. It requires agencies to relinquish some comfortable myths about creativity while doubling down on what machines still struggle to replicate: taste, context, cultural reading, narrative coherence, ethical calibration. But it begins with a simple act of honesty. Stop defending a model because it has been there. Start designing one because the writing on the wall is now in legible font.

The agencies that respond with structural clarity will orchestrate an intelligence layer for their clients. The rest will continue to produce occasionally beautiful work for a steadily shrinking audience.



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Last week, India's statistics ministry released its first estimates of gross domestic product (GDP) and other associated national accounts data with 2022-23 as the base year for a new GDP series. This is the second major economic indicator after the consumer price index (CPI) to have seen a base revision. Both these indicators had been using 2011-12 as base year, rendering them more than a decade old. But similar to the CPI revision, the one in the national accounts is also not just a technical re-basing. It also makes several methodological changes and uses new as well as revised sources.

Besides using new data-sets, the two national surveys by the National Statistical Office (NSO) and administrative data from several ministries, the new series also uses revised rates and ratios for arriving at estimates of gross value added (GVA). The use of outdated rates and ratios had been a long-standing criticism of national account estimates. Hence, revising them to recent years is likely to improve the quality of the data. Among the new datasets that the revised series relies on are the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and the Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE). Both of these are now carried out annually, which not only improves estimates in the base year but also future estimations. Their use is also important given the country's large

informal sector. The availability of these surveys helps capture a better picture of activity in the unorganized sector, compared to the earlier series.

The second major improvement is the adoption of double deflationation as a method to arrive at GVA estimates, unlike in the earlier series. While the absence of producer price indices for many sectors, especially services, restricts its use, the revised series is able to adopt this measurement method for agriculture and manufacturing where data permits. For other sectors, it uses a volume extrapolation method.

These changes help improve our GDP and GVA estimates, thanks to better and more frequent data. The shift has resulted in revisions in national accounts aggregates for past years, with data released for 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25. One change that stands out is a downward revision in the estimates; nominal GDP in 2022-23 is lower by about 3% than in the old series and by 3.8% in each of the two subsequent years. This is unusual but not surprising given the nature of changes. However, even a slightly smaller GDP poses a problem for the government as it alters fiscal deficits of the past and complicates the latest budget's arithmetic too.

Also, estimates for private final consumption expenditure (PFCE) have

been lowered by almost 10%. This again is sharp and indicates a smaller share of PFCE in GDP than earlier believed.

Also, overall growth rates between 2022-23 and 2024-25 for which final estimates are available have been slashed. Compared to the earlier three-year average of 7.8%, growth has been revised down to 7.25%. Much of this is due to a cut in 2023-24 growth to 7.2% under the revised series from 9.2% earlier. This decline comes despite the manufacturing sector's faster growth under the new series.

However, the new series also raises questions on the structure of India's economy and growth rate trends. One noteworthy aspect is how sectoral shares of GDP have changed. The share of agriculture in GVA now stands at 20% as against 18.1% in the earlier series. This share was 18.5% in 2011-12 by the last base revision and 19% in 2004-05 by the revision at the time. With an average growth of more than 6% since 2004-05, agriculture has seen an increase in its share rather than a decline. Now take manufacturing. Its share declined from 17.4% in 2011-12 based on the earlier series to 14.7% under the new series in 2022-23. Services, of course, make up the bulk of GDP. A fuller analysis of some of these trends for a proper assessment of the health of the economy as well as the relative performance of sectors will have to wait for the back series to be made available later this year.

QUICK READ

Recent changes made by India's statistics ministry in GDP data estimation should give us a better understanding of how different sectors of the economy have been performing.

Services form the bulk of our GDP, but how the shares of agriculture and manufacturing have shifted in recent decades needs a thorough examination to help sharpen policy formulation.



JUST A THOUGHT

AI agents will become the primary way we interact with computers in the future. They will be able to understand our needs and preferences, and proactively help us with tasks and decision making.

SATYA NADELLA

QUICK READ

QUICK READ

The advertising industry has spent two years debating whether artificial intelligence can be creative. Meanwhile, the audience engagement business has undergone a structural shift.

Agentic AI is not just a tool but a leap for marketing. Agencies will have to give up creativity myths while doubling down on context, cultural reading and other things that machines still struggle with.



MY VIEW | THE LAST WORD

MINT CURATOR

Fiscal support for states over the next five years: Is it adequate?

Overall statutory flows to states shrink as a slice of the divisible pool but the Centre's capital grants scheme could compensate



INDIRA RAJARAMAN
is an economist.

The day after the Union Budget on February, US tariffs on Indian exports fell from 50% to 25%, and further to a promise of 18% through a trade deal. Later, the US Supreme Court verdict against 'reciprocal' tariffs resulted in a uniform levy of 10% on all countries, including India, possibly rising to 15%. Wherever it settles, there is some relief for labour-intensive export sectors. But that prospect is now overshadowed by the fear of what renewed hostilities in West Asia will do to trade flows and the price of oil.

The advance estimate of GDP released a month after the Union budget is ₹345.5 trillion for the current fiscal year. At the budget projection of 10% nominal GDP growth next year from the new base, the estimated GDP for 2026-27 drops from ₹393 trillion to ₹380 trillion. Does the nominal growth rate itself need to be upped from 10% because of the real impact of trade deals with the EU and US?

The trade deals are a long way from being finalized. Their impact on India's GDP growth rate will be visible only in 2027-28. That is also the year in which the new pay scales of the 8th Pay Commission will become operative, with arrears due for 15 months. The resulting rise in fiscal expenditure in 2027-28 may possibly get offset by higher growth in GDP and tax revenues that year. But for 2026-27, it is best to leave the nominal growth rate at the budgeted 10% because of new uncertainties around trade and oil prices.

The Union budget announced acceptance of all recommendations of the 16th Finance Commission (FC) for the years 2026-31. But because the FC report was downloadable only after the budget speech, no FC-related grievances were aired while the budget speech was on. This was the first speech in recent years which ran with no interruptions from House members.

The 16th FC adopts the same 41% tax share for states (of gross central tax revenue excluding cesses and surcharges) prescribed by the 15th FC, which initially went with the 42% tax share of the 14th FC. It was reduced to 41% when Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state was given Union territory status (and so fiscally folded into the Union). The 16th FC could have opted to revert conditionally to 42% when the Supreme Court's order restoring statehood to J&K is implemented, but chose not to.

Finance Commissions also recommend absolute grants to states. If accepted by the government, the sum of the tax share and grants constitutes the aggregate statutory commitment to states for five years. The 16th FC prescribes only two grants (both accepted). The 15th FC had five, of which three were accepted and two rejected.

Both FCs have the same tax share of 41%, but the 16th FC's overall statutory provision with two grants added on works out to 44.7% of shareable



Union tax revenues (as projected), lower than the 49.3% of the 15th FC with only its three accepted grants included. This comparison in terms of percentages is perfectly valid, although of course actual tax share receipts are a function of realized tax receipts which often differ from FC projections.

The two rejected 15th FC grants were among those dropped by the 16th FC. In addition, the 16th FC has abolished the revenue deficit grant for states whose current expenditures exceed the sum of projected revenues including tax share receipts. Its abolition, however, need not be mourned because it was problematic, for several reasons not possible to delineate here.

In view of the 16th FC's smaller number of grants, it could have been more generous with the two prescribed: for local bodies and disaster assistance.

Local governments (i.e. municipalities and panchayats) are responsible for the maintenance of water supply, sewerage and rainwater drainage. The Ministry of Health, in response to a Parliamentary question, quoted a study showing a staggering rise after 2021 in killer water-borne diseases like cholera, typhoid, leptospirosis and various types of hepatitis.

Groundwater and pollution monitoring (at state government level) is handicapped by unfilled vacancies, for lack of resources to meet salaries.

The local grant is ₹7.9 trillion for the five years 2026-31. But 18.3% of the total is subject to performance conditionality like having to increase local tax revenue, and at the state level, raising fiscal transfers to local bodies. Undisbursed performance grants will be deflected to performers (para 10.101 of the report), which will worsen the inequality of disease incidence both within and between states.

Fortunately, states get other non-statutory capital grants from the Centre. The hugely popular Scheme for Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) provides funding from which sewage and waste treatment plants can be built or repaired, mechanical cleaners installed and leaking pipes replaced. The choice of capital projects is left to states, although in recent years an increasing proportion is hedged by other reform conditionality.

SASCI is budgeted at ₹185 trillion for 2026-27, as against the statutory local grant for the year of ₹101 trillion. What matters critically is whether SASCI funding is used by states to redress the disastrous rise in incidence of water-borne diseases.

QUICK READ

Given the fewer grants made by the 16th Finance Commission, it could have been more generous with the two it has prescribed: for local bodies and disaster assistance.

Thankfully, states also get non-statutory capital grants from the Centre. Its special assistance scheme for capital investment, funds public projects that the country cannot do without.

Although in recent years an increasing proportion is hedged by other reform conditionality, SASCI is budgeted at ₹185 trillion for 2026-27, as against the statutory local grant for the year of ₹101 trillion. What matters critically is whether SASCI funding is used by states to redress the disastrous rise in incidence of water-borne diseases.

Congressional war authority should assert itself in America

Even symbolic intervention in presidential wars has some value



NOAH FELDMAN
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.



How US presidents declare war isn't what its Constitution envisaged.

When you bomb a country and take out its leader, that's an act of war. Under the American Constitution, US Congress must declare war or otherwise authorize the use of force before the president may take such action. It doesn't matter whether it's Iran, where the joint US-Israeli attacks that killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei have already led to retaliation; Venezuela, where the Trump administration grabbed President Nicolás Maduro in January; or Libya, where the Obama administration participated in a 2011 bombing campaign that led to the removal of Muammar Gaddafi. And it doesn't matter whether the ruler is morally repugnant or a confirmed lifelong enemy of the US. It's still a 'war' for purposes of the American Constitution, not to mention international law.

Back when the Constitution was written, Congress had not only the legal authority but also the power to ensure that the president didn't initiate a war without its authorization. There was no standing army, so Congress had to raise and fund one. Congress also controlled the power of the purse and no fighting could go on for long without a specific appropriation of funds.

In the modern world, as it emerged in the wake of World War II, presidents have access to the world's most lethal arsenal and considerable military forces. A US president who chooses to start a war without Congress's say-so can often get away with it.

The tool that Congress created to constrain the president's war-making authority is the War Powers Resolution of 1973, passed because Richard Nixon illegally bombed Cambodia and Laos, considerably expanding the scope of the Vietnam War without authority from Congress. The resolution requires the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of engaging in hostilities and then gives him 60 days to continue military operations. If Congress fails to authorize the use of force within that time, or if Congress, during that time, enacts a resolution blocking the action, the hostilities become formally unlawful.

House Democrats tried to pass exactly such a resolution over the Iran war that began on Saturday. It failed to get the Senate's approval and was headed for a House vote on Thursday. Even if it had passed, President Donald Trump probably would not have signed it. The days when Congress could pass the War Powers Resolution over Nixon's veto seem like a relic of a remote past—because they are. And presidents can also get away with ignoring such

a resolution altogether. In 1999, President Bill Clinton continued bombing Kosovo for two weeks after the 60-day period had expired without securing congressional authorization.

Egregiously, President Barack Obama's administration took the legal position that bombing Libya did not count as hostilities for purposes of the War Powers Resolution because the mission was "limited," the attacks came from the air and so "exposure of US forces [was] limited." Thus, "the risk of escalation" was limited, too. This was the State Department's view under Hillary Clinton. It contradicted views of the Office of Legal Counsel at the US Department of Justice and those of the Department of Defense. Obama's adoption of this legal theory opened the door for any president to engage in acts of war conducted from the air and claim that the resolution does not apply—in other words, unilateral presidential war-making became *de facto* legal under the Obama position.

Trump's Iran attacks shows why that was a historic mistake. Regardless of whether the current war with Iran lasts more than 60 days, it's certainly a war. Regardless of whether it was a good idea, the Constitution requires Congress to be involved.

The problem is perhaps clearer now, at least to Democrats, because Trump has done more than any other US president in history to make Congress irrelevant and govern without regard to law. But the problem was already in place before Trump. The legality of a presidentially ordered attack cannot depend on whether the Iranian regime collapses, as Gaddafi's did, or manages to persist and fight an extended war against the US, as Iran's might. Nor can it rest on the supposed invulnerability of US forces, who are certainly in harm's way now.

War must be understood to mean war. Hostilities must be understood to mean hostilities. To be clear, even if the effort turns out to be largely symbolic, a War Powers Resolution [being initiated] has sent out a signal. It's all that remains of the US Congress's power to declare war. That power was fundamental to the framers' conception of a constitutional republic. Its loss changes the balance of power in the US within its constitutional order—and for the better.

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Instead of looking for a fine balance, redefine success

SRINATH SRIDHARAN & NISHCHAL JOSHIPURA



are, respectively, a corporate advisor, and author of 'Family and Dharma', @ssmumbai and lead, private equity and M&A, at Nishith Desai Associates.

For the first time in history, four generations are running on empty at the same time. Not because they lack discipline or because nobody has a planner anymore, but because modern life has become relatively unliveable in a very specific way. And yet the advice we keep handing out is almost laughably small: manage your time better, find your balance, figure it out.

That is what the twenties have become for many people. It is an age-span in which you are expected to build a career, shape your personality, forge a future and some-

how stay calm through it all. Consider the odds. 'Hustle culture' has turned availability into virtue and social media has turned comparison into background noise. You are told you have flexibility, but the real rule is to always be reachable.

Then come the thirties, the decade where life stops pretending it is manageable. Work accelerates just as everything else arrives: marriage, children, mortgages, ageing parents, long-term financial pressure, the exhausting expectation that you should be thriving, fit, present and grateful. Burnout begins to seem normal.

A friend once described his evenings in his mid-thirties as "a relay race of guilt. Guilty leaving office calls unfinished. Guilty missing bedtime stories. Guilty being physically at home but mentally elsewhere. The calendar fills, the mind splinters and the feeling of never fully showing up anywhere becomes strangely routine. The thirties now seem like a story of permanent over-dressed up as adulthood maturity.

In India, this overload has a familiar texture. The late-night WhatsApp from a senior. The expectation that you will join a work call even from a wedding, hospital corridor or family dinner. The casual praise for being

"always on," as if exhaustion is proof of commitment. Entire careers are built on this over-availability and entire personal lives shrink around it.

By the forties, many people reach the outward markers of success: seniority, credibility, financial comfort, a life that looks stable. And yet this is often when an inner compression begins. Work brings more responsibility and visibility, with less margin for error. At home, children need emotional presence, partners need attention, parents begin to need care.

Health starts sending subtle warnings that the body has kept score.

The real crisis of the forties is the disappearance of reflection. Life becomes so saturated with obligation that you stop asking whether the balance you have struck holds you up or you are.

In the fifties, the question shifts again. The quest for a work-life balance is less about performance and more about sustainability.

There is deep expertise at work, but also a growing awareness of energy, relevance and runway. People are expected to be anchors of stability while adapting to relentless change. The central question is no longer, "How much can I do?" but "How long can I keep doing this, and at what cost?"

Across these decades, one pattern holds. The personal self becomes a casualty. We talk about work-life balance as if it is a neat equation between professional and family life. But the deeper tension is often between the professional self and the family self, with the personal self vanishing.

Between the tags of duty on one side and ambition on the other, people ration not just their time, but their identity.

In trying to be everything for everyone, they risk becoming partly absent everywhere.

What unites all of us is a common, but also a misguided, expectation. Organizations that reward over-availability rather than effectiveness.

QUICK READ

The four-decade span of a career can get ever more taxing as one goes along. Burnout looms. The real exhaustion we face, though, is the quiet loss of the personal self between work and family.

For success, grant it space to exist. Not only in service of others but also for itself. An endless game of splitting oneself for a work-life balance could result in waking up feeling empty.

Cultures that glorify exhaustion as commitment. Definitions of success that remain externally visible while burnout is privately borne. And perhaps most critically, expectations we place on ourselves. A real balance does not come from efficiency, but from negotiating priorities honestly, over and over, at every stage of life.

Professionally, leaders help who model boundaries rather than merely preaching them, organizations that reward clarity instead of chaos, and cultures that normalize limits and do not glorify burnout. Personally, it helps to pick peace over perpetual escalation, let go of generational comparisons and reset what 'enough' means before health or relationships prove that less is more.

A meaningful life doesn't call for a perfect balance. It involves trade-offs that are revised often and adjusted earnestly. People across generations would arguably struggle less if they attain clarity.

Perhaps it is time to redefine success as a life where the personal self is allowed to exist, not only in service of others but also for itself. Because if you keep splitting yourself to meet every demand, one day you might just wake up fully accomplished and completely gone.

Reforms vindicated

Uptick in GST collections, a welcome trend shift

The revival in GST revenue growth in February (8.1 and 7.9 per cent, in gross and net terms, respectively) indicates that consumption demand is responding well to the tax cuts in September. The upturn comes after four indifferent months; growth in net GST collections was flat in October, and negative in November and December, and mildly positive in January (2.8 per cent). Last month's collection seems like a trend-breaker, where the lower rates have been offset by demand. The Budget has pencilled in a 2.6 per cent drop in collections in FY27.

GST collections could better expectations, unless prolonged global headwinds act as a serious drag on the economy. Significantly, gross domestic GST revenue recorded 5.3 per cent growth in February, the rest of the growth coming from imports. Growth in auto sales including two-wheelers, three-wheelers, commercial and passenger vehicles were at a record high of 25.6 per cent in February. Other high frequency indicators — such as improvement in bank credit growth, higher e-way bills generation and PMI Manufacturing hitting a four-month high in February — too point towards good domestic demand.

Notwithstanding this positive all-India performance, there are inter-State variations. States with a large services segment have shown a stronger uptick in February. For instance, Karnataka recorded 11 per cent growth in SGST revenue, probably led by consumption by services sector employees. Similarly, Telangana has also reported 12 per cent growth in SGST collection. But States such as Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh continue to witness contraction in SGST revenue. While these variations are yet to be fully understood — it could be due to seasonal factors, statistical anomalies, or consumption patterns specific to a State — they could well change over time.

The Centre should now focus on other aspects, such as improving compliance and the technical infrastructure. GST has ushered in enterprise formalisation; the GST taxpayer base has increased from 60 lakh in 2017 to 1.5 crore in April 2025. Small businesses are jumping on to the GST bandwagon. Formalisation has picked up, but the informal economy is still estimated at about 45 per cent of GVA. GST must be reformed as a process that encourages on-boarding, through simplified registrations, tax return filings, input tax credit claims, fewer anomalies in the interpretation of provisions and an efficient refunds process. GST tribunals should play a facilitating role here. The tax authorities should not veer towards excesses in the pursuit of targets, more so where micro-enterprises are involved. A case in point is the booking of tea vendors in Karnataka last year on the basis of their UPI transactions. The pursuit of reforms, such as tax cuts, should be accompanied by ease of compliance for all businesses.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"It's hopeless! I expected to see some news of peace at least on fake-media outlets!"

Informal sector growth holds up

DATA POINTS. The new national accounts series shows that the informal sector has grown robustly in recent times



R. GOPALAN
M.C. SINGHI

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) released the new series of National Accounts with 2022-23 as its base on February 27, 2026. The new series has been introduced to address the concerns of quality of data and of a dated base.

The MoSPI informs that the new series improves compilation of private corporate institutional sector data by segregating activities in multi-activity enterprises. It also improves coverage of the unincorporated sector using annual survey data. It uses double deflation in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors and single extrapolation in the remaining sectors.

It incorporates updated rates and ratios from recent studies, extensively uses GST/new administrative data sources and synchronises production and expenditure side estimates better by integrating with Supply and Use Table (SUT) framework.

The new series uses 2022-23 as the base. It neutralises the impact of demonetisation, all India GST rollout and the pandemic, each of which overshadowed the growth, more particularly of the informal and MSME sectors. The GDP estimates based on the new series are, however, reasonably aligned to the old series.

Overall GDP in 2022-23 (the base year) at ₹23,761,232 crore is 96.4 per cent of the old series GDP at current prices. The ratio of new series to old series for other macro parameters is as follows: private final consumption expenditure, 90.3 per cent; gross value added, 96.4 per cent; and gross fixed capital formation, 96.4 per cent. Overall GDP growth at current prices for the new series during 2023-24, 2024-25 and 2025-26 are estimated at 11 per cent, 9.7 per cent and 8.6 per cent, respectively.

NO SURPRISES

The new GDP/GFCF ratio for 2023-24, 2024-25 and 2025-26 is estimated at 31.9 per cent, 31.6 per cent and 31.7 per cent, respectively. The new GDP series hardly surprises. With the incorporation of new data, one expected an increase in the value of the macro aggregates. However, they happen to be lower than the old estimates.



the Table. First, the informal sector has not witnessed any deterioration relative to other sectors (corporate and government). In fact, the informal sector has grown better than other sectors in gross value added, with growth in 2023-24 and 2024-25 being 12.9 per cent and 9.7 per cent respectively compared to economy wide growth of 10.7 per cent and 9.6 per cent. The share of the informal sector in GVA in new series is higher than in the old series.

Second, capital formation in the informal sector is poor. The investment/GVA ratio of the informal sector has been quite sticky at 33-34 per cent compared to nearly 38 per cent for the non-informal sector. This situation is the same in both the old and new series. Steady lower capital intensity could be a reason. However, the gap is not wide enough to suggest credit distortions or their spillover out.

Third, the share of the informal sector in total savings has declined rather sharply in the new series; an upsurge is seen only in 2022-23. One reason is that the sector is witnessing stress due to reducing profitability.

Overall economy and informal sector (in ₹ cr)

| Overall economy | New Series 2022-23 base | | | Old Series 2011-12 base | |
|--|-------------------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|
| | 2022-23 | 2023-24 | 2024-25 | 2022-23 | 2023-24 |
| Gross Value Added | 23,763,761 | 26,316,103 | 28,854,467 | 24,646,698 | 27,712,888 |
| Gross Savings | 7,772,917 | 9,517,450 | 11,113,324 | 8,244,048 | 9,259,186 |
| Gross Capital Formation | 8,626,876 | 9,624,575 | 10,447,228 | 8,695,888 | 9,624,795 |
| Informal sector | | | | | |
| Gross Value Added | 10,694,985 | 12,078,453 | 13,250,480 | 10,911,414 | 11,848,489 |
| Gross Savings | 5,225,437 | 5,963,550 | 6,900,602 | 5,010,475 | 5,461,259 |
| Gross Capital Formation | 3,674,635 | 4,094,766 | 4,425,126 | 3,614,851 | 3,844,515 |
| Share of informal sector in overall macro parameters (per cent) | | | | | |
| Gross Value Added | 45.0 | 45.9 | 45.9 | 44.3 | 43.2 |
| Gross Savings | 67.2 | 62.7 | 62.1 | 60.8 | 59.0 |
| Gross Capital Formation | 42.6 | 42.5 | 42.4 | 41.6 | 39.9 |

The availability of new data sets, new rates and ratios and quality enhancement were important for the informal sector. Data on corporate and government sectors are reasonably correct. With the availability of unincorporated enterprises data, the non-agricultural informal sector data on manufacturing, trade, transport and

The new series invalidates completely the general apprehension of near collapse of informal sector post demonetisation, GST rollout and the pandemic

services are available on a regular basis.

Agriculture data, based on crop cutting survey, are reasonably better. It is generally believed that the informal sector, which contributes nearly 40 per cent of GVA, was relatively adversely affected because of structural changes in the economy such as demonetisation and GST and the pandemic, resulting in an overstatement of GDP on the basis of the formal sector data. It is, therefore, important to look at the informal sector's contribution to macro parameters in view of the latest data sets. The Table summarises key parameters of the informal sector in the old and new series of national accounts. Three observations can be made from

WHAT THE NEW SERIES REVEALS

The new series invalidates completely the general apprehension of near collapse of informal sector post demonetisation, GST rollout and the pandemic. The informal sector, particularly the non-agriculture segment, has been equally robust, though productivity growth and marketing tie-ups with established players is requiring attention.

Secondly, notwithstanding this invalidation, more disclosure is needed about the growth of the informal sector, as what the new series indicates is in contradiction to the growth seen in the quarterly surveys of unincorporated enterprises.

Third, with the investment/GDP ratio nearly stagnant in both the formal and informal sectors, measures for accelerating the ratio beyond their current levels are required. Underutilised capacity may provide some cushion; but with reducing product cycle due to innovation, destruction of excess capacity could occur.

The Union Budget does talk about support to innovation and legacy industries including MSMEs, but it still has not fully assessed the threats.

Gopalan is former Secretary, Economic Affairs, and Singhi is former Senior Economic Adviser, Ministry of Finance. Views expressed are personal

When platform design poses a regulatory risk

Regulators are now taking serious note of manipulative designs in websites and apps intended to shape consumer choice

Shwetasee Majumder

If you have ever rushed to complete an online purchase because a timer warned you "Only 2 minutes left!", only to see the same timer reset the next day, you have encountered what regulators call a "dark pattern". Dark patterns are design tricks built into websites and apps that nudge, or sometimes push, consumers into decisions they may not otherwise make. They include hidden charges that appear only at checkout, pre-ticked subscription boxes, confusing cancellation processes, or messages that create artificial urgency. Individually, these may seem like minor irritants. At scale, regulators believe they distort consumer choice.

Over the past year, India has begun treating these practices not as clever marketing, but as potential violations of consumer law.

A landmark study of 11,000 shopping websites identified 1,818 instances of dark patterns and documented third-party vendors offering such tools at scale.

INDIA'S REGULATORY SHIP
India's Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Dark Patterns, notified by the Central Consumer Protection Authority in 2023 under the Consumer Protection Act, expressly categorise

specific interface designs as unfair trade practices, collapsing the distance between design choice and legal exposure.

The Central Consumer Protection Authority has also issued advisories calling on platforms to conduct internal self-audits and, in some cases, to submit compliance declarations. The regulatory focus seems to be on whether platforms have reviewed their user flows, identified risks, and taken corrective action.

This signals a shift from reactive enforcement to proactive supervision. With 2026 widely expected to see stronger enforcement, businesses have a narrow window to prepare.

What makes dark patterns scrutiny particularly consequential is that it does not sit neatly within consumer law alone. Design choices that limit real choice or hide key information can also raise issues under data protection, advertising and even competition law. Consent obtained through manipulative design may fail the standard of being free and informed under India's data protection framework and misrepresentation can simultaneously raise issues under advertising standards.

At the margins, where platforms exploit behavioural biases at scale, design choices may also attract competition law scrutiny as exploitative conduct, particularly in markets characterised by lock-in and asymmetry



DARK PATTERN. Nudging consumers

of information. The regulatory risk, therefore, is not siloed. A single problematic user journey can trigger parallel exposure across consumer protection, data protection, advertising regulation, and, in time, competition law.

For marketplaces and intermediaries, the challenge is sharper. Many elements of the consumer experience are layered: sellers set prices, logistics partners update delivery timelines, marketing tools generate prompts. The final interface is often the result of multiple systems interacting.

Yet from a regulator's perspective, the origin of a misleading nudge matters less than its effect. If a platform enables a checkout process that obscures costs or makes exit difficult, liability may follow, even if no single team intended to mislead. At digital scale, small design choices can affect millions of users

simultaneously. That amplifies both impact and risk.

Traditionally, compliance in digital businesses centred on terms of service, privacy policies and filings. Dark pattern scrutiny changes that. The focus is shifting to product design itself.

This does not mean lawyers must sit in every design meeting. But it does mean companies need to internalise mechanisms to review high-risk flows — cancellation processes, default settings, subscription prompts, consent requests — before they go live.

Forward-looking businesses are embedding legal and compliance checks earlier in product development, rather than treating them as post-launch corrections. Where regulators are openly encouraging self-audits, the absence of internal review may itself invite questions.

The scrutiny of dark patterns reflects a broader rethinking of how consumer protection applies in the digital economy.

For India's fast-growing digital platforms, the question is no longer whether interface design will attract regulatory attention. It is whether governance systems are ready for it. In the race to optimise conversion rates, businesses may have to pay equal attention to something less glamorous but far more enduring: trust.

The writer is Managing Partner, Fidus Law Chambers

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Step up vigil

This refers to Lessons from 'Jayants' (March 5). The recent banking scam in handling government accounts exposed the weakness in monitoring and controlling the system of funds transfer. While there are several loopholes on the State government side too, much blame was unfortunately on the bank side.

Though RBI said there was no systemic fault, it has to take very serious actions on the bank as well as on the erring officials. The incident also highlights the need for a

thorough screening and background check of persons during the hiring process. Such incidents put the banks in poor light and erode the confidence and trust among the public.

RBI has to make it mandatory to have six eye checks for such transactions involving bulk transfer of funds. It also has to ensure that necessary alert messages reach the concerned depositor or the official account holder on all financial and non-financial activities.

R V Baskaran
Pune

Critical strategy
It is with reference to the news article 'Strategy to secure critical minerals' (March 5).

As over 90 per cent of critical minerals like lithium and cobalt are currently imported, India must formulate a new strategy to mitigate these vulnerabilities.

Recognising the urgency of securing critical minerals, it can engage with resource-rich nations like Australia and Chile. India has to reassess its minerals security strategy and enhance diplomatic outreach and bolster

domestic capabilities. It must promote geological mapping, enable private participation and uphold the environmental safeguards to tap its untapped critical mineral resources and reduce import dependency.

P Victor Selvaraj
Palayamkottai (TN)

Speed caution
This refers to 'Speed is not always a virtue in finance' (March 5). The Deputy Governor's observations make much sense for today's bankers. With 'speed' increasingly becoming the 'taraka mantra' in

banking operations, there is always the risk of some dilution in credit appraisal. Such compromises can eventually impair the quality of the credit portfolio and lead to huge provisions.

While leveraging technology for efficiency and outreach, banks would do well to keep the core principles of corporate governance uppermost in their minds, particularly in their lending practices. In banking, speed should never supersede sound judgement.
R Mohan
Kumbakonam

Healthcare's exit multiples

Why curbs on PE investment in healthcare are vital

M Muneer

India's hospitals have discovered a new vital sign — EBITDA.

Over the past decade, private equity (PE) has entered India's healthcare sector. Hospitals, diagnostics chains, fertility clinics, dialysis centres, oncology networks... nothing with a human body attached has been left unfinancialised.

The pitch is — PE will “professionalise” healthcare, bring “process efficiency”, improve “asset utilisation”, and scale access. What gets quietly de-emphasised is ‘care’ in healthcare. The healthcare sector has attracted over \$30 billion in private equity and venture capital since 2015, with deal sizes accelerating sharply post-Covid. Large hospital chains now routinely operate under PE ownership or influence, with expected internal rates of return (IRR) ranging from 18-25 per cent.

The problem is not efficiency *per se*. The problem is what gets optimised when efficiency is defined by exit multiples.

Average length of stay is no longer a clinical judgement... it is a spreadsheet variable. Diagnostic tests are no longer ordered to rule out disease but to rule in revenue. ICU beds are not scarce medical resources; they are “high-yield assets”. Surgeons are not healers; they are “rainmakers”. And patients, inconveniently mortal, are the only stakeholders who cannot negotiate terms.

PE-backed healthcare has not made care cheaper. It has made billing more sophisticated.

If PE is the accelerator, insurance is the oxygen. India's private health insurance market has grown at over 20 per cent CAGR, crossing ₹1 trillion in gross premiums. This has created a perverse nexus: hospitals over-treat, insurers underpay, and patients are squeezed in between.

PE-backed management loves this ecosystem. Insurance guarantees cash flow. Denials can be externalised to the insurer. Doctors are incentivised to maximise billable interventions.

PE prides itself on processes. In healthcare, this translates into clinical pathways designed not merely for outcomes, but for throughput. Doctors increasingly report pressure to meet revenue targets. Senior clinicians are replaced with younger, cheaper doctors. Time spent per patient shrinks. Empathy does not feature in quarterly reviews.



HEALTHCARE. Money matters
GETTY IMAGES

THE IRONY OF ‘ACCESS’
The most ironic claim of PE-backed healthcare is improved access. Yes, hospital chains have expanded into Tier-2 cities. But access to what? Certainly not affordable care.

A comparison of treatment costs shows that procedures in large corporate hospitals cost as much as four times more than in government or charitable hospitals, with no commensurate difference in outcomes for routine interventions.

What has expanded is access to premium pricing, not universal care.

Meanwhile, public hospitals — still handling over 60 per cent of India's inpatient load — remain underfunded, understaffed, and invisible to capital markets.

This is not an argument against private participation. It is an argument against unchecked financialisation of a moral, essential service.

India should seriously consider restricting or conditioning PE investment in healthcare delivery, particularly in hospitals and critical care. Options include:

Caps on ownership or returns in essential healthcare services; mandatory reinvestment requirements tied to patient outcomes; separation of ownership and clinical governance; transparent pricing and outcome disclosure norms; stricter regulation of insurer-hospital contracts.

Healthcare is not just another sector waiting to be “unlocked”. It is a social contract.

When capital enters without conscience, care exits without ceremony. Private equity has its place... in technology, logistics, and even diagnostics to an extent. But when the sick become revenue streams and suffering becomes a margin opportunity, the state must intervene.

The writer is a Fortune-500 advisor, start-up investor and co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute for Innovation.



PRATIM RANJAN BOSE

The Middle-East crisis can, in fact, be a boon to India-Bangladesh relations. After the exit of the Muhammad Yunus-led interim administration, anti-India rhetoric has stopped. The newly elected Tarique Rahman government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is giving every conceivable signal that it wants to restore ties.

The emerging economic crisis can only pave the ground for better ties. The combined setbacks — of the post-Covid supply chain disruption; aggressive monetary tightening by the US, pushing the dollar index to a record high; and the decline in global trade coupled with global inflation following the Ukraine crisis — have stalled Bangladesh's decade-long growth story under the Sheikh Hasina government.

The economy was showing early signs of stabilisation when Hasina was ousted from power. As of June 2024, inflation was 9.5 per cent, foreign exchange reserves improved and exports were on a recovery path. Remittances, however, suffered.

Bangladesh slipped into a debt-trap during the interim rule. Hasina borrowed to finance infrastructure projects. Yunus cut development expenditure by over 12 per cent yet public debt is up by 13-14 per cent. Added to this is the widening revenue gap. Dhaka is clearly meeting current expenditure through borrowings.

ECONOMIC DISTRESS

As an import-dependent economy, all economic activities in Bangladesh necessarily lead to imports. As of March 2026, private investments are at an 11-year low. Bank credit to the private sector is at a record low. Suppressed activities kept the forex position artificially stable but created a supply deficit of goods. Inflation is ruling high at 8.5 per cent. It crept up throughout the winter months.

To cut a long story short, the Yunus administration's moves to suppress political dissent, coupled with indiscriminate arrests and destruction of Awami League-affiliated businesses, hit the economy hard.

GDP growth was down from 4.22 per cent in 2023-24 to less than 3.5 per cent in 2024-25. Jobs were lost and poverty rose.

Bangladesh is now operating at a low equilibrium and may collapse at the slightest external shock. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has an unenviable task of bringing both social and economic order. To complicate matters, he has promised the moon to voters.

Yunus survived much of the criticism



It's time to step up India, Bangladesh ties

IMPACT OF WAR. For Bangladesh, better ties with India will help it weather the economic effects of the current Middle East crisis

by blaming Hasina but Tarique will not have that advantage. The interim administration signed a one-sided deal with the US three days prior to the election. Tarique's foreign minister — who was a key negotiator for Yunus — claimed that the pact was reached in consensus with the BNP.

Meanwhile, the patience of voters is running low after three-and-a-half years of economic struggle. The Islamists, who ruled the roost in the Yunus administration, are waiting to capitalise on grievances and capture power.

The situation is already tough, and the Iran crisis has made it worse. If the war continues for a few more weeks, it will have a devastating impact on the

Removing all barriers to trade and connectivity is an immediate requirement to combat inflation in Bangladesh.
The new Tarique Rahman government must scrap all import curbs from India's North-East

economy. Nothing short of a full-scale restoration of India-Bangladesh ties can help Tarique survive the imminent disaster.

REMOVE BARRIERS

Removing all barriers to trade and connectivity is an immediate requirement to combat inflation. Bangladesh suffers from high logistics costs. Corruption in the National Board of Revenue (NBR) led the Hasina administration to impose import restrictions through India's North-Eastern gates. Tarique must remove them.

A fully ready rail-connected terminal at Sabroom in Tripura, bordering the Chittagong Hill Tracts, has been waiting for inauguration since August 2024. Opening the route can reduce the price of staples — like eggs and wheat — in northern Bangladesh.

The Padma Bridge was supposed to pave the way for direct rail-based container movement between Kolkata and Dhaka. It can bring down transport costs substantially and make the turnaround faster. Work must be initiated on a foot footing for trade facilitation. The US submarine attack off the Sri Lankan coast may severely

impact trade in the Bay of Bengal. Before the Yunus administration came to power, Delhi was working to offer Bangladeshi exporters an opportunity to ship products through the Nhava Sheva port in Mumbai. Kolkata-Dhaka rail cargo movement can open up that opportunity.

Until that happens, India can reopen air-cargo transshipment through Delhi. The war has sent air fares through the roof, which were already higher from Bangladesh.

Disruptions in the Middle-East has increased shipping time and cost. The India-Bangladesh diesel pipeline helps Bangladesh cut delivery time and reduce the need for high capital blockage in inventories.

The pipeline, which now ends at Parbatipur in north Bangladesh, must be extended to Dhaka.

Desperate times need extraordinary measures. BNP thrived in the past on anti-India rhetoric and blamed Delhi for not supporting it. The time has come for the party to rewrite the rules.

That's a win-win for Delhi. For India, a thriving and prosperous Bangladesh will be less of a security concern.

The writer is an independent journalist

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 6, 2006

Bond market turns jittery

The domestic bond market appears to be jittery post Union Budget, with the Finance Minister having indicated that the Government might borrow an additional Rs 15,000 crore. This unscheduled auction in the last month of this fiscal is expected to put further pressure on the supply of funds that is already tight, said dealers.

Participatory notes here to stay

Participatory Notes (PNs), the much-debated capital market instrument, are here to stay despite concerns raised by the Reserve Bank of India. However, as a measure to check their misuse, the Securities and Exchange Board of India would soon have added powers to track the beneficiaries of PNs should the capital market regulator at any point require such information.

Brand-building bug bites mid-sized real estate developers

Advertising is all about selling dreams, little wonder that mid-sized real estate developers are roping in well-known advertising agencies to help them sell dream homes. Consider this: Taneja Developers and Infrastructure has appointed Rediffusion DY&R to manage its advertising account and Omaxe is handled by Lowe India.

Bloomberg News

China sets its most modest growth target in more than three decades, in a tacit acknowledgment that the model powering the country's rapid rise for four decades is showing strains.

The goal — a range of 4.5-5 per cent — was in a copy of the government's annual work report seen by Bloomberg News. It marks the first formal downgrade since 2023 and the least ambitious expansion goal since 1991.

While widely anticipated by economists, it carries symbolic weight in a country where growth figures function as political statements as much as economic forecasts. No target was set in 2020 because of the pandemic.

The shift signals Beijing's comfort with a slower pace while seeking more sustainable growth drivers to replace

debt-fuelled property and infrastructure investment. A lower target also reduces the pressure on officials to deploy aggressive stimulus despite a volatile global trade environment.

Premier Li Qiang is expected to officially announce the target Thursday morning in Beijing. The report to the national parliament will also detail objectives for employment and inflation that will dictate the scale of 2026 fiscal support. The legislative session begins as external uncertainties threaten China's export-led recovery. Widening Middle East conflicts risk disrupting trade routes and complicate a summit between Chinese leader Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump just weeks away.

Surging exports accounted for a third of China's 5 per cent growth last year, the highest share since 1997. This



CHINA. Growth worries

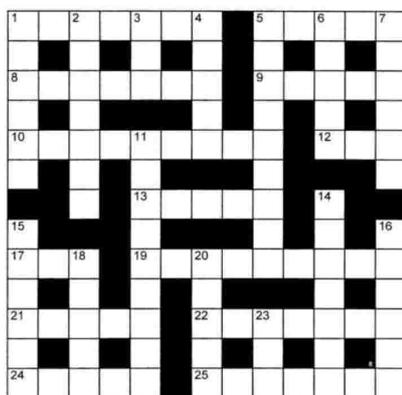
reliance highlights a deepening imbalance as efforts to boost domestic spending have so far failed to offset the impact of a property market collapse.

A conservative growth target would reduce the prospects of forceful stimulus. The government is reluctant to roll out sweeping easing as it did in previous downturns, for fear of worsening a record debt-to-GDP ratio and squeezing profit margins at state banks. Still, that remains above the 4.17 per cent average annual gain the

government deems necessary for the next decade to double per capita GDP between 2020 and 2035. Xi sees achieving the milestone as a critical step to turn China into a “powerful modern socialist country” by mid-century.

That long-term vision depends on Chinese factories' ability to sell more abroad, as well as to the world. However, that strategy is threatened by rising trade barriers prompted by China's record trade surpluses. The International Monetary Fund is among those warning that this imbalance is unsustainable without a major pivot toward consumption. However, the government has struggled to shift resources to households while prioritising industrial self-reliance for the sake of national security. A patchy social safety net and increasing working hours are also preventing individuals from spending more.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2631



EASY

- ACROSS**
01. Seemliness of conduct (7)
05. Somewhere around (5)
08. Gigantic beast (7)
09. Body representing workers (5)
10. Bring to one's favour (9)
12. (Of horses) move to the right, move on (7)
13. Black bird (5)
17. Fairly like being (3)
19. Without exception (9)
21. Industrial machinery (5)
22. One rejected by society (7)
24. Behind schedule (5)
25. Had a longing for (7)
- DOWN**
01. Affectedly modest (6)
02. Dog-like; not seeing good in anything (7)
03. Decay (3)
04. Telegraphic code (5)
05. Ample sufficiency (9)
06. Dues (5)
07. Easily chewed (6)
11. Ornamental inlaid wood-work (9)
14. Haughtiness, contempt (7)
15. Spouted china vessel (6)
16. With channels, grooves cut in (6)
18. Natural aptitude (5)
20. Tusk material (5)
23. Two (Scot) (3)

NOT SO EASY

- ACROSS**
01. Proper conduct of 4 turns curious (7)
05. It is roughly here and there (5)
08. Abnormally large storm Northeast is suffering (7)
09. Students' club shows Jack the flag (5)
10. Tip one for MC: modern English arrangement (9)
12. Horse will move to the right of East, for example, backing (3)
13. Barnaby's companion rapped at Poe's door (5)
17. Fairlylike child almost ran away backwards (3)
19. Sort of joint found all over the world (9)
21. Firmly place one's foot on a growing thing (5)
22. One rejected is no longer fashionable with the players (7)
24. Sailor will dry right out if behindhand (5)
25. Broken reed any might have longed for (7)

- DOWN**
01. Perhaps rude about half of them being so modest (6)
02. Seeing no good in New York, California and Channel Islands (7)
03. The rubbish one wrote about it (3)
04. Sam devised a code for the Carpenter's companion (5)
05. A what call that's in plentiful supply (9)
06. Having vig on that's someone not yet paid for (5)
07. Boat's smaller craft one will offer for acceptance (6)
11. Attempt to follow car brand with decorative work in wood (9)
14. Look with contempt on how it did a sin (7)
15. Poet at variance with Dormouse's situation (6)
16. With grooves it sounded mellifluous (6)
18. Faculty for nosing out first fox's hiding-place (5)
20. Off-white and gold Aralia is around (5)
23. Two Scots in an American airline (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2630

ACROSS 1. Brown 4, Bucolic 8, Inept 9, Growth-up 10, Due 11, Component 12, Note 13, Opal 18, Battalion 20, Eve 21, Opening 22, Edict 23, Kitchen 24, Tower
DOWN 1. Building-block 2. Overeat 3. Notice 4. Bigamy 5. Croton 6. Lance 7. Capital letter 14. Preview 15. Parish 16. Virgin 17. Invest 19. Theft

Hold On, Bumpy Ride To Continue for Now

Energy price surge to test markets

Investor reaction to the Iran conflict has been gaining momentum, with oil prices rising as the Persian Gulf blockade drags on. The market reaction has been muted to Donald Trump's announcement of insurance for oil tankers against strikes in the Hormuz Strait. Crude oil is now trading above \$90 a barrel, and the dollar is also firming up. Equity markets have recovered from the initial shock of the war, but volatility will persist until doubts over energy supplies are conclusively dispelled. The duration of the conflict is the key unknown that markets are grappling with.

Alternative energy supplies from Russia are making their way back into the market, which is expected to reduce global prices. The US and its allies cannot enforce restrictions on Russian energy exports, with Opec producers facing attacks on their energy infrastructure. South Korea has deployed market-stabilising funds to curb volatility. China has told its refiners to halt petrol and diesel exports. The energy market is adapting to the possibility of a drawn-out hostilities in West Asia. Investor anxiety could subside as more adjustments are announced in the global energy trade. These are also expected to relieve stress in the shipping industry.

Effects of a persistent surge in energy prices will test the resilience of the global economy which is caught up in tariff disruptions. Energy insecurity also feeds into investor concerns over a possible AI bubble. Bond yields are firming up in anticipation of central banks turning hawkish over inflation. Central banks are likely to look through a temporary spike in fuel prices but will be keenly monitoring inflationary expectations. Separate sectoral assessments need to be made about the impact on tourism, aviation and energy infrastructure. Markets are unpacking all these headlines, apart from those dealing with likely off-ramps for the conflict. It is going to be a bumpy ride in the markets for a while longer.

That Sinking Feeling About Trump Regime

The sinking of Iranian navy frigate IRIS Dana in Indian Ocean's littoral space defies just the logic of what the US considers to be strategy, but the logic of war — calling it whatever notwithstanding — itself. The vessel was returning from joint naval exercises off India's east coast, and was torpedoed by a US submarine. The geographic location of the hostile act is a matter of concern for India, and that this may have led to Gof finally condoning Ali Khamenei's assassination is more than understandable.

The Trump regime is sounding increasingly garbled, its narratives contradictory yards depending on who's saying it — Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, Pete Hegseth... The sinking of a non-combat Iranian asset falls in this category of confusion. What was intended by the act? It certainly couldn't have been to neutralise a vessel off the coast of Sri Lanka, as far from the theatre of war as can be. Instead, it has brought about serious questions to be asked about US accountability and objectives. Being left to manage the fallout of Trump's actions is not a good enough reason.

India has been unnecessarily put in an uncomfortable position. Pleading off questions about India's authority in its neighbourhood is not what 'strategic autonomy' is supposed to deliver. The US is increasingly guilty of playing the bull in the global china shop. It is one thing to have an 'America First' set of policies, quite another to make it 'America First, Second, Third...' at the cost of other countries, including friendly ones like India. The ongoing crisis started last weekend by the Trump regime underscores a stark reality: global stability now hinges on actions driven more by sketchy, regressive unilateral ambition than diplomacy. This cannot continue.



THINK ABOUT IT

Two marsupials — poor things — have been rediscovered by humans

Called Up for Duty From Extinction

It is with great reluctance that we share the news of the resurrection of the pygmy long-fingered possum and the ring-tailed glider — two marsupial species considered 'Lazarus taxon', or any species or group that was thought to be extinct, but later rediscovered alive — who, for 6,000 yrs, enjoyed the dignity of being considered extinct. Their recent discovery in a remote rainforest in West Papua is being hailed as a triumph of science. We hope it's a clerical error. Because extinction is the ultimate retirement plan. No more predators, no more habitat loss, no more awkward photographers from Nat Geo. To be thought of as extinct is to be free of human curiosity, that relentless paparazzi of the natural world.

But, now these creatures must endure the indignity of conservationists poking them, journalists photographing them — and editors written on them. The possum, with its absurdly elongated finger, will be mocked as nature's failed attempt at a backscratcher. The glider, once soaring majestically, will be reduced to a mascot for rainforest preservation campaigns. Better they had remained myth, whispered about in hushed tones, than to suffer the indignity of human rediscovery. 'Extinction' was their golden age. Discovery is their downfall. Sometimes, the kindest thing we can do for a species is to leave it blissfully forgotten.

Trade breakthroughs make India a compelling long-term bet for investors facing global uncertainties

Reaching Destination



Krishnamurthy V Subramanian

If foreign investors want to grow their investments 6x in dollar terms over the next two decades, they should invest in India now. Even as war in West Asia roils global markets, India's trade agreements with both the US and the EU is the critical signal that long-horizon investors can ignore only at their peril. Post Covid, India has entered a phase of economic expansion that's both powerful and durable. By advancing structural reforms, India can sustain 8% real growth for the next two decades. This estimate rests on structural realities that set India apart.

Start with the sheer room to grow. India's per-capita GDP is roughly \$3,000 today. Even after two decades of 8% growth, it would remain below \$8,000, a level at which labour productivity has historically continued to climb. Then consider unutilised labour and capital. India's female labour-force participation has nearly doubled in 6 yrs, rising from 22% in 2018 to 42% in 2024, and significant scope remains.

Nearly half the economy is still informal. So, formalisation alone can drive productivity gains for decades. Credit penetration, at about 60% of GDP, lags far behind the global average of roughly 100%.

Over two decades till 2040, inflation exceeded 7% on average, pushing the rupee to depreciate by 3.5-4% annually, diluting dollar returns. Following implementation of the inflation-targeting framework, inflation has averaged 5%.



All aboard

Given that India's leapfrogging in the digital economy the potential for sound credit growth to fuel productivity substantially.

Unlike advanced economies that must push the productivity frontier to grow, much of India's growth comes from catch-up, with some critical sectors also innovating at the frontier. Cross-country productivity data bear this out. India's productivity growth has averaged about 25% since 2014, nearly double the 13% recorded from 2002 to 2013.

For foreign investors, this moment is exceptional because 8% real growth can deliver about 11% growth in nominal dollars. In the past, India's rapid growth carried a penalty. Over two decades ending in 2015, inflation exceeded 7% on average, pushing the rupee to depreciate by 3.5-4% annually, thereby diluting dollar returns.

That regime has changed. Following implementation of the inflation-targeting framework in 2016, inflation has averaged 5%, despite pandemic-era disruptions and war-driven commodity shocks. With inflation roughly 2 percentage points lower, rupee depreciation has correspondingly fallen to about 2.5% annually, or roughly 1% over the last decade. 1.52



The economic arithmetic for 11% dollar return is simple: 8% real growth, plus 4% inflation, minus 1% depreciation.

So, an investor who allocates \$1 mn today could grow it to \$8 mn by 2047. That's not a bad return, given that the US' considerably weaker fiscal position and growing threats to its central bank's independence. The estimate also doesn't account for faster real appreciation of the rupee from India's accelerated productivity and greater global integration in the traded sectors of the economy.

The economic arithmetic for 11% dollar return is simple: 8% real growth, plus 4% inflation, minus 1% depreciation. This projection is consistent with historical experience. Over multi-25-year periods in the past, India has delivered more than 8.5% annual

growth in nominal US dollars. Adding the 3 percentage-point reduction in inflation, you get 11.5% annual growth even using historical data.

At 11% annual return, investments double every 6-and-a-half years. Over two decades, that means three doublings. So, an investor who allocates \$1 mn today could grow it to \$8 million by 2047. No other large economy offers foreign investors such large multiplication in their investments.

Despite increased global uncertainty, citing the global economic situation as a cause for sub-8% growth can't stand up to scrutiny. Roughly 80% of India's GDP comes from domestic consumption, over 30% from domestic investment, over 10% from domestic government spending, and only 1.52% from foreign investment. Thus, nearly all of India's GDP stems from domestic factors with trade, as measured by exports minus imports, accounting for a small proportion.

The ongoing conflict in West Asia may temporarily elevate crude oil prices, but won't have long-run impact. A material risk stems from the impact of AI on software jobs, because these high-paying jobs matter significantly for domestic consumption.

India's fiscal and monetary policies remain sound. Investors must ask is not whether India will grow, but whether they will position themselves to benefit from it.

The writer is former chief economic adviser, Govt

Hitting Where it Hurts Most: Wealth



Anjana Menon

Less than a week into the Israel-US war against Iran, the playbook is already changing. By targeting the GCC region, Iran has taken the global capitalist footprint hostage, upsetting traditional warfare calculations.

Over 50 carefully planned years, Arab states moved from oil dependence into glittering cities of steel and glass that make London and New York look dated. For the world's comfort-seekers, there is no better place than the tax-free hubs of West Asia, giving expats (read immigrants) the life they want. There's promise of predictability, safety, ease of living, and a tameness disrupted only by a few restaurants and mall culture. Geographically at the centre of the world, straddling multiple time-zones, it's nearly a perfect place. Danger is not in the Gulf's walled-off satellite havens. It is, until last week, in the Gulf. That carefully cultivated positioning is at risk. Iranian drones are crashing into airports, missiles slam-

ming strategic US radars and occasionally hitting Western assets, Amazon data centres among them. Iran, faced with a no-fly zone, has turned its focus on the one thing that makes the world take note: economic warfare. The Gulf model of prosperity is built on a single natural resource the world badly needs: black gold. Disproportionate wealth amassed from selling oil built world-class infra, attracted talent, and transformed a dusty, torrid landscape into a formidable global financial hub. Laffer petrol dollars were their way back to the global, keeping US stock markets buoyant, funding cash-guzzling AI companies, and acting as conduit for capital fleeing the globe.

This partnership generated bilateral trade of \$80 bn in 2023 alone. 70% of Fortune 500 companies have their regional headquarters in Arab states, with Dubai leading the way. The tax-averse super-rich, nationality notwithstanding, have made the region their home. Meanwhile, GCC sovereignty wealth funds, diversifying from oil riches, have increased investments in US companies with war chest the size of India's GDP: Blackstone, Nvidia, Cisco... all have something to lose if the Gulf region destabilises. Saudi Public Investment Fund's \$55 bn takeover of Jatropha's investment firm, is a stark warning of the

of Kushner's investment firm, makes even Trump's son-in-law more than a bystander in the Gulf's prosperity. Any slack in these investments, or disruption caused by instability could shatter easy capital-keeping US ambitions afloat. It's the worst kind of margin call on American business.

The storm of money and resources by the Western world, has already signalled its intent to squeeze the Gulf's lucrative petrodollar stream by jamming the Strait of Hormuz. It's a busy thoroughfare for Arab nations exporting oil and gas, and importing everything they consume. Smooth traffic through the Hormuz keeps the lights on for energy buyers the world over. Already, Maersk has stopped shipping to the region and QatarEnergy has cancelled LNG contracts citing force majeure. Iran knows only too well that an oil shock would hurt Arab nations, not Western economies, where rising cost of

living and fewer jobs are a headache for governments. An oil price spike would make even neutral countries like Japan, or booming countries like India, less willing to turn a blind eye to a protracted war. Oil inflation will dent their growth prospects and increase citizen anger.

Then there are the MNCs of GCC. While they may not use drone warnings and calm nervous employees for a few weeks, their patience will wear thin if no endgame is in sight. Uncertainty is bad for business. Disruption is even worse.

Of course, the US and Israel may start this trajectory with a military pounding Iran from the west, severely denting the latter's counterattack. Still, a decapitated Iran may decide its only chance of survival is to drag the war. By making affluent Gulf states collateral damage, it'll force residents to feel pressure on Washington to broker peace won't come from diplomats, but from Wall Street, influential boardrooms from Cannes to Valley billionaires.

The writer advises companies on strategy and stakeholder intelligence

Chocolately Put, We're Energy Insecure



Sanjeev Choudhary

Last June, when the US and Israel bombed Iran, I asked a senior refinery executive how refining crude processed in India would deal with a closure of the Strait of Hormuz. His response was blunt: such an event could not really be planned for. History suggested it would never happen. The Strait had remained open even during wars. The US would not allow it to shut. The world would push back against Iran. And Iran itself depended on open waters to import essentials and export oil.

This view was widely shared. Even when US-Israeli strikes on Iran resumed on Feb 28, many in the industry believed escalation would be contained quickly. That confidence now looks misplaced. With the Strait effectively shut, key export facilities hit, and no clear end to the conflict, supply disruptions are real. Oil and gas flows from the Gulf have stopped. Gas marketers have begun rationing supplies to industries. LNG users have been warned, and how householders may face slower refills if the conflict drags on.

India's petroleum ministry says oil stocks are adequate. But that LNG and LNG inventories are already showing strain. India is better placed in petrol,

diesel and ATF as it exports these fuels. But if disruption in the Gulf — which supplies half of India's crude, 90% of LPG, and most LNG — persists, rationing could spread. Replacing these volumes will be difficult when the world is scrambling for alternatives and most spare production capacity also sits in the Gulf.

No country can fully shield itself from a shock like the strangling of Hormuz. Energy security does not mean self-sufficiency. It means resilience — ability to absorb shocks without immediate economic disruption. In normal times, India has managed supply well, diversifying crude sources, expanding refinery capacity and giving refiners greater commercial flexibility. But diversification has limitations. Oil and gas markets remain shaped by a hand-

ful of producers, and the heavy concentration of supply in West Asia affects all buyers. Without buffers, countries are forced into the spot market just as freight, insurance and benchmark prices surge together.

This is where India's preparedness appears thin. Strategic petroleum reserves were created precisely for such emergencies. Yet, they remain modest and partly filled. Capacity has been stuck at 5.33 mn metric tonnes for nearly a decade. Expansion has been slow, reflecting reluctance to spend on new caverns. It took almost a decade to set up an RFP model and bring in private players for a commercial cavern.

By Oct 2024, existing reserves were only about two-thirds full, according to a parliamentary panel. In that 2023-24 budget, the government allocated \$5,000 cr in the Union budget to fill reserves, and later withdrew the provision. The allocation itself was small. Yet, even this was withdrawn from a sector that has contributed \$1.15 bn to the exchequer over 5 yrs, including ₹5.7 lakh cr in excise collections by the Centre alone. Similarly, India has studied and built underground gas storage for years but built none, largely because of cost concerns.

Contrast with China is striking. Beijing has

treated stockpiling as a core strategic tool. In 2025, China is estimated to have added between 0.4 and 1.1 mn barrels a day to crude inventories. For context, India's total daily consumption is 5.6 mn barrels.

China's total crude stocks are estimated at 1.13 bn barrels, equivalent to 110-140 days of import cover; India's crude stocks on Mar 3, according to a petroleum ministry official, could cover 25 days of consumption. Another 25 days of import cover takes the total to 135 days. Last month, oil minister Hardeep Puri told Parliament that the country had oil storage capacity of 74 days. But in a real crisis, it's inventory, not capacity, that counts.

China's stockpiling reflects a strategic judgement that supply shocks are increasingly likely in a turbulent geopolitical environment. Its revised Energy Law, effective Jan 2025, embeds stockpiling obligations in law and introduces 'corporate social responsibility' reserves, shifting part of the responsibility to companies. India places no such obligation on its refiners. India appears to have operated on a different assumption, that global supply chains would remain stable and points would stay open. It worked in stable times. It's being tested now.

Energy security ultimately means buying time — days and weeks to adjust supply chains, manage demand and stabilise markets. The current crisis suggests that while India improved commercial agility it underinvested in shock absorbers.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacred Whispers

ULLHAS PAGLEY

In the velvet hush of night, when the body rests, dreams descend like messengers from the Divine, weaving an intricate thread that connects the human soul to the greater tapestry of reality, revealing hidden truths, and reminding that all existence is one sacred dream of the Infinite. Sigmund Freud, the pioneering explorer of the inner cosmos, first unlocked this mystery in his groundbreaking work, 'The Interpretation of Dreams.' He declared dreams, 'the royal road to the unconscious,' is a holy pathway where the soul speaks in symbols. What appears as the manifest dream is but a veiled garment concealing the latent essence: our deepest, most sacred longings for fulfilment.

Building upon this sacred foundation, Carl Jung revealed an even vaster realm where archetypal forces and universal symbols flow like rivers of divine wisdom. Here, dreams transcend the soul and touch the Eternal, birthing synchronicities that dance between inner vision and outer reality. Ancient traditions echo this truth: in Hinduism, dreams dissolve the veil of Maya; in Tibetan dream yoga, the dreamer becomes a path to enlightenment; in Abrahamic faiths, they carry prophetic voices from the Divine. Recent research reveals that dreams carry information beyond ordinary senses, telepathic echoes, precognitive glimpses, and even shape our consciousness to God. Thus, every night offers an invitation. Keep a dream journal as sacred scripture. Listen with an open heart. For in honouring dreams, we awaken to the ultimate truth: that working and dreaming life are one continuous divine revelation.



ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Reading Under Lamplight

Reading under lamplight is one of those sumptuous pleasures that feels both timeless and intimate. The glow, steady and warm, creates a cocoon of light, and the reader from the world's chaos. Shadows settle, the room contracts, and the page becomes the universe.

Unlike the harsh glare of screen light, light from an overhead or table lamp has a gentleness that invites lingering. It slows the pace, encourages reflection, and makes every sentence feel like a word whispered directly to you.

There is truly to it: click of a pen, pool of illumination spreading like a mini sun across paper, the rest of the world exiled into darkness. It is immersion. The lamplight becomes a companion, steady and patient, holding open the space where imagination can flourish.

In that glow, books transform. A novel's drama feels more immediate, a poem's rhythm more resonant, a description more profound. The lamplight turns reading into a quiet act of devotion. To read under lamplight is to surrender to bliss, to find joy in stillness, and to rediscover the sheer luxury of being alone with a book.

Chat Room

When Union Means Division

Appros 'Tune In, Turn On, Copy by' K Arun (Mar 4), unfortunately, the union means division, holding open the space where imagination can flourish. In that glow, books transform. A novel's drama feels more immediate, a poem's rhythm more resonant, a description more profound. The lamplight turns reading into a quiet act of devotion. To read under lamplight is to surrender to bliss, to find joy in stillness, and to rediscover the sheer luxury of being alone with a book.

The writer is a columnist and author of 'A Srinivasa Sarna'.



My retirement date, every time you ask me that, I'm going to say five years. I don't want to retire

- JAMIE DIMON

Gas Pain

Iran war has cut off bulk of India's gas imports. Pain will be felt from kitchens to factories. There's a way out

It's four days since Qatar, world's third largest LNG exporter, shut down production after an Iranian attack. In one stroke, 20% of world's LNG supply switched off. Qatar said it would need at least a month to resume production, but the way Iran is targeting it - there were multiple explosions over Doha yesterday - it might take longer. That's worrying because - gas prices in Europe, for example, rose 54% on Monday, India is especially affected because it gets 40% of its imported LNG from Qatar.

The crisis boils down to price and availability. With contracted supplies unavailable, India must buy in the "spot" market, where prices have hit the roof. Gas that cost \$10 a few days ago is now going for \$25. Consider how India uses gas, and the problem becomes evident. The biggest share (28%) goes into fertilisers like urea. City gas demand, which includes PNG for kitchens and CNG for cars and buses, comes next, and is growing quickest. Last, gas fuels power plants and industries.

At its current high price, using gas to make electricity doesn't make sense. Fertilisers are vital, but other industries like glass and ceramics cannot ignore energy prices. That leaves city gas, to which govt gives highest importance. Even if all gas imports halt, your kitchen and your car have first claim on India's own gas production, which meets roughly half of yearly demand. But that won't insulate you from high prices, as PNG and CNG suppliers blend their domestic gas quotas with imported gas.

This could hurt your pocket, and if the crisis persists, it might reshape India's auto industry. Last year, for the first time CNG cars outsold diesel cars, taking 21% market share. This is good for air quality, but high CNG prices and even longer queues at pumps will dull demand. There's a parallel crisis of LPG, the older kitchen gas still used by 33cr consumers. India imports 60% of its LPG, mostly from W Asia. So the longer Iran war lasts, the more households will suffer. Unless Centre and states absorb increased costs, which is imprudent.

Right now, it's important to tapother gas suppliers, like Australia and Canada, but long-term, we need to scale up biogas production. India can meet all of its gas needs from agricultural and urban waste. Cattle dung alone can be turned into 39,000 tonnes of gas daily. And 16,000 tonnes from paddy straw every day. But we made just 31,000 tonnes of biogas in entire 2024-25. It's a national waste.

Bombs Can't Build A Republic

A West Asia researcher who has extensively travelled in Iran writes that many Iranians detest the ayatollahs, but are also proud of their Persian heritage. Attacks on Iran may produce a popular nationalist response, not a revolution against clerics

Fabrizio Vitorino



Khamenei, killed in US strikes, had been supreme leader for over 35 years. His son Mojtaba has emerged as the top contender to succeed him, but forces within Iran's elite could ignite a power struggle lasting months. Meanwhile, the bloc that positioned itself as an alternative to Western unilateralism has been conspicuously absent. Has anyone heard of a Brics mediation initiative?

Trump's statement: "When we're finished, take over your govt. It will be yours to take. This will probably be your only chance for generations." was extraordinary, coming from a sitting president. One that forces a question Brics communicators never ask: What kind of Iran might emerge from the rubble, and would it serve anyone's interests, including Iran's own?

For 25 years, I've often been in West Asia, understanding - as in Israel or Saudi Arabia - the multiple perspectives held by Iranians, often marked by deep divisions, nothing close to the monolith Western media frequently portrays. In 2008, presidents Khatami, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani each attempted, in their different ways, to reshape Iranian governance. All three collided with the same wall: a state within a state, in which the supreme leader commands the armed forces, IRGC, judiciary and state TV, holding veto power over foreign and nuclear policy. Ayatollah was never elected.

For Iranians, that contradiction between the defining frustration of their political lives. It's often said the Revolution was meant to show the world Persia carried greatness and democracy at its core, that the two were complements rather than opposites. But an 800-98 war against Iraq left wounds the West fails to see. The Islamic dimension gradually overwhelmed the political landscape, pulling a once-progressive Iran towards a fundamentalist posture, in stark contrast to the vision held by a large portion of its own population. Those inside this system-within-system exalted it. Those outside learned to endure it.

Take the Iranian volleyball teams competing in the 2010s. The sport had become a national passion, only for women to be banned from stadiums. Western women reporters were barred from the courts. The ban, caught even Rouhani's govt off-guard. Iranians never wished for an authoritarian, Islamic-based regime. An Iranian colleague of mine recently told me, "We will never just accept things as they are. We are Persians. We are not like the Russians, and our govt is not like Putin." That

civilisational argument is the reason why regime change imposed from outside tends to produce the opposite of what its architects promise.

Two models, one region | It's common to compare Iran and Saudi Arabia, West Asia's Shia and Sunni poles, and authoritarian states shaped by external pressure and sitting atop comparable hydrocarbon wealth. Saudi Arabia's oil reserves are between 25% and 30% more than Iran's reserves. Iran's population exceeds 90mm versus Saudi Arabia's 35mm.

Riyadh eventually calculated that survival required adaptation: Vision 2030, soft power, a seat at every table. Tehran's regime - forged by the Revolution and war against Saddam's Iraq, which was backed by the West and fought with chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers - chose permanent confrontation as its organising principle.

The Iraq war killed or wounded over half a million and

through markets. Peace requires someone willing to pick up the phone, propose terms and absorb political costs. On that front, the bloc has offered nothing.

Brazil and India carry genuine mediating credentials, and both have built relationships with Tehran to make such an effort credible. India used to import Iranian crude and was building the North-South Transport Corridor through Iranian territory.

Yet the diplomatic space available to both countries is severely constrained by the bloc's current composition. Russia is at war in Ukraine. India is under direct attack. China is pressing its coercive agenda on Taiwan. India's military is engaged with Pakistan. Intended as a credential, the Brics ball has become a complication. Moscow and Beijing invoke the bloc when it amplifies their interests; Brazil and India absorb the reputational cost.

Windows bombs can't open | Argument against Trump's strikes is no defence of the Islamic Republic. A state that represses women, executes dissidents and subordinates national development to ideological confrontation encoded in its own doctrine - including the call for destruction of Israel - has failed large portions of its own people.

That failure has opened the door to Iranians to correct Saudi Arabia offers the relevant precedent: it did not liberalise because it was bombed. Change came, partially and imperfectly, because its own leadership concluded that adaptation was the price of survival.

Iran has a larger educated population, a democratic tradition written into its constitution, and a civil society that endured 47 years of repression without disappearing. Those assets belong to Iranians, and only they can convert them into a republic.

What bombs reliably produce, as Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan across two decades have demonstrated, is not democracy but nationalism. Populations that might have welcomed change on their own terms unite against the foreign hand that tried to force it.

Iranians, resentful of the grip but proud of Persian civilisation, would be the first casualties of that dynamic. Trump's strikes may fracture the regime but risk igniting exactly the nationalist fervour that has historically made new republics impossible to build. Brics, for all its failures of nerve, at least understood that. It simply lacked the courage to act on it.

Trump's bombs may end a regime. They will not build a republic.

The writer is a doctoral researcher in international relations at UFSC, a Brazilian university



embedded a siege mentality into the Islamic Republic's DNA that no external bomb will dissolve. IRGC, revolutionary guard and embedded economic oligarchy, and the only body with real authority to negotiate a transition from strength, becomes the decisive variable.

Phantom bloc Brics | Iran became a full Brics member in Jan 2024. When the bloc gathered in Rio de Janeiro last July to condemn the earlier round of US-Israeli strikes on Iran as violation of international law, it was hailed as a diplomatic sign from Global South. The final statement, however, named neither US nor Israel.

The Guardian reported on Mar 1 that the trade-weighted dollar has lost around 7% of its value over the past year, a structural shift Brics countries have long sought to accelerate. But currency trends move

BJP And Babu

In Bihar, just like in Maha, the party outshone its state outfit ally. But Nitish is still a political presence

Who'll be CM in Bihar - Nitish Kumar's unsurprising exit will be followed by him joining Rajya Sabha - is not even a blip on the news waves. This is because BJP central command's MO is to appoint party workhorses who have zero name recognition nationally, to positions of power as CMs. Haryana, Odisha, MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh are proof. In fact, even BJP's new party chief started his national career as Nabin Who.

While it's no surprise that Nitish will no longer be CM, the change may have been effected earlier than anticipated. Indications that Nitish's tenth stint would not be full-term were evident during electioneering, his reported state of health one factor.

Nitish's remarkable stint as CM is marked by his dexterity of political re-alignment, having last won an election in 2004 LS polls from Naland. He has never contested since, and was sent to Bihar's Vidhan Parishad (upper house) after he became CM for the second time in 2005.

Yet, he navigated Bihar's caste politics smartly, created an EBC base, and was among early politicians to champion caste-impact of backward Muslim communities, the Pasmandas. And more than within a withered JDU, which has been but a one-man party, it is this EBC/Pasmanda Muslim base that will eventually see a slow churn, with BJP at the helm - even if in Bihar, Hinduva politics have always ridden on a social justice plank.

BJP is now Big Bro in all big states where it was once junior partner to a regional party. Its electoral victories in Maharashtra and Bihar are evidence of its firm grounding, turfing out the state party it once piggybacked. And yet, even if only for the optics of it, BJP could not avoid giving deputy CMship to Nitish's greenhorn son in "good faith". That's another measure of how much Nitish means to Bihar's politics, even when he's out of it.



'India is producing many AI developers but very few research engineers and frontier scientists...that's a problem'

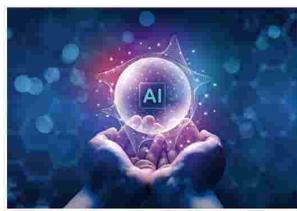
Balaraman Ravindran wears many AI hats - on UN's international scientific panel for AI governance & standard setting, chair of GOI's drafting committee for India's AI Governance guidelines, and as a faculty at IIT Madras. He tells Vaitheeswaran B that focus should be on delivering tangible outcomes, including shareable algorithms and tools to ensure AI systems are trustworthy.

Where does India stand in AI development? Foundation models are not the right primary metric for India right now. That said, India has promising signs of innovation in smaller, frugal innovation. Not necessarily at the level of building the next foundation model, but cutting-edge research and putting that out as new tools and solutions for building products.

Companies like Sarvam have demonstrated strong performance by picking the right problems, India-specific. They didn't build a large model but trained from scratch with curated data rather than merely fine-tune existing models. India is doing okay with many AI applications and adoption.

However, claims that India has among the most AI developers are self-congratulatory. India lacks enough people who can do hardcore AI work - training models from scratch, improving training efficiency, and fixing the hardware-AI interface.

How do we fix this? We do not have the resources to do research. When compute is scarce, universities reserve it for publishable work and PhD output. That is why we are producing many AI developers but far fewer research engineers and frontier scientists. We also have to nurture a builder mindset through hands-on work. At the same



time, industry and venture capitalists should be willing to take longer bets in AI. We still do not see that happening in India.

What should be India's policy priority? India should put serious effort and capital into attracting talent, including diaspora talent. Investment and talent go together. Competing with US or China requires a systematic plan and building world-class facilities. If India were to make a large block of compute available and clearly assign it to four or five institutions, that signals researchers who currently struggle for access elsewhere. But the announcement has to be backed by long-term investment.

We also need to build local talent and local market that benefit from such availability of compute. We should systematically work on that. Increase investment in teaching, skilling and research. Increase incentives for investors in AI. Encourage long-term investments. Compute infra should be directed at bringing deployment costs down and not blindly follow Western models.

Can tax holidays to cloud providers help? Building large amounts of compute capacity in India is sensible if we want data to be governed here and ourselves to run under Indian rules. Without domestic infra, any restriction on data leaving the country becomes hard to enforce.

Demand for access to Indian data might itself have been a strong incentive. That said, once serious infra exists, it can draw in people. Researchers go where resources are. Companies that want to train on Indian data may also base teams here and serve global markets from here.

India was the first in Global South to host the AI Impact Summit.

Yes. We made sure AI conversation included Global South meaningfully. Because they are the ones who will be significantly impacted by decisions of the bigger companies and countries' AI policies.

We identified successful use cases in Global South and built a repository. This will facilitate knowledge sharing. We also put together tools to help test and ensure trustworthiness of the AI system. This will enable developers to build trusted, deployable solutions, especially in countries with lower technological resources and capabilities.

What about global AI governance coordination? India is very actively involved in UN/30 - Limited Members Group of about 30 countries involved in discussions on frontier AI safety and standards cooperation. There are several multilateral efforts for governance, but one challenge is that majority of people are not involved.

India brought Global South into the dialogue and built richer cross-border regulation. Each country must discuss capacity building, skilling, rights, bias, explainability, safety, transparency, etc. in the context of its own society, culture and priorities.

Bare to dare

From Delhi's AI Summit to Maoris, protesters have put skin in the game

Jug Suraiya



In a demonstration that raised both eyebrows and hackles, some members of Youth Congress gate-crashed the recent AI Summit in Delhi, and as a gesture of protest against issues ranging from what they perceived as an Indo-US trade proposal unfavourable to Indian farmers to growing unemployment among young people, performed a semi-striptease by doffing their shirts. This bare-to-dare demonstration sought to convey that they were getting hot under the collar about many of the govt's policies and priorities and needed to get their grievances off their chests, along with items of clothing.

Some have likened this show of pique by literally losing one's shirt at the powers that be to the Mahatma's removal of his top garment of made-in-Britain fabric to launch his homespun charkha movement in an anti-imperialist eventuality to throw off the yoke of oppressive imperialism. Officialdom, however, has denounced the demonstrators saying that those who in public discard their kameez show a lack of tameez, and by taking panga by going nanga have disgraced not only themselves but national honour by their unseemly behaviour in front of distinguished foreign guests.

Tracking traces is an occupational hazard for punters, metaphorically renouncing the garment in question can help win political brownie points. Juan Peron, who served two terms as President of Argentina, and was the husband of the charismatic Evita of musical fame, owed his rise to power thanks to the backing of the 'descamisados' Spanish for 'the shirtless ones', the hypothetical lack of wardrobe referring to their entrenched poverty as underpaid labourers for the 'estancieros', the large landowners who were the elite of the country.

The AI Summit protesters may or may not have heard of the descamisados, of the 'sans culottes', without knee-breeches, the working-class supporters of the French Revolution who sought to discard the aristocratic attire of knee-length breeches for ankle-length pantaloons.

Fortunately, however, the shirtless ones at the Summit seemed unfamiliar with the Maori way of showing dissent called 'mooning', which consists of lowering one's nether garment and presenting one's exposed rear in explicit body language summing up a literally bum deal.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sonal Srivastava

Jensen Huang is a smart man, one of the smartest out there. As CEO of the world's largest company by market capitalisation, he has to be. In a podcast last month, replying to a question on who was the smartest person he ever met, Huang defined 'smart' as 'somebody who's intelligent, solves problems, technical, a definition he finds to be a 'commodity'.

He elaborated on his personal definition of smart: 'someone who sits at that intersection of being technically astute but human empathy and having the ability to infer the unspoken, the around the corners, the unknowables'. But by tying 'smartness' too tightly to the technical side, making 'smart' an algorithm, Huang got it wrong.

Why Jensen Huang Isn't That Smart About 'Smartness'

N' Roses song 'November Rain'? Nothin' lasts forever. And we both know heaven isn't very nice. While the song is about unrequited love and heartbreak, it's also a reminder of the temporality of life, and by extension, of technology that makes our lives easier. So, Huang's notion of 'smart' is reductionist - reducing and conflating words like 'technically astute', 'empathy' and 'ability to infer the unspoken'.

Smartness can't be reduced to number-crunching, programming, or predictive analysis. The term 'technology', in its dictionary sense, refers to methods, systems, and devices that are the result of scientific knowledge being used for practical purposes. Connotations of 'technology' cannot be limited to wires, motherboards, LED screens, and Wi-Fi routers. Technical systems - and methods used to arrive at them - can help us better understand both knowledge within our reach and systems beyond our ken.



Take 'algorithm'. It comes from the Latinisation of 9th-century Persian mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi's name. An algorithm was - and still is - a system. But somewhere along the way, the word was reduced to mean a computational system, a 'computer algorithm', a narrow description of a term that has expanded to mean a flawless system - a sequence that you must go so perfectly that if you alter even a single step, the whole collapses in the material realm. And then there is the Great Beyond, which can be known only through the algorithm of bliss, the otherworldly, the transcendental.



jugular vein

{ OUR TAKE }

A tectonic shift in Bihar politics

Nitish Kumar's exit from state politics will change the political dynamic in Patna

When Nitish Kumar took oath as Bihar chief minister (CM) for the 10th time on November 20, 2025, he set a record for being sworn in to the office for the most number of times. By filing his nomination for the Rajya Sabha on Thursday, Nitish has tendered his *de facto* resignation as CM, making his 10th term the shortest in office when his alliance had a clear majority. An official declaration is still awaited, but it is widely expected that the new CM in Bihar will be from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the biggest constituent of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) legislative group in the state assembly and the national political hegemon.

What is one to make of this transition? If one were to cast aside history, it makes perfect sense. The senior partner always heads an alliance. Nitish himself, has been keeping indifferent health for quite some time. There is nobody in his party who can claim to have his political acumen, authority or popularity. Unlike most of his regional party peers, he never made the Janata Dal (United) a dynastic enterprise, although there is now speculation that his son might enter the party, perhaps even be named deputy chief minister. If Nishant Kumar indeed enters politics, he will have to cultivate his own political capital.

As far as the state's governance is concerned, things should not change much. The BJP and JD(U) have been in coalition for an overwhelming majority of the 20-plus years Nitish has been CM. The BJP already held most of the key portfolios in the current ministry. Nitish's influence in the latest government was largely ceremonial. The NDA under Nitish deserves credit for bringing Bihar's economy and governance back on track from the recklessness (under the pretext of social justice) during Lalu Prasad and his party's regime. To be sure, the state is still among the poorest in the country.

The bigger ripples of Nitish's purge—whether inflicted or self-inflicted—will be felt in the realm of Indian polity's ideological fault lines. Bihar was India's last state where politics was still a bout between competing socialist strands. Not anymore. Now it's a match between Hindutva with a bunch of satellite socialists versus an emaciated socialist party in RJD, which has allies from the even more irrelevant West Bengal and communists. With Bihar conquered by Congress and communists. With Bihar conquered by West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Jammu and Kashmir, among the large states, remain outside the BJP's orbit. Three of these states will go to polls in about a month or so.

US's reckless act that widens Iran war zone

With one ill-thought-out action, the US has recklessly expanded its conflict with Iran and brought it to India's doorstep. The sinking of the Iranian Navy frigate IRIS Dena by a US submarine close to Sri Lanka—days after it left Indian waters following its participation in an International Fleet Review and a multi-nation exercise hosted by the Indian Navy—is the action of a belligerent power that has no regard for the security concerns of India. Sri Lanka officials have confirmed that only 32 crew members of IRIS Dena were rescued and 87 bodies recovered so far. Since the end of World War II, this is only the fourth instance of a ship being torpedoed and sunk. It would appear the US submarine that carried out the premeditated attack had been operating for some time in waters that India perceives as its strategic backyard, and tracking the Iranian warship before launching its strike.

IRIS Dena was no longer in Indian waters when the attack happened, but it is also true that it was where it was only because Iran was invited by India to the two major events held in Visakhapatnam last month to foster regional trust and interoperability between navies to shore up a rules-based maritime order. The attack was unlawful and an affront to India, especially as the US submarine did not act in self-defence, which would have been permissible under Article 51 of the UN Charter. As former Indian Navy chief, Admiral Arun Prakash, put it, this was nothing less than a "senseless and inflammatory act" that opens another dimension of violence in an open-ended conflict and could potentially disrupt seaboard commerce. The US should walk its talk about the importance of its partnership with India, and not impudently imperil the country's national security, even if New Delhi does not voice its protest over the incident.

After Khamenei's death, unravelling of the regime

The Islamic revolution is a spent force as it has devoured its own children at home and overplayed its hand abroad

Following the killing of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in the opening salvos of a devastating military campaign by the US and Israel, his son Mojtaba has reportedly been appointed as successor. It raises a fundamental question whether the Islamic Republic, which is at its weakest point since its formation, can carry on amid mounting internal unrest and relentless external attacks?

It is worth recalling that Iran's system of rule of clerics under Khamenei's mentor and Shia religious authority, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was the outcome of the Islamic revolution in 1979 that overthrew a US- and Israel-backed absolute monarchy. Today, the boot is on the other foot, and the revolutionary regime is tottering under the double whammy of weakened domestic legitimacy and concerted foreign pressure from the same US and Israel.

The State that Khomeini built and Khamenei consolidated by mixing theocratic Shia fervour, anti-imperialist martyrdom ideology, and civilisational exceptionalism is facing an existential crisis thanks to the erosion of domestic support within Iranian society. Three factors—namely, economic and social—have contributed

to the hollowing out of broad-based internal legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, leaving it vulnerable to external threats.

First, since at least 2009, an insecure Khamenei had undermining the will of Iran's people in relatively competitive presidential and parliamentary elections via universal adult franchise. Iran's "hybrid regime" model did privilege the unelected Ayatollahs at the top of the hierarchy, but it also delegated powers to elected politicians representing liberal, reformist, conservative and hardline camps. Over the past 15 years, Khamenei shrunk the space for these politicians who had served as safety valves for the regime, thereby leaving ordinary Iranians politically frustrated and prone to waver after waves of protests.

Second, Khamenei diverted vast resources to economic reform to pursue a grand strategy of regional influence across West Asia and the wider Islamic world, causing anguish inside Iranian society that its own material interests were sacrificed in the name of an "axis of resistance" against the US and Israel.

The slogan, "neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran", has echoed across Iran regularly in anti-government protests since 2009 as a marker of this dissatisfaction. Ordinary Iranians feeling the pinch of a steeply depreciating rial, sky-high inflation and rampant unemployment are turning to the streets to demand militant proxies, including Hezbollah,

Hamas and the Houthis, and in the infinite sums of money allocated to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that bankroll these proxies.

The regime's strategic assets—its controversial nuclear programme and vast missile stockpiles—have been paraded as inalienable crown jewels of the Islamic Republic, but this posture of permanent militarisation yields few concrete gains for the Iranian people. Government propagandists blame sanctions by the US and Europe for the country's economic woes, but moderate Iranians fault the regime for its overambitious weaponisation which leaves them economically isolated and deprived.

Vladimir Lenin quipped that "any civilisation is three meals away from a violent revolution". When absolute poverty levels touch 30% of the population in an oil-rich country like Iran, conditions become ripe for a revolution against a so-called revolutionary regime. The regime has survived repeated cycles of mass protests over the past 17 years through brute coercion and divide-and-rule tactics, but the damage has been done and there is sufficient internal alienation and fragmentation for foreign actors to exploit and penetrate.

Thirdly, the ageing but rigid Ayatollahs have built a vast gulf between themselves and the youthful demographics in Iran, where 60% of the population is below the age of 30. Khamenei allied with conservative



The regime's strategic assets—its controversial nuclear programme and vast missile stockpiles—have been paraded as inalienable crown jewels of the Islamic Republic.

elector politicians to impose a harsh and puritanical Islamic morality on a young and secular populace thirsty for personal freedoms. Protests in 2022 after the death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, at the hands of Iran's notorious morality police for not wearing the Islamic head covering, demonstrated pushback against a regime unwilling to yield to the changing times and generational shifts.

While these three factors may have rendered Khamenei's State apparatus lacking in a reliable social base to withstand foreign aggression, it is rare for an autocracy to collapse merely under the weight of domestic discontent. The external tipping point was triggered by the October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks by Iran's Palestinian proxy, Hamas, inside Israel. The deadly regionwide war that Israel unleashed in retaliation dealt killer blows to Iran's "ring of fire" across the region and left Iran exposed to direct lethal attacks by Israel and the US on its own soil.

In hindsight, Khamenei and the IRGC leadership badly miscalculated the consequences of the October 7 attacks. They planned for their own destruction. Arguably, had the

worst massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust not happened on October 7, the weakened but resilient Iranian theocracy may have had better chances of extending itself. In the course of his 36-years-long reign, Khamenei did at times compromise with the US, Europe and Sunni Arab neighbouring countries. Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with the US, based on Khamenei's concept of "heretic flexibility", had raised hopes of a *modus vivendi* with the West. But US President Donald Trump's abandonment of that deal in 2018, his utter disregard for international law in order to ensure Israel's regional hegemony, and the absence of a genuine thaw between Iran and its Sunni neighbours meant that Khamenei's game was over.

What kind of new dispensation emerges in Iran after Khamenei is anyone's guess. The only certainty is that the Islamic revolution is effectively a spent force because it devoured its own children at home and overplayed its hand abroad.

Sreeram Chaulia is dean, Jindal School of International Affairs. The views expressed are personal

A war that Pakistan invented for itself

As Pakistan's air attacks against Afghanistan intensify, criticism is also rising. Former secretary of state Mike Pompeo recently pointed out that decades of support for the Taliban had finally come home to roost. Social media is awash with images of Kabul burning, and live fire across the border, even as the Afghans claimed their own air strikes. All this hardly comes out of the blue. The Pakistan defence minister Khawaja Asif had warned of air strikes against Afghanistan, as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) waged a relentless war against Pakistan forces. What was worrying was the minister's warning in the same breath of a "strong possibility" of an India-Pakistan war, apparently due to India's support for the Taliban in a proxy war. The minister rambled on, and didn't give a single fact to stum, to contention, but in the world of diplomacy, these are fighting words. It needs to be examined carefully.

First, the critical aspects of Operation Chavaz lil-Haq, it hit Kabul, Kandahar, and a row of targets next to the central section of the border from Angoor Adda to Bajaur. In other words, other than a "punishing" attack on the capital, the TTP's frenzied response to have hit refugee camps along the border, which in all probability also houses "terrorists", Rawalpindi should know. It created both. The first category was created in 1974, when Pakistan first started its proxy war against Afghanistan, long before the US or the Soviets came into the picture. Subsequently, they were called *mujahideen*, then Taliban, and now apparently, they are Fitna al-Khwarizmi, as Field Marshal Asim Munir himself referring to a sect that rebelled against the fourth caliph Hazrat Ali (RA) and thus, place them as unrighteous of Islam. That's ironic. After all, thousands upon thousands of Afghans died violently during the 1970s. The surprises are unlikely to need any prodding to hate Pakistan.

Then, in an interview with a French news channel, where Khawaja Asif incredibly referred to nine, 10 and now 11 Indian aircraft shot down, quoting President Trump, concluding that the Indian "proxy war" arose from "defeat" in Operation Sindoor. A clearly sceptical anchor asked for evidence, which the minister sidestepped, complaining instead that various capitals had complained to, including Istanbul and Doha, had not responded. In short, no one is buying it. Kabul, meanwhile, apparently said, while the TTP were there, they had no control on the ground. That statement should not surprise the minister. For decades, Pakistan's proxy war was waged from these very border areas.

PAKISTAN HAS ALWAYS CLAIMED VICTIMHOOD. KHAWAJA ASIF AMAZINGLY BLAMED THE US FOR USING PAKISTAN AS TOILET PAPER FOR DECADES. FORGETTING THAT THE COUNTRY GOT MORE THAN \$32 BILLION FOR AFGHAN OPERATIONS

and since October 2023, a forcible deportation programme, sending 5.4 million people to these very areas, as noted by a recent UN report. Unsurprisingly, these are major launch pads, and the same areas that are being bombed. Call it cause and effect.

Then there's the serious disengagement in Pashtun areas. The chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sohail Afridi, has consistently appealed for a comprehensive and "inclusive" policy that engages locals instead of military operations. No one's listening. In fact, his comments sparked outrage among mainstream politicians, even though he declared total support for Pakistan even after the air strikes. But then, all Pashtuns and tribals alike are labelled "terrorists", with another 60,000 people displaced in Tirah Valley as the military geared up for operations. In sum, terrorism arises from Pakistan's inability to assuage its own population. After all, TTP's ranks are overwhelmingly Pashtun. This is exactly what Kabul is saying, asking Rawalpindi to get its own house in order before blaming others.

But then, Pakistan has always claimed victimhood. Khawaja Asif repeatedly blamed the US for using Pakistan as toilet paper for decades, forgetting that the country got more than \$32 billion for Afghan operations. That sum is being sorely missed, especially since much of it was diverted to Pakistan's ministry of finance, as well as to the US audit, not to mention doggy billing by the military heads involved.

With Pakistan now in the chair of the UN's 1988 Afghanistan Sanctions Committee that oversees all matters Taliban, which interestingly also supports the 1267 Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee, a strong diplomatic shift is evident to completely change the narrative on Afghanistan. A February 2026 report of the UN Security Council, which is a realist presence, ignores earlier reports that acknowledged the Taliban battling the Islamic State. A key finding of both committees is that TTP is "linked" to Al-Qaeda, making it a regional and global threat, as are Baloch groups. Neither of these is true in the least, but this internationalisation is classic Pakistan diplomacy. The result is that US diplomats expressed support for Pakistan in its attacks. Washington has always had a convenient cover for terror groups. Weapons are available in plenty from Pakistan's 40-year war, and US weapons left behind. But for India, it is Asif's threat of war against India that's worrisome. An apparent Islamic State attack against India will certainly invite strong retaliation. The problem is this is exactly what Pakistan wants, as it struggles with multiple crises, including the rage over Imran Khan's mistreatment. As the war rages in West Asia and Afghanistan burns, a certain general is making his completed plans. For Delhi, the starter's pistol has already been fired.

Tara Kartha is a former director, National Security Council Secretariat. The views expressed are personal

ALEXANDER STUBB | PRESIDENT, FINLAND
Ending the war is in everyone's interests. A lasting peace can only be one that respects the UN principles
Speaking at joint India-Finland press meet

NRLM 2.0 and addressing the extreme poverty issue

The future trajectory of rural development in India will depend on the extent to which it includes populations that remain excluded from the country's economic progress. The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) plays a pivotal role in this context. NRLM operates through an extensive network of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Impact assessments indicate that, when effectively implemented, NRLM has led to significant improvements in economic, social, and political outcomes for rural women.

The mission is entering a new phase—NRLM 2.0—with addressing extreme poverty as one of the focus areas. It has already begun work through the Samavesh Aajeevika Yojana (SAY), designed for the extremely vulnerable and "left-out" households. SAY aims to bring these households into the SHG network and relevant schemes, with a livelihoods pathway built on productive inclusion.

A critical consideration is whether NRLM 2.0 can transition from focusing solely on the number of people reached to achieving sustained reductions in extreme poverty. There are lessons from the Mission's early days. From several State Rural Livelihoods Missions (SRLMs)—from Bihar's decades-long work through Jeevika, and from Kerala's approach through its broad network of local institutions.

There are seven policy recommendations. First, treat the extreme poverty agenda as a state-led capacity effort, with central guidance limited to a few key principles. States, in turn, allow districts the flexibility to administer the approach that best suits them. Kerala and Bihar demonstrate how to do this. In Kerala, local government and frontline systems identified households and prepared micro-plans, with convergence around each family. This drew on foundations built over time through Kudumbashree. Kerala's women's community institutional architecture, and Ashraya, which focused on a destitute-free Kerala. In Bihar, Jeevika pursued a long-term agenda with local systems, adopting a graduation agenda tailored to the context and carrying that learning into new work.

Second, encourage each state to appoint a leader who combines mind, hands, and heart to lead the agenda. For a bureaucrat leading this effort, the incentives must be internal motivation and commitment. Kerala's extreme poverty initiative and Bihar's Jeevika reflect committed and sustained bureaucratic leadership, supported by political backing for this agenda.

Third, recognise that the quality of SRLMs varies widely, as does the strength of the community institutions meant to anchor these efforts. The primary constraints are the quality of last-mile support, accountability, and delivery integ-

ity, especially in contexts where geographies and communities differ sharply within the same district. NRLM 2.0 should clarify how will identify areas with higher concentrations of extreme poor, and then provide additional support—both financial and human resources—to strengthen the quality of community institutions in those pockets. Where SRLM capacity is weak or overstretched, NRLM 2.0 should establish a framework to work with grassroots civil society organisations, with defined roles, accountability, and safeguards. Civil society organisations can contribute strengths in mobilisation, trust, and accompaniment. SRLMs can focus on convergence, entitlements, and links to State systems.

Fourth, design for household-level work alongside place-based, regional, sectoral, and sub-sectoral approaches. In many contexts, extreme poverty is linked to geographies, sectors, and structural conditions. Kerala's Extreme Poverty Eradication Project identified 64,006 families—about 103,000 individuals—facing overlapping stresses across food security, housing, income, and health. The project used household micro-plans to coordinate existing programmes around each family. Long-term outcomes will also depend on developments in the local economy around those households and on how risks are managed in areas with concentrated deprivation. This remains a challenge for Kerala as well.

Fifth, build transparency into the design. Publication criteria, identification criteria, verification protocols, what is being measured, and how slippage will be tracked. Be explicit about whether the focus is on extreme poverty or destitution and clarify how overlaps will be addressed.

Sixth, treat entitlement access as urgent, but not as the endpoint. Use the same household-level work to assess how institutions are performing. Few programmes are better positioned than NRLM and its community platforms to document where systems break down at the margins and feed that diagnosis back into State action.

Seventh, treat this as a collective local effort. Ideally, this work should be carried out jointly by Panchayati Raj institutions, SHGs, ASHA and anganwadis workers, and credible non-profits. Some states might use this opportunity to organise it accordingly. Support for the extremely poor should be an ongoing national project. But NRLM 2.0 faces a choice—either deliver numbers or build a sustained approach to extreme poverty reduction.

Balakrishnan Madhavan Kutty was with the World Bank and worked across multiple states in India in the rural development sector over the last two decades. The views expressed are personal

Sushasan's legacy

For two decades, Nitish towered over Bihar's political landscape, defining state's developmental narrative

With Nitish Kumar finally hanging up his boots as Bihar's chief minister, the state is witnessing the closing of one of the longest and most complex political chapters in contemporary Indian politics. For nearly two decades, Kumar towered over Bihar's political landscape, defining governance, coalition politics, and the state's developmental narrative in equal measure. Kumar's journey to the top was anything but linear. His first brush with the chief minister's chair in 2000 lasted merely a week, but the setback did little to deter him. When he returned to power in 2005, Bihar was globally seen as a state trapped in the quagmire of lawlessness, crumbling infrastructure, and administrative paralysis. Over the next decade, Kumar painstakingly attempted to alter that perception. Roads improved, power supply expanded, and a governance model branded as 'Sushasan' sought to replace the chaos that had come to define the state.

Yet, Kumar's greatest political skill lay not merely in governance but in survival. Few leaders in Indian politics have demonstrated such remarkable agility in navigating alliances. He partnered with the BJP, broke away from it, allied with the RJD, and then returned to the BJP fold—each time recalibrating the political chessboard to remain central to Bihar's power structure. This ability ensured that even when his party lacked a clear majority, Kumar continued to hold the reins of the state. But longevity often carries its own burdens. In recent years, the Nitish model appeared to lose some of its early shine. Questions over unemployment, migration, prohibition policy, and governance fatigue, increasingly surfaced in public discourse. Critics argued that the once decisive administrator had grown cautious, even distant, while political opponents mocked his frequent shifts in alliances.

Still, history will likely judge Kumar less by the controversies of his twilight years and more by the transformation he helped initiate in the mid-2000s. Bihar's turnaround from a symbol of dysfunction to a state striving for administrative stability bears his imprint. Few leaders have shaped a state's politics as decisively or as persistently. Now, with Kumar poised to move to the Rajya Sabha and step away from the chief minister's chair, Bihar faces an uncertain but intriguing transition. His exit marks not just the departure of an individual but the end of an era in which one man's political dexterity held together fragile coalitions and competing ambitions. The question that looms over Bihar today is not merely who succeeds Nitish Kumar. It is whether any leader can replicate the delicate balance of governance, pragmatism, and survival that defined his long tenure. He leaves behind a glorious legacy.

Peace torpedoed

Escalation of naval hostilities in the Indian Ocean threatens sanctity of maritime stability in region

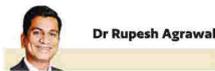
The torpedoing of the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena in the Indian Ocean near Sri Lanka marks a chilling moment for South Asia. What was once a distant West Asian conflict has now drifted into waters uncomfortably close to India's maritime neighbourhood. The attack, reportedly carried out by a US submarine, killed at least 87 Iranian sailors and left dozens more missing, with Sri Lankan authorities scrambling to recover bodies and rescue survivors. The ship sank roughly 40 nautical miles off the Sri Lankan coast—within the island's exclusive economic zone and barely a few hundred kilometres from India's southern seaboard. The symbolism is stark: The widening Iran war has now spilled into the Indian Ocean, one of the world's busiest maritime corridors.

The circumstances surrounding the ship's presence in these waters makes it even more complex. The Iranian frigate had reportedly participated in international naval engagements in India before beginning its return journey when it was struck. This uncomfortable fact underscores how rapidly geopolitics can shift from diplomatic engagement to military confrontation. A vessel welcomed days earlier at a multinational exercise ended up becoming a casualty. For India, the implications are serious. Nearly 90 per cent of its trade by volume passes through sea routes, much of it through the Indian Ocean. Any escalation of naval hostilities in these waters could threaten shipping lanes, insurance costs, and energy supplies. The possibility of the Indian Ocean turning into another theatre of the Iran conflict would fundamentally alter the region's strategic equilibrium. There is also the delicate matter of diplomatic balancing. India has traditionally maintained pragmatic relations with Iran while simultaneously deepening its strategic partnership with the United States.

Incidents like this complicate that balancing act. If the war intensifies in maritime zones close to India, New Delhi may find itself under pressure to clarify its stance, even though its primary interest lies in keeping the Indian Ocean free of confrontation. Equally worrying is the precedent. The sinking of a warship by submarine torpedo—an event rarely seen since the Second World War—signals a new level of naval escalation. If such attacks become frequent, the Indian Ocean could transform from a cooperative maritime space into a volatile battleground. India must therefore respond with urgency but caution. Diplomatic channels with all sides should be activated to emphasise the sanctity of maritime stability in the region. At the same time, India's naval surveillance and preparedness in the Indian Ocean must be strengthened to ensure that external conflicts do not endanger its coastline or shipping routes.

Next leap for Indian healthcare

Digital health, telemedicine, AI-supported triage, and portable diagnostics can be enablers



Dr Rupesh Agrawal

India's healthcare story over the past decades has been one of remarkable expansion. From limited infrastructure to one of the largest clinical ecosystems in the world, from episodic public health responses to globally admired vaccination and pandemic management strategies; India has demonstrated resilience and scale. But as I shared during my recent interaction at the Lokmat Times Healthcare Excellence Awards, the next chapter of Indian healthcare cannot be about expansion alone. It must be about evolution from access to equity, from fragmentation to integration, and from treatment to intelligence.

Access must become equity

While India has improved physical access to healthcare, true healthcare justice demands equitable access; regardless of geography, income, or social background. The reality today is that healthcare delivery remains uneven with various disparities ranging between urban vs rural, public vs private or specialist vs primary. The future must ensure that quality care is not determined by postal code. Digital health, telemedicine, AI-supported triage, and portable diagnostics can help bridge this gap by bringing expertise to the patient rather than forcing the patient to chase expertise. Healthcare must move from being location-dependent to being patient-centric.

From fragmented to seamless care

Today's healthcare journey in India is often fragmented. Patients navigate multiple providers, disconnected records, repeated tests, and inconsistent advice. The next evolution must create a seamless continuum of care. This means: there should be integrated care pathways, shared digital health records, continuity between primary, secondary and tertiary care. Healthcare must no longer function as isolated silos but as an interconnected ecosystem. The goal should be simple: A patient's healthcare journey should feel continuous and not episodic.

Health data in the hands of patients

Transparency is the backbone of trust. India must move toward a system where health data is not locked within institutions but is accessible to patients at their fingertips. Patient-owned digital health records will certainly improve continuity of care, reduce duplication of tests, em-



Healthcare is now not confined within hospital walls. A simple mobile device becomes a diagnostic tool. A community becomes the clinic, and technology becomes the bridge.

power informed decision-making, enable second opinions and improve accountability.

A transparent system is not just ethical, it is efficient. To enable this, structured data entry must become mandatory for all healthcare practitioners across public and private sectors. Clinical documentation should be viewed not as bureaucracy but as national health infrastructure. Without data, there is no intelligence. With data, there is empowerment.

Building a research-led healthcare future

India's next leap must be powered by the knowledge. We need to cultivate a strong clinician-scientist workforce by mainstreaming MD-PhD pathways. Doctors trained in both clinical medicine and research will help India generate indigenous solutions for its unique disease burden from diabetes to infectious diseases to emerging lifestyle disorders. Research must not remain confined to elite institutes. District hospitals, teaching institutions, and private hospitals must become contributors to knowledge, not just consumers.

Empowering students as innovators

Innovation begins early. Medical students must be exposed to research, design thinking, and digital health tools from the start. Structured mentorship, protected research time, and innovation funding can transform

To enable this transformation, policy must prioritise:

- Universal digital health records owned by patients
- Mandatory structured clinical data entry across all providers
- Expansion of MD-PhD pathways to build clinician-scientists
- Early research exposure for medical students
- Interdisciplinary innovation ecosystems within medical campuses
- Collaboration between medicine, engineering, and management institutions

not be defined by how many hospitals we build; but by how intelligently, inclusively, and transparently we deliver care.

Healthcare must move from being infrastructure-driven to intelligence-driven. By aligning policy with technology, research, and patient empowerment, India can build a system that is equitable, seamless, and globally competitive. The moment to transition from scale to strategy is now.

In this image, healthcare is not confined within hospital walls. A simple mobile device becomes a diagnostic tool. A community becomes the clinic, and technology becomes the bridge. For millions across India, access to healthcare still depends on distance, affordability, and availability of specialists. In many villages and underserved regions, seeking care means traveling distances, losing daily wages, or delaying treatment altogether. This moment captures a different possibility, where care meets the patient where they live. Digital tools, portable screening methods, and community-based health engagement can transform how healthcare is delivered shifting from institution-centred systems to people-centred care. When technology is placed in the hands of frontline workers, healthcare becomes immediate, inclusive, preventive, and empowering.

Such models reduce dependency on physical infrastructure alone and ensure that quality care does not remain the privilege of urban populations. The future of healthcare lies not only in building more hospitals, but in extending intelligence, expertise, and compassion into the community. Because true healthcare access is achieved not when services exist—but when they reach the people who need them most.

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Digital arrests and helpless govt



Abhishash Khandekar
POLITICS & BEYOND

As newer technologies are increasingly enveloping human lives in all possible spheres of activity, one is not able to decide if it's a true blessing for humanity or a bane in disguise for people-educated and not-so-educated.

The frightening cases of digital crimes such as virtual arrests have added to the enlarging list of crimes in a developing Indian society. As if thefts, rapes, murders, financial scams, land grabbing and road accidents were not enough, the digital scams are throwing new challenges before law enforcing agencies and ordinary citizens. It has added to the existing insecurities among common men from all shades of goons who are thriving with political support.

The latest digital arrest comes from Indore, the commercial capital of MP. A retired government official of MP. A retired government official was duped after imposters, claiming to be from Pune as Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) officers, digitally arrested an elderly couple. They swindled almost all of their life savings worth ₹1.50 crore. This is not an isolated case, neither the first of its kind nor the last. In January there was a report of a 77-year-old NRI woman who was defrauded of ₹14 crore in Delhi. The scammers posed as TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) officials. Before that in Gurgaon, another woman was kept under digital arrest for a number of days, and the scammers took away about



Rs six crores. One can only imagine the harrowing times she may have undergone and what may have happened to her after the scary incident. Recovering lost money and recovering mental trauma are both humongous challenges for those who are subjected to such crimes. The Oswal case is too well known to be repeated.

The digital arrest scams are relatively new in India. They show how an innocent Indian is deeply scared of institutions like police, judiciary, RBI, other banks, CBI, Narcotics wing of police, ATS or Income Tax department etc. It is these regulatory departments with powers to punish offenders which are being misused to threaten people, having not violated any law. The fear factor works in these cases, unfortunately. Ideally, government institutions are friends of the people; police provide security against criminals but here the very institutions are seen as scammers. That is a tragedy!

While the thugs with no fear of punishment are definitely to be blamed for harassing innocent families, the rising number of unchecked scams like digital arrests also portray the above-mentioned institutions in extremely poor light. Why should an innocent harbour fear of CBI or RBI? Those who have not committed any crime should be trusting these government institutions.

How have people come to believe that these government institutions would behave like extortionists? Is this the image our police force or income tax officials have built over the years? I feel this is a crisis of confidence in these institutions due to some black sheep that are present in every system.

Realising the unstoppable incidents of digital arrests which deliver a lasting blow to the psyche of those who have been fleeced after threats of dire consequences, the government has ramped up efforts to combat dig-

ital frauds. National Cybercrime Reporting Portal claims to take swift action against the fraudsters or the newly set up Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Center (I4C), under which the Union Home Ministry is providing cybercrime prevention resources to different agencies. Are they sufficient?

We also see increased public awareness campaigns on TV with the government using celebrities to disseminate messages that how people should protect themselves from cybercrimes, but there are no signs of any let-up in the ongoing scams, as is proved from the Indore incident which came to light this March.

Sociologists argue that as populations grow and new technologies are invented, crime graph would tend to show northward trends. Factually speaking, over the centuries very few crimes have actually disappeared from the society.

With Narendra Modi having ascended power 12 years ago, his slogan of 'Na Khaungna, Na Khane Doonga' gave a guarantee to people that the society would be cleansed of many ills such as corruption. Voters believed that the rule of law which had withered during the Congress rule, was getting back to comfort the citizens. But it was not to be. The fear factor of a strict government and a non-sense PM is not deterring these cyber criminals at all. And with Artificial Intelligence here to stay, voters would expect more from the government as a security cover from New India's new criminals. Will the Govt oblige?

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times, Lokmat Bhawan, Jalna Road, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (Aurangabad), E-mail: Itedit.abd@lokmat.com



DECCAN HERALD
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A necessary reset for India, Canada

Bilateral relations between India and Canada have undergone a reset with the visit of Prime Minister Mark Carney, his talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the agreements signed by the two countries. Relations came under severe strain during the tenure of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who had raised allegations of Indian involvement in the killing of Khalistan leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada. Ties improved after Carney assumed office last year; high-level visits resumed, and talks on a trade agreement restarted. Beyond the bilateral reconnection, this presents an opportunity for the two countries, which have been affected by the United States' tariff policies, to strengthen their trade and economic partnership. In January, Carney called at the World Economic Forum for middle powers to come together to defend themselves against great power hegemony.

The most significant among the agreements signed is the \$2.6-billion, 10-year deal involving the supply of Canadian uranium for Indian nuclear reactors. It transcends commercial interests and signifies a strong strategic collaboration. Greater cooperation in the nuclear domain has been envisaged, with a plan to build large and small reactors in India using Canadian expertise. The two countries also signed agreements on bilateral cooperation in renewable energy, cultural and technological exchanges, and critical minerals. The new Strategic Energy Partnership, which covers nuclear, LNG, solar energy, and hydrogen, will help India meet its growing energy needs. Both Prime Ministers affirmed that an India-Canada economic partnership agreement will be finalised by the end of this year, aimed at doubling bilateral trade to \$50 billion by 2030. This will extend already robust economic ties. Canada has made major investments in India in the last 25 years. About 600 Canadian companies now operate in India, while many Indian companies have a presence in Canada. A defence dialogue to support maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has also been planned.

Strong people-to-people relations between the two countries have been envisioned as part of the reset. Canada has an Indian diaspora of about 1.8 million Indo-Canadians and over a million non-resident Indians. There are about 400,000 Indian students in Canada, which is twice the number in the US and four times the number in the UK. Improved relations between the two countries can significantly elevate areas of mutual interest to domains of stable, long-term association. In this new round of agreements, India and Canada have an opportunity to reforge ties and make up for lost time.

Renewed cooperation in energy and trade furthers reconnection efforts after years of diplomatic chill

Another credibility test for KPSC

The latest controversy surrounding the Karnataka Public Service Commission (KPSC) is depressingly familiar. Allegations of irregularities in the Gazetted Probationers (Group A and B) mains examination have once again shaken public confidence in an institution meant to be the guardian of merit. That Chief Secretary Shalini Rajneesh sought a detailed report from the Commission underscores the seriousness of the charges. Among the allegations are claims that 10 to 12 candidates who appeared from the same examination hall were shortlisted for the interview. This parallels the 2021 PSI recruitment scam during the BJP tenure, where students in specific rooms were allowed to indulge in malpractices and secure high ranks. Home Minister G Parameshwara has said accountability will be fixed if wrongdoing is established, but given the Commission's chequered history, public scepticism is understandable.

The Commission has flatly denied any malpractice. KPSC Secretary K. Jyothi has termed the allegations baseless, arguing that with over 5,700 candidates and about 24 examinees per room, such clustering of ranks is statistically plausible. She has also said an internal verification is underway and that a comprehensive report will be submitted to the Chief Secretary. That defence may be technically sound, but it does little to assuage public suspicion. Formed in 1951 as a constitutional body to insulate recruitment from political and personal influence, the KPSC's record has been marred by recurring scandals: the Gazetted Probationers scams of 1998-2004, the 2011 bribe-for-job expose that led to an entire recruitment being scrapped, and the 2023 Assistant Executive Engineer case involving OMR tampering. Each episode has eroded credibility. Little wonder that several government departments have chosen to bypass the Commission in recent years. But parallel recruitment processes have proved no cleaner, highlighting that corruption is systemic rather than institution- or party-specific.

The P C Hota Committee had earlier proposed reforms to cleanse the recruitment system, but most of its recommendations remain unimplemented. The answer does not lie in *ad hoc* workarounds but in comprehensive reform. People of proven integrity must be appointed not only at the helm but across operational levels. Corrupt officers and the ecosystem of toots must be dismantled. The Lokayukta must play a far more proactive role in safeguarding the sanctity of the selection process. Transparency, technological safeguards, and external oversight must be strengthened so that competence, not money or proximity, decides who serves the state. The KPSC must evolve into an institution where merit is the sole currency, rather than a marketplace where public offices are auctioned.

As alleged irregularities erode public trust, transparency and stronger oversight become non-negotiable

BEYOND KHAMENEI

No endgame in Trump's Iran gamble

The Islamic Republic's political structures are likely to endure, deferring the objectives of the US-Israel offensive

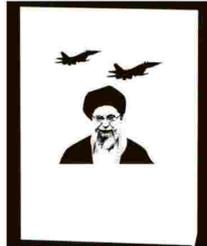
VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN

As the United States-Israel war against Iran threatens an extended phase of instability for West Asia, several questions remain unanswered. Is it, as economist and public policy analyst Jeffrey Sachs says, "a war for control of the Middle East... for control of the oil of the Middle East"? Does this explain why President Donald Trump suddenly escalated his policy, on February 28, from Mar-a-Lago when three rounds of talks were already held in Geneva between his special representatives and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, even as he continued to assemble American forces around Iran? Why was February 28 chosen to launch 'Operation Epic Fury'? Elliott Abrams, senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), reported that the decision to attack Iran might have been made during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington on February 11.

Questions have arisen regarding links to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel two days before the attack. The operation had no connection with Modi's visit, according to the Israeli Ambassador to India, Reuven Azar. He said an "operational opportunity" that arose after Modi left Israel was granted final approval by Israel's security cabinet on the morning of February 28. This "operational opportunity" runs contrary to the negotiations that were going on. CFR, the New York-based think tank, in its February 26 daily news brief, quoted Oman's mediator as saying that both Iran and the US demonstrated "unprecedented openness to new and creative ideas and solutions" during the Steve Witkoff-Araghchi talks, and that both Trump and Araghchi maintained that "a deal is preferable." Was this linked to Oman to prevent a war it did not want? This was because most of the US allies currently targeted by Iran (SAU, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain) had changed their assessments of the threats from Iran. Chatham House, the London-based international affairs think tank, in its February 19 assessment, said Qatar,

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt had changed their stance. These governments, which once urged the US to deal with Iran and the 'Axis of Resistance,' were advocating negotiations, considering that the "greatest risks are now an expansionist and aggressive Israel, and the chaos of a potentially collapsed Iranian State".

They were also worried that a change of regime in Iran, as in the case of what America did in Iraq, would revitalise the Islamic State. The final riddle is: Why didn't Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, move into a safe bunker when President Trump's and Prime Minister Netanyahu's public pronouncements made it clear he



would be targeted?

The February 28 decision by Trump and Netanyahu to launch the operation compares implausibly with the White House announcement on February 12, after the Israeli Prime Minister's visit, that no "definitive" agreement was reached between the US and Israel on "how to move forward with Iran". Nor did Trump hint at this possibility in his State of the Union address on February 24. According to the assessment by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Trump dropped from his speech "much of the threatening language about the massive military buildup in the region".

The regime will resist

The only clue as to why this decision was changed is possibly the BBC's interpretation of the Mar-24 statement that Trump and Netanyahu viewed "the Iranian leadership as at its weakest point domestically for years, with its allied militias in the region decimated after the Gaza war". Did Trump believe that this would be as easy as the Venezuela-Maduro operation? Or was this decision made only to benefit Netanyahu?

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Losing rank, gaining insight

Discipline is not confined to uniforms or drill grounds—it is in the mind

IP ANAND

Adets! *Shaan paanch bajay Major Saab ke samany phosti Uvaalon ka parade hoga!* The announcement came almost as soon as we had arrived and settled in the NCC camp. As a proud rank holder, I felt instantly important. Puffed up with pride, I began to await the evening ceremony with great eagerness. We assembled well before time. At exactly five o'clock, Major Saab arrived. Elegantly attired in military uniform, with the national emblem shining on his broad shoulders, he looked smart, authoritative, and unmistakably strict. His very presence inspired awe.

The proceedings began with inspection. The Major moved down the line, minutely examining uniforms, belt buckles, boots, haircuts, and even nails. When he stopped before me, my confidence faltered. I was placed among those declared "poorly dressed"—our uniforms wrinkled and boots insufficiently polished. The consolation that

others shared my fate helped little; my spirits had already sunk.

Next came the parade. "Saadhaan! Vishram! Aagay badh! Pechaymad!" Commands rang out sharply. Still smarting from the inspection, I tried to keep pace, but my half-heartedness hampered it from happening. I missed steps, lost rhythm, and struggled through the exhausting forty minutes.

Then came the verdict. I stood among four cadets declared "not fit for the rank". My cherished chevrons—the badge of my being a Lance Naik—was removed. It was humiliation piled upon humiliation. This time, even shared misfortune brought no comfort. I could only accept the setback in silence.

The camp schedule, however, allowed little time for self-pity. For the next ten days we were immersed in drill and parade; tracking and patrolling, rifle practice; and camouflage and reconnaissance. Gradually, the sting of that first day faded into the rigour of routine. The final day arrived with the valedictory function, which included a cultural programme. Many hesitated to perform before the imposing Major, but some senior students broke the ice. My friends then urged me to sing a *ghazal*. Reluctantly, I agreed and began my favourite, *Marne ki duayen ki un maangoon...*

As I sang, my initial hesitation dissolved. The familiar melody steadied me; confidence replaced nervousness. The audience responded warmly, and by the final couplets, several voices joined in. What had begun timidly ended on a note of shared enjoyment.

The real surprise came during the Major's address. Referring to my performance, he observed that the involvement I displayed while singing had been missing during the parade. His remark was neither harsh nor sarcastic—simply perceptive. Yet it struck home with remarkable clarity. He had noticed not just what I did, but how I did it.

In that moment, disappointment turned into understanding. The loss of my chevrons was not merely a disciplinary action; it was a lesson. I had taken one responsibility casually while giving my whole heart to another. The difference lay not in ability, but in attitude.

That camp taught me something no textbook could: discipline is not confined to uniforms or drill grounds—it is a habit of mind. Whatever we undertake deserves our full commitment. Certainly, sometimes we win; sometimes we learn — and often, it's losing that leaves us learned.

Be considerate

The Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission's tariff hike for commercial units and reduction

for agricultural pumpsets is noted. However, suitable relief could be considered for establishments suffering losses, based on audit reports.

Are these objectives achievable? CFR, which did a survey, found it nearly impossible for the US and Israel to topple the theocratic regime even if Iran is heavily debilitated after the war. The reason is the very structure of the Islamic Republic, "an ideological system with a multi-layered elite and base of support". It is not a one-man show. Although all decisions were taken in the name of Khamenei, experts like Vali Nasr, author of *Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History*, believe that in the multi-nodal Iranian theocracy and defence establishment, decisions are taken at different levels. He refers to a complex decision-making process involving the Assembly of Experts that determines succession and advises the supreme leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the clerical councils.

This is probably why the IRGC's Quds Force was not blunted even after the US killed Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020. Soleimani was the most charismatic and most feared face of the Quds Force, which focuses on unconventional warfare and extraterritorial operations. The system of decentralisation "still provides the regime with a cadre prepared to use force to maintain power". Middle East experts say that the theocracy will likely survive the latest bombing — "battered and bruised but standing".

Ray Takeyh, senior fellow for Middle East Studies at the CFR, believes that the West could have secured better dividends without this war. He says that Araghchi had tabled proposals that called for the suspension of uranium enrichment for several years before allowing it to then resume at low levels. Linda Robinson, CFR's senior fellow, also feels that there will be mass American casualties if special forces are deployed. The consensus among CFR experts is that Trump's ambitious objectives cannot be achieved merely with joint assaults by air or sea.

Finally, contrary to what Trump said about Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that he was "unable to avoid American intelligence", there are indications that Khamenei, in the true spirit of "martyrdom", chose to remain outside his bunker.

(The writer is a former special secretary, Cabinet Secretariat; Syndicate: The Billion Press)

SPEAK OUT

Nitish's tenure as CM (of Bihar) will be remembered as a golden chapter in Bihar's history.



Babulal Marandi, Jharkhand Assembly LoP

Praise undeserved, is satire in disguise.

Alexander Pope

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

When AI mirrors gender biases

A feminist approach will help data design to be more inclusive, preventing a replication of society's biases

VARSHA SINGH

The recent India AI Impact Summit, while showcasing the country's advancing technological capabilities, also raised concerns over AI's ethical inconsistencies. It is now accepted that biases entrenched in society are reflected and amplified by algorithms and AI-based products. This can be traced to inherently discriminatory training datasets and unequal modes of data collection.

Industries are increasingly employing AI systems to make important decisions at a brisker pace. Algorithms are deployed by companies to shortlist candidates for hiring, by financial institutions to offer credit to customers, by healthcare workers to prioritise candidates for vaccines, and in multiple other fields. However, since these algorithms are a reflection of the prevalent norms of society due to the data fed into them, the resultant gender bias may reinforce stereotypes and discriminate against women.

A feminist lens is essential for identifying and eliminating gender bias in the data economy. The times call for a scrutiny of data science from the perspective of what is being termed "data feminism".

In 2018, Amazon landed in controversy when its automated system to sort resumes of job applicants rejected women's applications. The algorithm's preference was based on the statistics of the company's existing workforce, which consisted mostly of men. The AI was trained to reject women's candidature on detecting terms like "female", "women's college" or "women's team" on their resumes. This demonstrates how technology can perpetuate existing biases.

Consumer credit industries have faced criticism for discriminating against women in the allocation of credit. In a striking case of algorithmic bias, a 2019 incident revealed that a woman and her husband reported the same income, expenses, and debt, but a credit card company set the woman's credit limit to almost half the amount allotted to her husband.

Moreover, feedback loops between data inputs and outputs tend to reinforce existing stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles. For instance, translation software often translates gender-neutral English terms into stereotypical, gendered words in other languages, such as Spanish. A researcher noted that a translation application would convert "the doctor" and "the nurse" in English to "el doctor" and "la enfermera" in Spanish, reinforcing the notion that doctors are male and nurses are female.

Similarly, many image recognition technologies have been reported for bias in images corresponding to occupations. A study observed this during a keyword search on a platform for "nurses"; 80% of the generated images were of females, while searching for "CEO," only 10% of the images shown were of females. In reality, about 30% of the CEOs of leading businesses are women. Such search results and translations feed into existing prejudices and mislead people about women in the workforce.

Inclusion through participatory design
Humans generate and collect data that goes into the training modules; humans determine which datasets algorithms can learn from to make predictions. These stages can introduce human biases in an algorithm, affirming a reality — data cannot be truly neutral. Such biases in algorithms can be reformed by using a more participatory process or developing better training data modules that accommodate diverse genders and communities. Another promising way to correct these gender biases would be to improve diversity by increasing the representation of women in the tech industry.

Practising gender justice in data science can help in creating more functional AI systems. A 2020 study by Bo Cowgill et al. has shown that diverse demographic groups are better at reducing algorithmic bias. Participatory technologies in the development of tech would ensure gender sensitivity. Bias in data collection can also be avoided if the data analyst employs personal modes of collection, such as crowdsourcing. A 2019 UNESCO report on embedding gender equality into AI principles is an important document in this regard. Moving past the gender binary, valuing multiple forms of knowledge, and using data to challenge unequal power structures are some healthy practices that could help fill gender gaps in data. The National Council of German Women's Organisations has published a policy paper titled 'Achieving a gender-equitable digital transformation', where scholars have come together to devise ethical principles for designing gender-sensitive datasets.

Improving the approach to design and management of AI systems can ensure a more just and representative world. Ethical data governance should be a top priority for all stakeholders involved. Conversations about gender are vital in creating inclusive, socially beneficial data systems and AI. The challenges are manifold, but as long as critical enquiry is not muted, there is hope.

(The writer is a judge based in Rajasthan, with an avid interest in gender studies and human rights)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shameful surrender to casteism

Your editorial 'Deep discrimination, cosmetic fix' (March 5) rightly condemns the caste discrimination in Shingatur village, Gadag district, where Dalits were denied haircuts by local barbers citing a "religious tradition". The Karnataka government's decision to open a separate government-run shop for Dalits is a shameful indictment of our society, 76 years after

Securify for Indians abroad

Appropos 'Indian labour in wartime Israel' (Mar 5), the growing presence of Indian workers in global labour markets raises concerns about safety in conflict-affected regions. While opportunities provide better livelihoods, stronger safeguards are essential. Transparent recruitment, enforce-

able contracts and proactive consular support can protect workers. Economic opportunity should go hand-in-hand with dignity and security for Indian citizens working abroad.

Sakshi Kumari, Bengaluru

Be considerate

The Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission's tariff hike for commercial units and reduction

for agricultural pumpsets is noted. However, suitable relief could be considered for establishments suffering losses, based on audit reports.

AK Shariff, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com (only letters emailed — not handwritten — will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

'BRS failed, now Cong is failing the state. Will fight for Telangana identity, welfare'

Former MLC and Telangana Jagruthi founder K Kavitha, suspended from the BRS founded by her father and Telangana patriarch K Chandrashekar Rao, is now gearing up to launch a new political party. Fresh from her acquittal by a trial court in the Delhi excise policy scam case and receiving a steady stream of visitors offering congratulations, Kavitha spoke to DFI about how the Rouse Avenue court's verdict exposes the misuse of State agencies. Excerpts:

K Kavitha, Telangana Jagruthi founder and former MLC, in conversation with S N V Sudhir

THE DEEP TAKE

What is your reaction to the Delhi court's verdict on the excise policy case?
The verdict has fully exposed the victimisation and political motivation behind this false case. We have said from the beginning that we had nothing to do with it. We are clean, and the court's judgment has reinforced that. Moreover, the court's comments on certain matters are revealing. It exposes how agencies were misused, especially regarding regionalism. How can you label someone from a "south group", club people together, and at-

tribute wrongdoing based on who they are rather than on what they've done wrong? Another statement is that you may curtail a person's freedom, but how will you give it back once proven wrong? That's what happened to me. My teenage child was writing board exams when I was sent to jail; that time

cannot be brought back. The stress my son, my family, and I endured, plus the damage to reputation over four years, was horrible for a woman. The online harassment peaked in my case.

You also spoke about the misuse of agencies by governments. One hundred percent. I believe it is the first time in history where the court ordered a probe into one investigating officer—I gathered this from newspapers, as I haven't read the full judgment yet. That shows how the judiciary sliced through the web of lies, getting to the bottom of the issue. They refused to frame charges based on mere allegations, deeming them baseless without concrete logic—nothing but a political vendetta. The court has established this fact. I'm happy to be out peacefully.

Going forward, what are your plans?
We will launch a political party in the next two months—a regional, Telangana-focused party. I will work to restore people's faith in the Telangana

cause and identity. In the last 12 years, that faith has faded. BRS ignored those who fought for the state; Congress welcomed everyone else but sidelined Telangana's people, identity, and culture, which we fought for all those years. My party's motherboard will be Telangana; the rest will follow.

When you say the last 10 years, that includes BRS (or TRS) rule under your father, K Chandrashekar Rao. Are you saying BRS, too, failed in restoring the Telangana spirit or culture?
See, I was part of BRS for 10 years but expelled in the last eight months. In my Janabata tour of Telangana during my suspension, I first apologised to families of Telangana martyrs and those who fought for the state. Despite being in a party that fought for Telangana, I couldn't do much, but I will now. I stand by that. I take my share of responsibility in the party's negativities, no doubt. Now, after 12 years, going to people previously confined to Nizamabad by protocol, strategy, or design, I've visited Adilabad and the

poorest areas like Achampet and Mahabubnagar. No change since the days of the agitation: the same villages, the same situations. Over the past 12 years, BRS failed them; Congress is failing them now. Someone must voice it and fight, and I am taking that forward, hoping for people's support.

Can you replace the BRS as opposition? With the BJP, BRS, and ruling Congress already there, is there space?
The BJP and BRS failed to expose Congress' failures, so Congress won municipalities despite doing nothing, not even providing uninterrupted power. Why did urban voters choose Congress? No opposition stood tall calling out failures. We aim to play that role now and hope to come to power after elections. Whom am I fighting? BRS, Congress,

BJP—everybody. No allies now. My primary interest is Telangana's people. Congress did nothing for Telangana; the BJP did nothing; the BRS tried but failed in core areas—*Neelu* (water), *Nidhulu* (budget), and *Niyamakulu* (jobs)—that we fought for. Fall there, and what's left? That's what my village travels reveal. Meagre changes in most places, nothing in many after 12 years.

You're compared to Y S Sharmila, who folded her party in Telangana...
It's sad a woman launching a party gets compared to another woman who did, like Devender Goud, Chitrarajeevi, Indra Reddy, Chenna Reddy, and hundreds more. It's unfair to compare. Our histories are different. I'm not Sharmila; she's not me. I'm like KCR. Compare me to him; he floated a party and succeeded. Why not think I can too? It may take time, but you can't compare apples and oranges.



China announced a 7% increase in military spending and a five-year plan to try to reduce its military and industry's reliance on Western technology

CHRIS BUCKLEY AND LILY KUO

From its strikes on Iran to its global tariffs, the United States has wielded military force and economic threats to impose its will. China's top leader, Xi Jinping, is preparing for this era of perilous rivalry by pouring resources into artificial intelligence, quantum computing and other strategic technologies, while also expanding the country's armed forces.

Details of Xi's ambitious plan for the next five years of China's technological ascent were released at a meeting of the national legislature in Beijing on Thursday. The approach reflects Xi's view that competition with the US will ultimately be decided by technological innovation that drives economic, military and cultural strength.

The plan calls for fostering new engines of economic growth in emerging industries like quantum computing, bio-manufacturing, hydrogen and fusion energy, brain-computer interfaces, embodied intelligence and 6G mobile networks. "In the midst of fierce international competition, we must win the strategic initiative," the plan said.

As China's relationship with the US has deteriorated, threatening Beijing's access to US technology, leaders in Beijing see achieving self-reliance as ever more urgent. Xi himself said in October that China should "seize this window of opportunity to consolidate and expand our advantages."

Even as Xi is preparing to host President Donald Trump in April to try to extend a trade truce, he is doubling down on a strategy of ensuring that China's economy and military are not vulnerable to being cut off from advanced semiconductors and other critical technologies from the West.

"Chinese leaders have a view that Washington will continue trying to constrain China's technological development," said Gerard Pippo, an associate director of the China Research Centre at Rand, a research organisation. "That belief underpins the urgency behind self-reliance efforts."

The plan said China would "continuously enhance" the country's competitive advantage in rare earths, exports of which Beijing had restricted in response to the US tariffs, before the two sides agreed to pause retaliatory measures. Separately, the plan also called for strengthening China's ability to counter sanctions and foreign interference.

The ongoing US-Israeli strikes on Iran and America's attack on Venezuela in January—which led to the capture of President Nicolás Maduro and takeover of that country's oil industry—may have deepened Chinese leaders' wariness of Trump, said Daniel R. Russell, a former assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs.

"Donald Trump may think he is demonstrating military strength that will intimidate Beijing," said Russell, a distinguished fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute. "But his actions in Venezuela and Iran are more likely to drive Beijing's determination to harden its capacity to resist the US and to tighten its alignment with Russia."

To fortify China against perceived threats, Xi is also committed to a continued buildup of the People's Liberation Army forces, even after eviscerating its high command with



ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

In a riskier era, China bets on tech to resist US pressure

purges that have removed his top generals and left key leadership posts vacant. The government said Thursday that it would increase its military spending by 7% this year relative to last year, bringing its outlay to about \$277 billion—about one-third of the Trump administration's proposed military spending for the 2026 fiscal year.

But Xi has indicated that long-term victory depends less on raw spending and more on the country's ability to dominate industries of the future. The new plan calls for technological breakthroughs, including in the development of medicines as well as in deep sea mining and fusion energy research. The term "artificial intelligence" is cited over 50 times.

In areas like AI, robotics, quantum computing and 6G, "I think there's a strong sense among China's policymakers that they can take the lead over the US," said Kyle Chan, a fellow at the Brookings Institution focusing on China's industrial policies.

The goals laid out in the plan are like "huge flashing lights that orient central bureaucrats, local officials, domestic companies and multinationals on the country's priorities for the next five years," said Scott Kennedy, a researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and the author of a new study of China's drive for technological breakthroughs. **The New York Times**

Sets economy's growth target below 5% for first time in decades

Every March, China's leaders gather in Beijing's Great Hall of the People to announce how much the world's second-largest economy is expected to grow that year. It doesn't change much from year to year.

On Thursday, the target for 2026 was set at between 4.5% and 5%. It was the first time in more than three decades that the benchmark was placed below the 5% mark, and represents an official acknowledgment that China is on a slower growth path.

The announcement came at the start of the National People's Congress, the meeting of China's Communist Party-controlled legislature, when leaders reveal the government's main economic and policy priorities for the year. The unveiling of the growth target is followed closely by financial markets because it lays out the expectations of the country's officials, including China's leader, Xi Jinping. In a political system heavily directed from top levels, the number can offer clues about plans for economic policymaking.

Speculation over whether the target would be below 5%, where it has been for the past three years, was a parlour game among China watchers. Dan Wang, a director on Eurasia Group's China team, said the government is aware of the domestic economic problems and the lower target signals that it is willing to tolerate slower near-term growth while it focuses on longer-term structural fixes. In addition to the growth target, China said its central budget deficit would be around 4% of the size of the economy, or gross domestic product—roughly in line with last year's level. The deficit target sets a direction for central government borrowing, which can offer hints about plans for fiscal stimulus. But provincial and local governments also do a lot of borrowing. In recent years, China has endured downward pressures in its domestic economy. A trade war with President Donald Trump, currently in an uneasy truce, has caused China to redirect its considerable exports, pressuring businesses and causing factories to scramble for new markets. **NYT**

Equality vs tradition in Mizoram

ABIGAIL CHINZAH

The Mizoram Legislative Assembly's unanimous passage of the Mizo Marriage and Inheritance of Property (Amendment) Act in February 2026 marks a revision of customary family law in the state. The amendment bans polygamy and bigamy, requires divorces to produce a divorce certificate before remarriage, and allows women to claim up to half of property acquired jointly during marriage in the event of separation. These measures aim to modernise Mizo customary law by strengthening women's economic rights and reinforcing monogamous marriage norms.

Yet the legislation also introduces a controversial clause on inter-community marriage that has triggered debate over gender equality and identity rights. Under the amended law, Mizo women who marry non-Mizo men lose their recognised Mizo identity and are no longer eligible for the protections of the Act, including their children's entitlement to Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. This departs from the earlier 2014 Act, which applied to all Mizos regardless of whom they married. In effect, the amendment applies only when both spouses are Mizo or when the husband is Mizo, excluding Mizo women who marry outside the community.

Some provisions are widely viewed as progressive, particularly the prohibition of polygamy, which codifies what had long been a social norm in Mizoram, where Christian values discouraged bigamous marriages. More significantly, the Act introduces property rights for women by allowing a divorced spouse, usually the wife, to claim up to 50% of jointly acquired matrimonial assets. This addresses criticism that customary laws treated women as outsiders and provides greater economic security after divorce. By recognising contributions of both partners, the amendment moves towards gender parity in marital property rights.

However, these reforms have been overshadowed by the identity clause on inter-community marriages. Chief Minister Lalduhoma explained that traditional Mizo custom viewed a woman marrying outside the tribe as "entering" her husband's family and losing her place in the Mizo community. Under the new law, if a Mizo woman marries a non-Mizo man, she forfeits her Mizo identity, and her children become ineligible for ST status and

reservation benefits. In contrast, Mizo men who marry non-Mizo women retain their tribal identity and pass it to their spouses and children. Mizoram's largest women's organisation, the Mizo Hmeichhe Insukhkhawm Pawl (MHIP), demanded withdrawal of the amendment, calling it "unsafe" and "inadequate" for women. Activists and members of the Mizo diaspora argue that the law legitimises a discriminatory double standard by penalising women who marry outside the community. Supporters argue the amendment reflects long-standing customary practices and the right of tribal communities to define membership. In the Assembly debate, legislator Barly Vannehsangstated the measure would help prevent cultural assimilation and preserve Mizo identity. According to customary understanding, lineage traditionally follows the male line.

Nevertheless, the provision raises constitutional concerns, as Indian constitutional principles, particularly equality before the law, sit uneasily with gender-based distinctions in identity rights. The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that caste or tribal status is primarily determined by birth and cannot be automatically lost through marriage. It has also affirmed that a woman does not lose her SC or ST status by marrying outside her community and that children may claim such status through the mother's lineage if raised within that social environment. Even the government circulars cited in support of the amendment, including a 1977 Home Ministry note and a 2019 directive from the Ministry of Social Justice, do not endorse a blanket prohibition. They emphasise case-by-case evaluation and allow the possibility that children raised within their mother's tribal community may qualify for tribal certification.

The amendment reflects a broader tension between tribal autonomy and constitutional equality. While Article 371G grants Mizoram authority over customary laws, such autonomy does not exist outside democratic and constitutional values. The state's legal review committee, including representatives from women's organisations, did not unanimously support the identity clause, and the chief minister acknowledged the need for further review. For now, the law remains in force, though its implications remain uncertain.

(The writer is a PhD scholar, Department of Political Science, St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1976

90 bus passengers feared dead

Mandya, March 5
About 90 persons were killed today when a private bus carrying nearly 100 passengers plummeted into the Maddur Main Canal at Dudda, near here. A marriage party from Honnenahalli and a group of devotees coming from Jajjara at Mathigere were in the bus. At 7.45 a.m. Chinnna Thambi, a mason, who lives on the bank of the canal, saw the bus coming from Jakkannahalli to Mandya, swerve from the entrance of the bridge and plunge into the canal water, knocking down, in the process, a 11-year-old cowherd Andani into the canal. The boy died on the spot.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2001

Jaya drops Cong, TMC; strikes deal with PMK

Chennai, March 5
AIADMK general secretary J Jayalalitha today slammed the door on the Congress (I) and the Tamil Mania Congress by striking a separate deal with the PMK for the coming elections to the Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry Assemblies and starting formal seats-sharing talks with the two left parties. Exasperated by the procrastination by the Congress, which has made an issue of the entry of the pro-LTTE PMK into the front and its claim for Chief Ministership of Pondicherry, Ms Jayalalitha signed an agreement with PMK.

OASIS | RESWARAN

Realisation through assertion and negotiation

The Supreme Self is realised through two distinct yet complementary processes: assertion and negotiation. The scriptures lay out these two pathways with great clarity. Assertion removes the unreal, and negotiation establishes the real. Both together lead to the discovery of one's true nature. Assertion concerns itself with removing all that is unreal. This is done through logic, reason, *pratyaksha*, *anumana*, *upamana*, and other valid means of knowledge available to an individual. To understand that the world is temporary, that whatever is born will die, that everything is constantly changing—one does not need a *shas-*

tra. If you have a basic intellect and if your eyes are open, you will know it. *Shashtra* is not required to teach that which is obvious. Predominantly, the *shashtra's* methodology is the process of negotiation: *neti, neti, neti*. Yet negotiation alone is not sufficient. One must also assert the real. We wonder how can we assert that which I do not yet know? The answer lies in the *shashtra*. While negotiation can be carried out through personal observation and logical reasoning, assertion requires *shraddha*—a deep trust in the scriptures. Without this trust, one cannot make the leap

from the known to the real. The goal is *ivattma-paramatma aikyam*—the oneness of the individual Self and the Supreme Brahman. Realising this oneness is the ultimate destination of life. What is Unreal? Unreal is that which has a dependent temporary existence. That which is dependent is unreal. Any statement in Vedanta that reveals the identity of the individual Self with the universal Self is a *mahavakya*. A *mahavakya* does not offer a new definition of God nor provide a new experience of God. Its role is simple and direct: to reveal the truth of oneness, which is already the case.





Truth, deeds and character should not be post-revolutionary considerations. They should go along with the revolution

Ram Manohar Lohia

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

BIHAR MANDAL ERA FADES AS NITISH GOES TO DELHI, BJP EYES THE DRIVER SEAT

Nitish Kumar's move from the Bihar chief minister's office to the Rajya Sabha marks an unusual transition in Indian politics—a powerful regional leader stepping away from state power while remaining within the formal political arena. After nearly two decades in and out of office, and 10 stints as chief minister across shifting alliances, the shift signals the closing of a long chapter in Bihar's governance.

The timing suggests careful choreography. Nitish returned in office through the election cycle, returned as chief minister and steered the state budget before initiating the move to Parliament. His message on X emphasising that the decision was voluntary appears designed to reassure supporters and preempt speculation that the move was forced or orchestrated by allies, particularly the BJP. At a time when questions about his health have circulated in political circles, the transition allows him to step aside without the optics of being displaced.

Yet the development inevitably raises questions about succession and the future balance of power in Bihar. For the BJP which has long been the junior partner in the state despite its growing electoral strength, the moment presents an opportunity it has waited years for—to head the government in a politically pivotal state. Whether it chooses to assert that claim immediately or maintain the alliance equilibrium will be closely watched. For the Janata Dal (United), the shift carries deeper implications. The party's political relevance has long been intertwined with Nitish Kumar's personal authority and administrative imagination. Without him at the helm in Patna, it will have to navigate a future in which it is no longer the unquestioned centre of the alliance.

Nitish Kumar's tenure shaped Bihar's politics after the era of Lalu Prasad Yadav. His governance model—often summarised as 'sushasan'—emphasised administrative stability, welfare measures and incremental development in a state long associated with political turbulence. At the same time, his leadership also set the limits of the ruling coalition's ideological agenda. Issues central to the BJP's politics often found cautious expression in Bihar, while policies such as prohibition remained closely identified with his administration despite criticism over enforcement and revenue losses.

With Nitish Kumar stepping away from Patna's centre of power, Bihar enters a moment of political recalibration. The immediate question is who succeeds him. And the larger one is whether the state's politics will continue along the cautious equilibrium he maintained or move toward a different balance of power.

CHILDCARE LEAVES CAN STRENGTHEN WORKFORCE

As before the Karnataka High Court has brought focus on the value of childcare leaves—the paid days off granted to female and single-parent male government employees to look after the needs of their young children under Rule 43C of the Central Civil Services (Leave) Rules, 1972.

A Bengaluru-based woman officer at the electronics and IT ministry's Centre for Development of Advanced Computing had appealed to the Central Administrative Tribunal when her request for a five-month childcare leave up to May 20, 2026—to attend to her son's Class 10 pre-board and possible supplementary examinations—was shrunk to less than a month from February 16 to March 7, encompassing only the pre-boards. This week, the high court rejected the Union ministry's plea against the tribunal's order that had upheld the woman's appeal.

The Central Civil Services (Leave) Rules were enacted in June 1972 mainly to encourage women government employees to strive for a work-life balance without risking job security or career interruptions. But society has changed since then. The rules now allow an employee who is a mother or a single male parent a total of 730 days childcare leaves for two under-16 children over the entire service period.

Such leaves gain even more significance over half a century later, when children are showing increasing tendencies of exam stress, anxieties and adverse psychological reactions, with several tragic cases involving extreme steps. In an intensely competitive age, providing children easy access to social media and unlimited information via the internet, benevolent parental involvement is of crucial importance to keep them positively focused, especially when exams close in.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, female workforce participation in India has increased from 22 per cent in 2017-18 to 33.6 per cent in December 2025. Even though a large part of the increase has been attributed to unpaid work, it is time away from other necessities of life nonetheless. Childcare leaves and similar policies relevant to the private sector would go a long way in ensuring two things—more women joining the workforce and healthier parenting options for employees. Both of these are necessary to ensure a stronger human resource base for India's future.

QUICK TAKE

STOP THE RUMOUR MILL

An old adage has come back to haunt us—along with the posters it generated. We cannot be certain who first said, "Truth is the first casualty of war." Greek playwright Aeschylus is given credit for offering divine justification for deception during wartime, but he did not quite frame it the way we know it today. It had been paraphrased in so many ways by the Second World War that both warring alliances put up posters warning against rumours. Right now, West Asian governments are in a similar overdrive, deeply worried about citizens drawing the wrong conclusions from social media posts. Indians would also do well to trust official channels for information about the conflict and not burden their dear ones among the West Asian diaspora with alarmist messages.

THE American-Israeli attack on Iran nudged and winked, if not instigated, by Iran's other regional adversaries has once again underscored that multiple obsolescences of the post-1945 US-anchored, 'sol-disant' rules-based international order are repeatedly being foregrounded. The world has regressed to the early 20th century where outcomes are once again being measured in hulls, squadrons and technological edges.

In this churn, the US has delineated a new baseline: its defence budget has almost crossed the trillion-dollar threshold, a sum larger than the next nine nations' combined. A significant portion of this is being channelled into a new generation of capabilities, from the yet-unproven 'Golden Dome' architecture to the software-defined platforms of Silicon Valley's defence tech startups.

Opposite this is the People's Liberation Army of China. Since the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-96, Beijing maintained a sustained, double-digit increase in defence spending for two decades, a trajectory that moderated in 2016 to a still-steady 7.6 per cent annual rise in the decade since.

From a defence expenditure roughly a sixth of the US's in 2012, China compressed the gap to roughly a third by 2024. In the Indo-Pacific, China's defence spending is hegemonic: more than three times that of India, five times that of Japan and nearly seven times South Korea's. The Chinese spend more on defence than the next 22 Indo-Pacific militaries combined, including India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and Taiwan. It translates into the world's largest navy, a modernised air force operating stealth aircraft, and an integrated missile force predicated on power projection far from its shores.

For a nation of India's geostrategic heft, a peninsula jutting into the Indian Ocean with a contested 15,000-km land frontier, this is the unforbearing context. We are not just situated in a hostile neighbourhood, but also positioned in the crucible of the 21st century's defining great-power competition.

Against this backdrop, India's own fiscal calculus for national security demands a cold, hard audit. The M M Joshi Committee flagged a chilling trend in 2018: defence expenditure had slid from 2 per cent of GDP in 2014-15 to 1.5 per cent by 2017-18. It has averaged 1.9 per cent since then—a persistent pattern of stagnation.

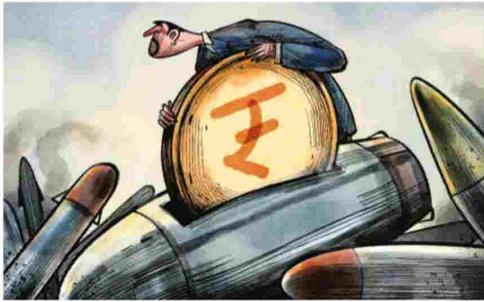
For 2026-27, the Budget estimated defence spending at ₹7.85 lakh crore. While this represents an over-15 per cent increase from the last fiscal, as a percentage

Bureaucratic limbo and anaemic funding hamper the upgrades India's armed services desperately require. Defence spend must be raised as share of GDP and research efforts integrated across institutions

DANGER OF PLAYING CATCH-UP WITH DEFENCE TECH

MANISH TEWARI

MP, lawyer, former Union I&B minister and author of *A World Adrift*



of GDP it hovers around 2 per cent, close to the average since 2014. Within this constrained envelope, the tussle runs deeper. Capital outlays remain anaemic—less than 30 per cent of total defence spending, stuck at less than 0.6 per cent of GDP for the three services. These modest outlays are strangulating the modernisation of the armed forces so desperately we require.

The Indian Air Force's struggle to replace its ageing squadrons and expand its fighter fleet is held hostage to this dynamic. The production ramp-up of the Tejas light combat aircraft remains painfully sluggish, a source of public frustration. The advanced medium combat aircraft, however, languishes in bureaucratic limbo.

The navy's submarine and surface fleet expansion, from Project S5 to the P-18 class, face interminable headwinds.

Projects 75-I and 77 for conventional and nuclear-powered submarines struggle to translate ambitious policy into steel in the water, even as Chinese shipyards launch vessels at a pace outstripping the US's.

The army requires advanced surveillance, rugged communications and specialised weaponry. Artillery modernisation remains a work in progress—delayed, scaled down or proceeding in numbers too small to make decisive operational difference.

The quest for 'atmanirbharta' in defence is mired in systemic inertia. The Defence Production & Export Promotion Policy 2020 ambitiously aimed for a turnover of ₹1.75,000 crore and exports of ₹35,000 crore by 2025. Yet, the journey from policy to production has been labyrinthine. The administration was quick to trumpet defence exports reaching ₹23,000

WHEN SHARING AIN'T ENOUGH

WHEN something scarce and consequential is at stake, watch who invokes the language of sharing. It is rarely the party that controls the asset. The one with the weak hand asks to "open the cards". The one holding leverage speaks instead of prudence, sequencing and risk. That simple asymmetry is the right way to read today's fashionable demand to 'democratis' access to artificial intelligence and its 'diffusion'.

The claim is morally attractive, especially when framed for the Global South. But it is analytically incomplete. Asking for democratisation is not an alternative to building strategic capability. It is, at best, a complement to it. At worst, it is a substitute for hard choices that must be made at home.

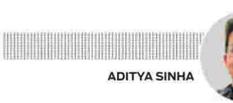
AI is not a monolithic technology that can be diffused like a textbook. It is a layered production system with tight complementarities and hard bottlenecks. At the frontier, it rests on advanced semiconductors, dense compute clusters, high-bandwidth interconnects, reliable energy, cooling systems, engineering depth, evaluation tooling, data pipelines and deployment infrastructure. High fixed costs, steep learning curves and scale effects create natural concentration. Marginal access to one layer without the others yields sharply diminishing returns.

This is why 'open-access' rhetoric sits uneasily with industrial reality. You may be offered model weights, developer tools or research collaborations. But the binding constraints remain compute, energy and the tacit know-how that converts prototypes into reliable systems.

One is reminded of Michael Polanyi's words that we know more than we can say. Capability is embedded in routines, tooling and organisational learning. It cannot be transferred wholesale by declaration.

Once AI becomes dual-use and general-purpose—embedded in defence analytics, cyber operations, surveillance, logistics optimisation and financial risk management—it moves from commerce to strategy. In such domains, export controls and technology-denial regimes are standard instruments of statecraft. The ability to deny access is itself a bargaining chip.

So who asks for democratisation? Typically those outside the frontier. Their argument draws on fairness and global public goods language. The claim is not frivolous. But justice claims do not change the incentive compatibility of the supply side. When the supplier internalises the benefits of control and can



ADITYA SINHA

Public policy professional

externalise many costs of exclusion, the equilibrium is conditional diffusion.

India is well aware of this. The latest Economic Survey's chapter on moving from import substitution to strategic resilience and then to strategic indispensability captures the hierarchy correctly. Translate that frame to AI and the implications are immediate. If the 21st century runs on 'compute' and the minerals and energy that feed it, then AI capability is inseparable from energy policy.



Artificial intelligence is not a monolithic technology that can be diffused like a textbook. When AI is embedded in defence, logistics and finance, access to it is a strong bargaining chip. So 'democratisation' or symbolic sharing is not enough. India needs assured compute capacity, secure cloud infrastructure and resilience buffers

buffers for energy and connectivity.

Second, build economically feasible capabilities where imports persist due to coordination failures or early scale disadvantages. For AI, this includes servers, storage, networking equipment, power electronics, specialised cooling, testing and certification infrastructure, model evaluation systems and domain-specific datasets. Support here must be time-bound and performance-linked. The central government has already been doing this by supporting Sarvam AI.

There is also a macro-financial dimension that cannot be ignored. India's external stability, though prudently managed, still relies significantly on capital inflows. Capital is conditional and reversible; export earnings are earned repeatedly through competitiveness. If AI is to be a source of strength rather than dependency, it must feed into manufacturing exports and global value chain integration. Strategic indispensability means becoming a node others cannot bypass.

None of this argues against international cooperation on AI governance. Standards, interoperability, safety norms and research partnerships are necessary. But they are complements, not substitutes. The temptation to substitute rhetoric for construction is understandable. Democratisation sounds virtuous and immediate. Capability-building is slower, messier and politically inconvenient. It requires patience in a period when decades seem to happen in weeks. But the alternative is dependence dressed as solidarity. In a world where trade, technology and finance are increasingly strategic, the choice is not between cooperation and capability; it is between capability with cooperation, and cooperation without capability.

(Views are personal) On X @adityasinha004 Full article on newindianexpress.com

core, though it was missing the target by more than a third. The response? An even more imprudent target of ₹50,000 crore for 2029. This pattern is the government's 'announcement is the achievement' syndrome in its most distilled form.

Our public defence enterprises remain hamstrung by unconvincing order quantities, a lack of long-term production capabilities and a chronic gap between orders placed and deliveries made. Furthermore, our research and development architecture has struggled to deliver cutting-edge, user-ready systems. The inability to master critical technologies keeps us tethered to foreign equipment manufacturers for hardware as well as the entire lifecycle of support.

This dependency extends beyond hardware into the very doctrine of warfare. India's concept of defence preparedness remains dangerously narrow, fixated on conventional, full-spectrum conflicts of a bygone era.

The Trump administration, which seems to be on track to build his 'dream military' with a \$1.5-trillion defence budget by 2027, has sought \$384 billion from the US Congress on advanced technology and R&D for 2026. The UK has announced \$538 million for defence innovation. The European Union and its member states spend roughly \$17 billion annually on defence innovation.

According to a 2025 Pentagon report, Beijing invests on an 'aggressive' scale in chokepoint technologies including AI, semiconductor, quantum and biotechnology. The Chinese continue to deploy AI for unmanned systems, intelligence, surveillance collection and analysis, decision-making assistance, cyber operations and information campaigns.

A nation with India's aspirations cannot afford to be perpetually catching up. The path forward demands a roadmap. We must raise defence spending to a minimum of 3 per cent of GDP by 2030 and to 5 per cent by 2035. For a future-ready defence architecture built on design and development, Indian industry must be incentivised to innovate and take risks. The national scientific establishment, from government departments to the IITs, must be coalesced into a coherent defence R&D ecosystem.

It is the baseline premium for insurance in a world on fire. The wake-up call has been sounded by the undeniable reality of our geostrategic environment. The question is whether the government comprehends the gravity of the situation. The locust years must end.

(Views are personal) (manishatewari01@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Judicial accountability

Ref: NCEBT is in a mess of its own making (Mar 3). In a democracy, questions should be asked. For one, is the judiciary above law? Next, people want to know the action taken against Justice Ishwant Verma in 'currencygate'. It will be construed as another mess unless those responsible are dealt with in fairness. Raghavendra Rao Vuppu, email

Care standards

Ref: Caring for children (Mar 5). Beyond regulations, we need enforcing care standards, surprise inspections, trained counsellors and a public redress dashboard. Fund child helplines, protect whistleblowers and mandate trauma informed disclosure. Private management can serve, but only with transparent oversight. K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Collaborative training

Ref: Closing the college jobs gap (Mar 4). What India needs is an educational revolution with incorporated skill-based educational processes, cooperation with industry and vocational education, avoiding over-emphasis on theoretical knowledge. Education should not only train students to innovate in traditional employment but also promote entrepreneurial mindset. P Victor Selvaraj, Tirunelveli

American Frankenstein

Ref: US looks to arm Kurdish militias (Mar 5). The US is apparently a poor learner. It has created numerous Frankenstein's in the past by arming regional populations to fight its enemies. Once the current war is over, the same militias could be abused by a vengeful Iran to turn against the US. George Jacob, Kochi

BJP playbook

Ref: Buzz on Nitish going to RS (Mar 5). Nitish being replaced is on the usual line of BJP using local parties for footing and then assuming power on its own. It happened in Maharashtra. Andhra Pradesh is on the line. Tamil Nadu is yet to be seen. The formula works. A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

NRIs' worry

Ref: India pushes for dialogue, diplomacy (Mar 5). With both sides determined to fight to the last end, India's call for a best turn out to be a cry in the wilderness. However, India cannot afford to be a hapless spectator as nearly a core of non-resident Indians look up to their leadership. CV Aravind, Chennai

Reset in ties

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney to New Delhi this week, the symbolism extended far beyond diplomatic protocol. The two governments were not merely signing agreements; they were attempting to redraw the political boundaries of a cyclical relationship that had, until recently, appeared fractured beyond repair. At the heart of the reset lies a 10-year civil nuclear energy arrangement. Canada, home to some of the world's largest uranium reserves, will supply fuel to India while exploring collaboration on small modular and advanced reactors. This is not a minor commercial understanding.

For India, which faces soaring electricity demand as it pushes industrial expansion and electrification, reliable nuclear fuel is a strategic necessity. For Canada, access to a rapidly growing energy market strengthens its global economic relevance at a time when trade diversification has become urgent. But the nuclear agreement is only one pillar of a broader recalibration. The commitment to conclude a comprehensive economic partnership by 2026 signals recognition on both sides that geopolitical volatility demands new alignments. The United States' increasingly unpredictable tariff policies have unsettled traditional trade assumptions. Ottawa is seeking to reduce overdependence on its southern neighbour. New Delhi, for its part, is working to widen its economic partnerships while reducing exposure to single-source vulnerabilities in energy and technology.

This rapprochement unfolds under the long shadow of the 2023 killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada, an episode that triggered expulsions of diplomats and a near-freeze in visa services. The legal process surrounding that case continues. Domestic political debate within Canada - particularly among members of the Sikh diaspora and some parliamentarians - has not vanished. What has changed is the calculation of cost. Confrontation has yielded diminishing returns; engagement promises measurable gains. There is a hard-edged realism in this shift. Neither government has pretended that mistrust evaporates overnight. Instead, both appear to have concluded that structured cooperation in areas such as critical minerals, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and defence serves national interest more effectively than prolonged diplomatic estrangement. The deeper question is whether this reset can mature into resilience. Strategic partnerships are tested not in moments of ceremony but in those of crisis. If fresh allegations surface or domestic political pressures intensify, will institutional mechanisms withstand strain? That will determine whether the current thaw represents tactical convenience or durable transformation.

For now, the message from New Delhi is clear: economic statecraft has overtaken political grievance. India and Canada are choosing interdependence over isolation, energy security over rhetoric, and negotiated trade expansion over symbolic confrontation. In a fractured global order, that may be less about reconciliation and more about survival - and that is precisely why it matters.

Strait Shock

Wars in West Asia are often measured in missiles and maps. This one may ultimately be measured in barrels and basis points. The US-Israeli strikes on Iran and Tehran's retaliation have done more than redraw military red lines. They have reintroduced a familiar but deeply destabilising variable into the global economy: energy insecurity. The immediate surge in Brent crude and liquefied natural gas prices is not merely a trader's reflex. It is a reminder that the Strait of Hormuz remains the narrow hinge on which global growth swings. Roughly a fifth of the world's oil and a significant share of LNG exports transit the Gulf transit routes. The latest escalation between Iranian commanders and western vessels away, when tankers anchor rather than sail, when insurers quietly recalculate risk premiums, the shock travels far beyond the Gulf. It reaches Frankfurt bond desks, London trading floors, and petrol pumps in Mumbai.

The market reaction so far has been sharp but not panicked. That distinction matters. Prices have spiked, then partially retreated, signalling that traders believe disruption is possible but not yet systemic. The Gulf transit routes have not been comprehensively destroyed. Production in Saudi Arabia and Qatar has not collapsed. Opec+ has indicated willingness to increase output modestly. But the danger lies in duration, not drama. If elevated prices persist for weeks rather than days, central banks such as the Bank of England and the US Federal Reserve will confront an unwelcome complication. Inflation, which had been easing after aggressive tightening cycles, could reaccelerate through fuel, freight, and food costs. A delayed rate cut here, a postponed easing there, and suddenly the global recovery narrative frays.

For emerging economies, the pressure is more immediate. Higher crude prices widen trade deficits and weaken currencies. Governments must choose between absorbing fuel subsidies or passing costs to consumers. Either option carries political risk. India, heavily dependent on imported energy, is particularly exposed to volatility in the Gulf transit routes. The strategic irony is striking. Washington's stated objective was to constrain Iran's nuclear trajectory and degrade its deterrent capacity. Yet the most immediate leverage Tehran retains may be economic rather than military. It does not need to close the Strait of Hormuz outright; it merely needs to keep uncertainty alive. Markets price fear faster than governments can calm it. History offers caution. The oil shocks of the 1970s were not solely about physical scarcity. They were about confidence evaporating. Today's global economy is more diversified and more energy-efficient, but it remains psychologically vulnerable to chokepoints.

The decisive question is not whether oil briefly touches \$90 or even \$100. It is whether shipping lanes normalise quickly or become semi-permanent theatres of contestation. If the Strait becomes a bargaining chip in a prolonged confrontation between Washington, Tel Aviv and Tehran, the economic aftershocks will outlast the initial exchange of fire. In modern geopolitics, escalation is transmitted as much through markets as through missiles. President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu have opened a Pandora's Box.

Opening the floodgates

Forest Corporations in many states used to bulldoze and rip the area, and plant short rotation tree species like Populus, Casurina, Eucalyptus and Acacia auriculiformis. The purpose was to supply the raw materials to industries. Such projects were also economically viable, but it was at a huge environmental cost. We ended up converting a biodiverse forest to the monoculture of exotic species. Natural forests have higher carbon sequestration potential than the plantation forests



private players, the amended law has more moroleophers. The newly inserted section 1A(1) in the 2023 amendment can make way for the exploitation of the unclassified forests. Around 90 per cent of the forests in the north eastern states are unclassified and successive reports published by the Forest Survey of India have shown that these forests are shrinking.

It is evident from the bi-annual reports published by the said agency that the country lost 1,743 square km of unclassified forests between 1997 and 2019. A group of retired Indian Forest Service officers have challenged the amendment in the Supreme Court. The petitioners agitated that the Apex Court's 1996 rulings in the Gadvarman case with regard to definition of 'forests' has been diluted in the amendment and an extent of 197 lakh square km forest land in the country stands excluded from the applicability of the original 1980 Act.

In February last year, the Court passed an interim order saying when there are exigencies to divert forest lands for any urgent need including strategic requirements on the country's border, alternative land must be provided for compensatory afforestation. The forests closed to the habitation are subjected to heavy anthropogenic pressures and consequent degradation. Livestock grazing, removal of bamboo, non-timber forest products and small timber for bonafide requirements as well as grabbing of forest land for cultivation etc. are the reasons for degradation.

Communities residing in the neighborhood and the persons accompanying livestock set fires for easy access to non-timber forest products and regeneration of palatable grasses and foliage. There have been very

few success stories, when degraded forests are rehabilitated with native species. We have succeeded only when we planted the monoculture of exotics. There are hardly any evaluation and monitoring reports indicating the success of compensatory afforestation on degraded forest lands and also on non-forest lands.

A central scheme named 'Rehabilitation of degraded forests' was in vogue during the 1990s and 2000s. The main work under the scheme was planting native tree species in the gaps created due to degradation. The newly planted saplings faced root competition from the hidden root stock in the soil. Usually the young plantations are provided with rigid protection and watch ward. Often the area used to become green due to regeneration of old root stocks and the artificially grown sapling used to fail.

However, the forest corporations in many states used to bulldoze and rip the area, and plant short rotation tree species like Populus, Casurina, Eucalyptus and Acacia auriculiformis. The purpose was to supply the raw materials to industries. Such projects were also economically viable, but it was at a huge environmental cost. We ended up converting a biodiverse forest to the monoculture of exotic species.

Natural forests have higher carbon sequestration potential than the plantation forests. Moreover, the plantations are harvested at the end of rotation. In the warming world we are facing climate related disruptions.

The need is to let the natural forests be regenerated with native species, and not diverted for plantations of monocultures.

While this author was working in the Western Ghats as Deputy Conservator of Forests, Shivamogga, a joint venture of Birla's Harihar Plyfibres and Government of Karnataka named Karnataka Pulp-wood Ltd. was incorporated in 1985.

Its functionaries bulldozed and ripped a Reserved Forest area in Thirthahalli taluk, deep inside Western Ghats, for growing abode exotics. In the process, they had damaged valuable natural tree species including sandalwood. An IPS officer Kisan Singh Sugara in charge of the area had booked a case, arrested the persons and seized the bulldozer. Though the Court initially took cognizance of the case, the government's notification of a joint venture bailed them out.

Activists moved the Supreme Court arguing that the plantations raised by joint ventures on forest lands without the approval of the Central government, were in contravention of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. Karnataka government failed to justify its incorporation and had to dissolve it, duly handing over the assets to the State Forest Corporation.

After about four decades of Karnataka allowing investments from private players on forest land and then rolling it back within two-three years, we have come full circle and MoEFCC has again moved on the same track. Forests, even after degradation, have potential to regenerate, if only we protect them from the entry of humans and livestock. Growing raw materials for wood based industries is also a necessity. Let that be done on degraded lands other than notified forests.



The writer is the former Head of Forest Force, Karnataka

The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 was amended in 2023 to name it as the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam. One of the provisions of the amended law is to promote plantation works on forest lands by government and non-governmental agencies, within the framework of Working Plans of the State Forest Department.

The intention of this provision is quite good, as it attracts investment on degraded forest land with a task to re-green it. In other words, afforestation and plantation activities could be carried out on forest land by any private agency after providing for growing compensatory afforestation and recovering the net present value of the forests. On 2 January 2026, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change issued a circular redefining how these activities on forest lands are exempted from long standing environmental safeguards like compensatory afforestation and recovery of net present value of the forests.

Recovering the cost of compensatory afforestation and net present value of the forests required for diversion had been considered as barriers that prohibited big industries from investing in degraded forests. The circular makes way for pulp and paper and rayon industries to grab the opportunity and use degraded forest land for growing short rotation tree species for the raw material that the industries need. The country is importing newsprint, and this move is said to take us towards 'Atmanirbharta'. Let me examine in this piece what are the economic and environmental costs associated with it. In addition to opening forest lands for

CHINADAILY

Data of self-reliance and shared future

If globalization once looked like a seamless web, China's 2025 statistical communiqué would read like the blueprint of a nation steadfastly reinforcing its own corner of that web - increasing bandwidth, rerouting circuits and installing backup generators in anticipation of a stormier world. The latest scorecard from the world's second-largest economy is a dense ledger of hedging a major country recalibrating its exposure to an unpredictable global system. That China's economy expanded 5 percent last year, pushing output beyond 140 trillion yuan (\$20.4 trillion), is a hard-earned result. In this decade, that growth adds more than 5 trillion yuan in new output, an increment larger than the annual economy of many G20 economies. The more revealing shift, however, lies in the growth's composition. About 67.3 percent of growth came from domestic demand, with consumption contributing 52 percent. Retail sales surpassed 50 trillion yuan,

and express deliveries exceeded 190 billion parcels, signalling an effective effort to construct an economy that can better resist external shocks.

By cultivating a consumption-driven model that reduces dependence on export markets vulnerable to tariffs, sanctions and geopolitical whims, while stressing on high-standard opening up, Chinese policymakers are further consolidating the fundamentals of the economy.

The country's pragmatic policy portfolio is conducive to leveraging the global market to strengthen its internal economic system, while contributing to the common development of the world. Innovation plays a central role in this pragmatic and balanced hedging policy. Research and development spending reached 2.8 percent of GDP, surpassing the OECD average for the first time, while high-tech manufacturing grew 9.4 percent year-on-year to account for 17.1 percent

of industrial output.

The same logic applies to China's digital infrastructure build-out. By the end of 2025, the country had installed 4.84 million 5G base stations, achieved 80.1 percent internet penetration, and pushed online retail close to 16 trillion yuan. Digital ecosystems are the new trade routes of the global economy, shaping standards, steering data flows and redefining consumer behavior. While some Western policymakers frame technological competition in military terms, the more consequential contest may lie in the architecture of everyday commerce - payments, logistics, cloud services - where China is constructing reliable systems that boost overall economic efficiency.

China's green transition reflects a similar fusion of domestic necessity and global agenda. Clean energy accounted for 30.4 percent of consumption, carbon intensity fell 5 percent, and production of new energy vehicles exceeded 16 million units,

maintaining a world-leading position for the 11th consecutive year. This is climate policy as industrial policy: by strengthening clean technology supply chains, China brings down the cost of the global energy transition.

Despite these inward fortifications, China remains deeply integrated into global trade. Its goods trade exceeded 45 trillion yuan, likely ranking first worldwide for the ninth consecutive year, while its service trade surpassed 8 trillion yuan.

Trade with partners in the Belt and Road Initiative accounted for 51.9 percent of total imports and exports, underscoring a diversification strategy aimed at reducing reliance on some Western markets. China is redirecting flows toward emerging markets and infrastructure corridors where its engagement is structural. Underlying these economic shifts is a focus on social stability that remains central to China's development. Urban unemployment averaged 5.2 percent, with 12.67 million new urban jobs created.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Sparkling wit

Sir, Years ago, I had a serendipitous encounter followed by a face-to-face conversation with the late Bengali author Mani Shankar Mukhopadhyay, pen named Shankar, in Durgapur. Listening to his speech in impeccable English at the H.F.C. Durgapur Unit (dismantled long since) premises, I was wondering how a corporate executive at the British firm Dutoip and a vernacular writer could coexist in one persona. He bowled us over with his sparkling wit and sense of humour - something that had the audience splitting their sides at times.

Later during a small private meet, his Dunlop boss, a New Zealander, joked he would accompany the distinguished writer to please his wife, a literary enthusiast, who would take him to a restaurant. The boss came Shankar with his disarming smile that put us at ease to begin the conversation veering mostly towards Chowringhee, Jana Aranya and Seemabadda.



To a passing question on which works of his he valued most and why, he retorted, "If you genuinely value eating fish, you love eating its head, body and tail, all equally - neither less nor more - don't you?"

Yours, etc., Ardhendu Chatterjee, Durgapur, 25 February.

What's in a name?

Sir, Kerala has officially been renamed Kerala by the Union Cabinet. And so, Kerala, now Kerala (a la X, formerly Twitter), will still be 'God's own country', its name change notwithstanding. India's

Chile, shapewise, with lush green fields and backwaters that never fail to attract tourists from within India and abroad.

For once, the forward looking state has taken a cue from its arch political rival the BJP, and has subscribed to the renaming act, an exercise with which the BJP has been obsessed ever since it came to power. Will this, in turn, encourage the BJP to go hammer and tongs with its remaining agenda? Will it rename Bhopal to Bhopalam, Ahmedabad to Ahmedabadam, Alwar to Alwaram, etc. Well, the possibilities are almost endless. The Bard must be turning in his grave for asserting 'What's in a name?'

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole, Dewas, 25 February.

Acid test

Sir, In May last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the North-East as the "most diverse region of our diverse nation". Alas, India's much-cherished diversity is repeatedly being shamed as people from

northeastern states are bearing the brunt of racial prejudice.

Less than two months after Tripura student Anjel Chakma was murdered in Dehradun, three women from Arunachal Pradesh were called "handweaver" (prostitutes) by their neighbours in New Delhi and told to "go sell momos". They were branded as outsiders in their own country - and that too in the national capital. This wasn't mere abuse hurled in a fit of rage. It was a targeted attack on identity and ethnicity.

The Supreme Court has warned of divisions caused by hardening regional identities. Racial hostility is an ugly manifestation of this phenomenon. What's quite chilling in the Delhi episode is a sense of entitlement and the mistaken belief that some Indians are more Indian than others.

Indeed, every Indian has the right to live with dignity anywhere in the country. Ensuring that no citizen is deprived of this right is an acid test of pluralism in India.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 24 February.

Connect, don't confiscate for children's digital safety

ANANTHA PADMANABHAN

The recent tragedy involving three minor sisters who stepped off a ninth-floor balcony together in an act of collective despair has forced a harrowing reckoning with a new, endemic form of addiction.

These children had lived almost entirely within a gaming world for months - reportedly insulated from reality and withdrawn from school. When their access was abruptly severed to break the cycle, the resulting "void" proved too much to bear.

This is no longer a peripheral issue of teenage rebellion. Across modern India, the pattern is repeating with devastating frequency. Not long ago, a 13-year-old boy reportedly took his life after being reprimanded for excessive gaming.

The scale of this crisis is now empirically undeniable. Globally, gaming addiction affects approximately 3 to 4 per cent of the world's three billion gamers, with adolescent rates surging to 8.6 per cent.

To address this, we must move past the label of "bad behaviour" and understand the mechanics of capture. Expert analysis has highlighted how children are caught in "Tudic Loops" - repetitive cycles of challenge and rewards meticulously designed by software engineers to be inescapable.

When a child enters this state, they become what experts call a "Digital Ghost." They remain physically present at the dinner table but are emotionally and psychologically absent. Their brain's reward system has been rewired.

However, this biological capture does not occur in a vacuum. It is facilitated by a disappearing physical reality. As we emerge as a global digital powerhouse, the question before us is whether our physical "Third Spaces" for youth are vanishing under the weight of urban congestion and high costs.

Modern India presents a similar paradox. Our urban landscapes are increasingly designed for mobility and commerce rather than play. In congested cities, where public parks are either locked, priced out, or repurposed for housing, the smartphone

becomes a spatial necessity. For many, games are not just traps; they are sanctuaries from a world defined by hyper-competitive academic pressure and constant surveillance.

This retreat from the physical world has reached a scale that threatens the nation's future stability. The urgency is further underscored by the Economic Survey 2025-26, which officially labels digital addiction as a major threat to national productivity.

This report marks a historic turning point, as the state finally acknowledges that the "mental infrastructure" of our youth is as vital to GDP as physical roads. For the first time, national policy is pivoting from a singular focus on "Digital Access" to a necessary mandate for "Digital Wellness."

While the state prepares structural interventions, the first line of defence remains the home. Preventing these tragedies requires guardians to identify the subtle shifts that signal a child is migrating from healthy play into a terminal virtual void. This "Social Recession" begins when a child stops participating in family traditions because the physical world has lost its "colour."



It is followed by a "Vigilance Response," characterised by an extreme, physical guarding of devices. Soon, "Dopamine Exhaustion" sets in - a flat mood or hollow irritability when offline - culminating in a "Biological Blackout," where basic hygiene and sleep patterns are totally abandoned.

When a crisis is identified, the instinctive response of "pulling the plug" can be life-threatening. Evidence shows that sudden disconnection for a rewired brain feels like physical pain. To bridge the gap, families ought to adopt a structured "re-entry" strategy: gradually reducing screen time, replacing digital tasks with non-judgmental physical hobbies, and restoring biological rhythms through shared meals and strict sleep hygiene.

Instead of reactive bans, we must advocate for "Safety by Design" rather than punishment.

The rising number of tragedies suggests that a shift in perspective is no longer optional. We must realise the need for parental vigilance with the responsibility to build a physical world worth inhabiting. This is a complex challenge involving biological, psychological, and systemic factors. Addressing it successfully will require moving away from reactive discipline toward stable, policy-driven solutions.

It is time to transform digital despair into real-world connection by replacing force with empathy and systemic reform.

(The writer is an independent author and researcher.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 06 March 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

ENGLAND and India are both concerned at the same time about the markings of imported goods. While Mr. K. C. Neogy explains that piece-goods manufactured abroad are sold in India as hand-woven khaddar and wants people protected against this and other substitutions, Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister is proposing that imported goods shall not bear the name or the trade-mark of a British manufacturer unless their foreign origin is indicated.

News Items

"A CONTENTED INDIA" COMMON EFFORT NEEDED

LORD Irwin was to-day the guest of the Colonial Institute at a farewell lunch, Lord Fitzalan presiding. Two hundred persons were present, including the Earl of Meath, the Marquess of Aberdeen, Lord Emmott, Lord Gladyne, Sir Atul and Lady Chatterjee, Sir Francis Younghusband, Sir Reginald Wingate and Sir Benjamin Robertson.

B. N. R. GRIEVANCE

COMMONS QUESTION ON ALLEGED DISMISSALS

In the House of Commons to-day Mr. J. Scurr (Lab., Stepney Mile End), at question time declared that considerable unrest prevailed among the employees of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway owing to the alleged indiscriminate dismissal of numbers of workers.

The financial position of Great Britain was strong and sound.

"A SCRATCH TEAM" C. B. FRY AND ENGLISH TEST PLAYERS

COMMANDER C. B. FRY, the Hampshire cricketer, speaking at a luncheon at the Criterion Restaurant said he had discovered a most interesting psychological point in cricket namely that when playing in a real team one became endowed with a virtue other than that which existed in one as an individual.

Holistic dispute resolution needed for infra

NILAVA BANDYOPADHYAY AND MOONMOON NANDA

There is a massive infrastructure boom in India. These large scale and complex projects involve multiple stakeholders, from government to private contractors and lenders. This gives rise to high-value and technically complex disputes.

Today, various government instrumentalities are facing huge debt on account of pending liabilities arising out of arbitral awards. National Highways Authority of India by March 2025 had liabilities of about INR 116 trillion arising out of only arbitration claims against it.

high-value disputes. In view of these growing uncertainties, the Ministry of Finance by an Office Memorandum No. F1/2/2024-PPD dated 3 June 2024 advised ministries and other government bodies to only refer disputes below Rs 10 crore to arbitration and prefer mediation and conciliation instead for high value disputes.

Very recently, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways by its circular no. H-25011/02/2025-P&P (C. No. 262142) dated 12 January 2026, has removed arbitration mechanism for disputes of value above Rs 10 crore and has prescribed arbitration by SAROD for disputes of value below Rs 10 crore.

The recent policies are couched upon the Mediation Act, 2023. However, amicable settlement by mediation depends on compromise by parties. In large scale projects with high value claims, where liabilities and technical issues are contested, parties are unlikely to agree to compromise and settlement without proper adjudication of

claims and determination of rights. Mediation at present may thus only be useful as a pre-requisite step to arbitration.

The Government may introduce any dispute resolution process, but ultimately such a process has to be effective. At present, in several disputes, it is seen that Dispute Resolution Board is not empowered to give binding decisions and authorities refuse to comply with DRB decisions.

The problem thus is not arbitration itself but also how it is conducted in infrastructure disputes. The true reasons that have undermined the efficacy of arbitration proceedings in India include absence of a robust institutional arbitration framework, ineffective contract management, excessive judicial intervention, prevalence of ad-hoc arbitration, routine challenge of arbitral awards and consequent enforcement. Arbitration proceedings may get protracted due to voluminous documentation, lengthy pleadings, evidence, and adjudication.

Dispute resolution mechanisms in large scale projects therefore need procedural discipline. MOTT MACDONALD has also attempted to resolve the



issue of prolonged arbitrations by issuing a circular on 4 September 2025 where the time limit for passing of award can be extended only after approval from the higher competent authorities, however there can be misuse of the same.

Therefore, the future of dispute resolution may not lie in choosing between arbitration, mediation or courts. Each mechanism is distinct and has its own role. While mediation and conciliation help protect business and commercial relationships by enabling settlements, arbitration gives technical adjudication and determination of rights and liabilities in a time bound manner.

At this stage, policies should focus on building a holistic dispute resolution ecosystem suited to mega projects rather than shifting fully to one method and away from another. The focus should be on developing a systematically tiered, project-specific dispute resolution mechanism that ensures effective resolution of all disputes arising therefrom. Removing arbitration as a dispute resolution process will not significantly cut liabilities. If the contractor's claims have merit, any adjudication process will lead to the same result.

(The writers are, respectively, Senior Partner, and Partner (Designate) at S&A Law Offices.)

Crossword | No. 293395

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down. Includes 'Yesterday's Solution' and a note: 'NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)'

As Rajya Sabha member, Nitish can emerge as statesman

NITISH Kumar, who heads JD(U), has confirmed the speculation that he would be moving to the Rajya Sabha after resigning as Bihar Chief Minister. In a social media post, he talked about his "desire" to have served as a member of four legislative Houses—the Lok Sabha MP, the Rajya Sabha, and the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council of Bihar. Critics and Nitish detractors may say that he is making a virtue out of necessity, but it is also true that as a senior RS member he can play a meaningful role.

Addressing his supporters and people of Bihar, he wrote, "For the past two decades, you have trusted and supported me, and I have

served you with full dedication. It is your trust and support due to which Bihar is setting new standards in development."

While his tenure as Chief Minister was surely better than those of Lalu Prasad Yadav and Rabri Devi, it was not exactly the gold standard of good governance. In fact, his government looked good because the preceding one was abysmal.

Then there was the disastrous policy of prohibition that further intensified the incidence of corruption and led to the loss of revenue and many mishaps—without much decline in alcoholism. Introduced in 2016, primarily at the behest of Kumar, its failure was made evident by the report of the National Fam-

ily Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-20. It said 15.5 per cent of all males above 15 years consumed alcohol, the consumption being higher in rural areas than in towns. Consumption was more in Bihar than in Maharashtra.

Economic development, for instance, remained limited by structural challenges. The state continued to lag behind most others in industrial investment, employment generation, and per capita income. Migration of labourers to other states remained a defining feature of Bihar's economy.

Now it is up to the Bharatiya Janata Party, one of whose leaders is likely to succeed Kumar, to chart a new course for the state. As for Ku-

mar, we will see if he takes his RS membership as a retirement home where he has reached ticking all the boxes or a new innings with new responsibilities. His party's support to the Narendra Modi government is critical, so his statements will carry a lot of weight. Will he throw his weight around to keep the government in check? Only time will tell, but he certainly has the opportunity to act like an elder statesman. After all, the Rajya Sabha is also known as the House of Elders.

The very nature of the RS provides such an opportunity. It is meant to serve as a chamber of reflection and deliberation, where experienced leaders examine legislation with greater detachment

than the more politically charged Lok Sabha. Senior leaders who no longer face the immediate pressures of electoral politics can use the platform to guide debates, question executive decisions, and defend constitutional principles.

Kumar, therefore, stands at an interesting crossroads. On one path lies the possibility of quiet retirement. On the other hand lies the chance to begin a new innings, using his experience and stature to influence national politics in a more reflective and statesmanlike role. Which path he ultimately chooses will determine how history judges this final phase of his career, maybe his entire career if he excels as an RS member.

LETTERS

Nitish plotting his moves carefully

THIS refers to "Bihar CM Nitish likely to opt for Rajya Sabha" (5 March). Historically, the BJP (earlier Jan Sangh) had little space in Bihar, a state shaped by socialist stalwarts such as Jayaprakash Narayan, Karpoori Thakur, Acharya Narendra Dev and veteran leaders like Basaw Singh. Later, student leaders—Shardad Yadav, Nitish Kumar, Ram Vilas Paswan and Lalu Prasad Yadav—rose under Lok Nayak's influence and collectively resisted the Sangh's foothold in the state.

Ironically, except for Lalu, most of them eventually helped the BJP grow, often in pursuit of narrow political ambitions. Today, with dwindling numbers, the JD(U) chief and Bihar CM appears under pressure to trade the Chief Minister's chair for a Rajya Sabha seat.

Nitish Kumar, long seen nurturing prime ministerial ambitions, may now settle for a different address—perhaps even Rashtrapati Bhavan in 2027. Either way, his political innings surely benefited insured till 2032.

N Nigaranjan, Hyderabad

US-Iran war, a case of military overreach

IN a demonstration of its military power, the US, by using a submarine, has sunk an Iranian warship, *Iris* Deen in the Indian Ocean off the south coast of Sri Lanka. Without disguising his glee at the sinking of the Iranian frigate, US Defence Secretary Pete Hoggseth leading the Pentagon boasted that Iran was under the illusion that the vessel was safe in international waters and it was the first sinking of an enemy ship by a torpedo since World War II.

It was clearly an act of military overreach. Here in India, we felt a sense of nervousness on the ongoing conflict. In this day and age there is no guarantee that a war won't be spilled over into areas outside the theatre of war.

The US and Iran continue to pound Iran, reducing the lives of 90 million Iranians to a daily test of endurance. US claim that this war is fought in the interest of Iranians is belied by the fact that more than 1000 Iranian civilians lost their lives to the war. The deadly strike on a girls' school has claimed the lives of over 100 innocent girl students. If it is not an act of inhumanity, what is it?

Washington speaks of "regime change" in Tehran. By the same logic, Tehran must have the right to speak of "regime change" in Washington. But then military might and economic wherewithal to impose sanctions which the US did for so long make all the difference! It is remarkable that in this moment of great difficulty people of Iran are united in offering resistance through retaliation.

In any case, it is a collective failure of our civilization that there has been no worldwide movement against war and for peace at a time when a dangerous war is playing out in West Asia. The United Nations Organization has become powerless to prevail on world powers, in the present context the US and Israel, to de-escalate and opt for diplomacy, instead of war to resolve geopolitical conflicts, no matter what their causes are.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

AI and knowledge-driven economy

ADOPPING AI solutions at scale and upskilling the workforce is the imperative for India's technology ecosystem to remain globally competitive. Rather than posing a threat to the software services industry, AI acts as a powerful force multiplier—enhancing productivity, innovation, and problem-solving capabilities. Enterprises are increasingly integrating AI to expand value chains and create new avenues of efficiency and creativity. India has already witnessed several global partnerships centred on AI-driven development, signalling growing confidence in its technological capacity. Hesitation at this stage would be costly. Harnessing wisely, AI can contribute across sectors, accelerating India's journey toward a knowledge-driven economy - to become a world leader.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

II

THIS refers to your editorial 'Adopt AI solutions at scale and up skill to remain relevant.' AI (artificial intelligence) despite the initial hiccups has come to be part of the Indian and global industrial scenario. AI will emerge as an inevitable and accepted trend in robotic automations, advanced medical and surgical aspects, automobile industries and defence fields. AI will emerge as an inalienable aspect in space research and unmanned space explorations. Engineering science will become redundant without AI applications in relevant areas, to be made part of the academic curriculum. AI adoption will become a driving aspect for jobs and emerging technologies. Technology cannibalisation may not be avoided initially in some fields; and AI-led solutions will be the future trend for the researches of the future.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

The intelligence failure that reshaped the Middle East



CHITTARVU RAGHU

THE targeted assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, appears to have been conceived in Washington and Tel Aviv as the ultimate "decapitation strike" — a move expected to cripple the ideological and political core of the Islamic Republic and force a rapid strategic retreat. Such calculations assumed that Iran's highly centralized leadership structure would collapse into confusion once its most powerful figure was removed.

Yet the emerging reality suggests that this assumption may have been a profound miscalculation. Instead of descending into paralysis or internal power struggles, Iran's military establishment appears to have quickly consolidated authority and activated what analysts increasingly describe as a prepared contingency framework — a "Plan B." The speed and coherence of the response have raised serious questions about whether Western intelligence agencies, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Israel's Mossad, fully understood the depth and resilience of Iran's strategic doctrine.

At the heart of the intelligence failure lies a familiar strategic blind spot: the persistent underestimation

of asymmetric warfare. Western intelligence models may have predicted that the death of the Supreme Leader would produce a vacuum of power within the Iranian system, potentially paralyzing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). However, the Islamic Republic's governance structure — built over decades — was designed precisely to withstand such shocks. Authority within the IRGC, the clerical establishment, and the broader security apparatus appears to have transitioned smoothly into a collective command structure.

Iran's military doctrine has long acknowledged its inability to defeat the United States or Israel in a conventional military confrontation. Instead, Tehran has invested heavily in asymmetric capabilities — drones, ballistic missiles, proxy militias, cyber operations, and distributed command networks. These tools allow Iran to wage a form of strategic harassment that imposes continuous costs on its adversaries while avoiding full-scale conventional war.

Recent developments indicate that this doctrine is now being executed with remarkable intensity. Drone swarms, missile strikes, and proxy operations across the region have demonstrated that Iran's capacity for retaliation was never dependent on a single leader. Rather, it is embedded within a decentralized and layered security architecture.

The expansion of hostilities across multiple theatres underscores the scale of the miscalculation. Attacks targeting American



At the heart of the issue lies a familiar strategic blind spot: the persistent underestimation of asymmetric warfare. Western intelligence models may have predicted that the death of the Supreme Leader would produce a vacuum of power within the Iranian system, potentially paralyzing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). However, the Islamic Republic's governance structure — built over decades — was designed precisely to withstand such shocks

installations and regional infrastructure signal a deliberate strategy to widen the strategic battlefield. The most alarming dimension of the escalation is the willingness to target states that were previously considered peripheral to the conflict. By extending the theatre of confrontation beyond its immediate adversaries, Iran appears to be signalling that any country facilitating military operations against it may become a potential target.

Such moves introduce an additional layer of geopolitical risk. Strikes affecting NATO-aligned territories or European-adjacent airspace would significantly alter the international dimension of the conflict, potentially drawing additional actors

into an already volatile situation.

Another factor complicating the situation is the divergence in long-term objectives between the United States and Israel. For Israel, Iran represents an existential security challenge. Israeli strategic thinking has therefore leaned toward the possibility of regime change, with the belief that dismantling the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic may ultimately remove the threat posed by Iran's regional networks and missile programmes.

The United States, by contrast, has historically framed the Iranian challenge primarily through the lens of nuclear non-proliferation. While Washington has supported measures aimed at

weakening Iran's military capabilities, successive American administrations have been wary of the unpredictable consequences of regime change and the prospect of prolonged regional conflict.

This difference in priorities creates a strategic gap. While Israel prioritises dismantling the Iranian regime, the United States seeks containment and deterrence. Such divergence can produce fragmented strategies — precise strikes and targeted operations without a coherent long-term political roadmap. Iran appears to have capitalised on this ambiguity, expanding its low-intensity conflict strategy through networks of drones, proxies, and irregular forces that operate below the threshold of conventional warfare.

Modern Western military strategy has placed enormous faith in precision warfare — the belief that high-value targets can be eliminated with surgical accuracy to achieve decisive outcomes. However, precision strikes often struggle against decentralized adversary command centres or eliminating senior leaders does not necessarily neutralize networks designed to function autonomously. Mobile drone platforms, dispersed missile units, and proxy militias embedded within civilian environments are difficult to eradicate through conventional targeting.

Iran's continued ability to launch attacks suggests that the strategic ecosystem sustaining its military operations remains largely intact. The persistence of these

operations indicates that intelligence assessments may have focused excessively on hardware and leadership hierarchies, while underestimating the ideological cohesion and institutional resilience of the Iranian system.

If current trends continue, the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader may ultimately be remembered as a tactical success but a strategic miscalculation. Decapitation strategies have historically produced mixed outcomes. While they can disrupt leadership structures in the short term, they can also provoke consolidation, radicalization, and escalation — particularly when the targeted state possesses robust ideological institutions and a deeply entrenched security apparatus.

For policymakers in Washington and Tel Aviv, the unfolding situation raises difficult questions about the reliability of intelligence assessments and the risks of assuming that adversaries will respond in predictable ways. The central lesson is clear: removing a leader does not necessarily dismantle a system. In Iran's case, the Islamic Republic appears to have anticipated precisely such a scenario — and prepared for it.

What was intended as a decisive strike may instead have opened the door to a prolonged regional confrontation, one that underscores the enduring complexity of Middle Eastern geopolitics and the limits of military solutions in deeply ideological conflicts.

(The writer is a senior advocate)

Today is the veteran scribe's 3rd death anniversary

Ch Rajeshwar Rao: A Raja among journalists of his days

DR VELCHALA KONDAL RAO

Iam happy to write a few words of appreciation in connection with the 3rd anniversary (March 6) of the senior journalist Late Sri Ch. Rajeshwar Rao. Sri Ch. Rajeshwar Rao belonged to the times when we called a journalist a senior, measuring his seniority in terms of his coverage of growth and development contributing to welfare with reference to governance.

We had stalwarts in journalism like Chalapati Rao, Kasa Subba Rao, Kamalingeshwar Rao and the like, whom prominent men who belonged to many fields treated with great respect for their stature and views. They were visionaries and scholars whose views were taken as the most valuable to be valued for many purposes in politics, economics and many other.

They were treated as equal to the most eminent to discuss, consult on many important matters. In fact very many policies in government were formulated and enunciated on the basis of their views. Even men like Jawaharlal Nehru respected and invited them for discussion. That is for reason

of their being very well versed not only in journalism but also in language, literature, music and art.

But as the time passed, journalism came to be known more for sensationalism and populism than for intellectualism. News dominated the views, politics dominated politics and views only counted that the visions. Advertisements and sensation news took more space than the normal. Men below a desirable standard got elected or nominated. They, who had money or muscle or both. Noise came to dominate more than the voice. Cast came the primary qualification than the qualification. Regionalism became the primary consideration than nationalism.

The decline of standards in educational institutions was so much glaring that men who not to speak of literature art and music but even of language and culture became scarcer. Journalism could not help depending upon men who were more ordinary than the extraordinary. Populism became as much the forte of the journalists as it became the forte of politicians. Advertisements covered very much the newspapers than all other.

Paid news covered more space than any other.

Even the language in journalism in general started deteriorating so much that in the name of common man's language, common language became very common. The captions became more prominent than all other. In general journalism declined as much as all other. Junior-journalism replaced senior-journalism and junior journalists very much the senior journalists. Many senior journalists like



It was his up-to-date knowledge in politics as well as in many other fields which was very much respected, recognised and valued in all circles where he moved. In fact he was more appreciated because he knew so much, remembered so much, and could share so much on so many matters of life and living. He meticulously made note of the most important to be remembered and quoted

Ch. Rajeshwar Rao were either retired or retired and replaced very difficult. Men like Raghavachary and Rajeshwar Rao who were well read and well connected became very rare.

If the standards of newspapers declined we can't attribute the reasons to journalism alone but to all other fields particularly for decline in education and in particular to decline in learning the languages.

To come back to Rajeshwar Rao, he was so fond of good

language and good views that unlike many journalists of the past and the present he spent much of his time in reading books and in calling the attention of people whom he met to the books that he read. That was his strength wherever he moved and whom ever he met.

Rajeshwar was a student when I was the principal of SRR Government College, Kaminagar. I always found him with a book in one hand and a dictionary in another. It was really very amusing to see a student like that in those days. I was really amazed to see that even when he left the college and joined journalism.

It was his up-to-date knowledge in politics as well as in many other fields which was very much respected, recognised and valued in all circles where he moved. In fact he was more appreciated because he knew so much, remembered so much, and could share so much on so many matters of life and living. He meticulously made note of the most important to be remembered and quoted.

The diaries which he kept of the notes that he took from the books he read if only could be published would go a long way to enrich and empower any

book lovers and journalists. I still wish that they are published by the press council for the benefit of many journalists.

Raghavachary, who himself was a very prominent journalist was related to him and both of them spent a lot of time in exchanging views. When Raghavachary died Rajeshwar Rao became so forlorn and depressed. That was a great setback to him from which he could never recover.

He was a great source of inspiration to me. I have lost a good friend and a good reference point. He was a rare journalist who was not only well read, well versed but also well equipped in communication and conversation in Telugu, English and Urdu also.

His death left a very big gap not only in journalism but also in intellectualism as he was a good company to meet and to talk to and to even to seek an advice whenever it was wanted as he had a very rich experience as he worked with very many Chief Ministers of AP and was very much respected by the senior officers for creating cordial relationship with the senior politicians as he also worked as a PRO.

(The writer is a senior freedom fighter)

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Siddaramaiah to present his record 17th Budget today

BENGALURU: The Budget Session of the Karnataka Legislature will begin here on Friday, with Chief Minister Siddaramaiah presenting the Budget for 2026-27, his record 17th as the state's finance minister. This is another feat for Siddaramaiah, who recently surpassed D Devaraj Urs's record to become the longest-serving Chief Minister of Karnataka. However, this has come amid speculation over a possible change of Chief Minister after the Budget session, citing a "power-sharing" arrangement between him and his deputy D K Shivakumar, at the time of the government formation in 2023. According to official sources, Siddaramaiah as the finance minister, faces a "tightrope walk" as he must negotiate between containing the revenue deficit and funding his government's populist guarantee schemes ('Shakti', 'Gruha Lakshmi', 'Gruha Jyoti', 'Yuva Nidhi' and 'Anna Bhagya'). Faced with a revenue shortfall amid rising expenditure commitments, he has a task cut out to maneuver the state's finances while maintaining fiscal discipline. As the CM is expected to look for resource mobilisation schemes, speculations are rife that there may be an increase in taxes. There are calls to trim the outlay on the 'guarantee' schemes, with annual spending for the five schemes exceeding Rs 50,000 crore.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Nitish's move

Set to vacate CM's chair for the BJP

THE inevitable is set to happen in Bihar. Janata Dal (United) chief Nitish Kumar, who took oath as the chief minister for a record 10th time less than four months ago, is on course to vacate the coveted chair. The 75-year-old Nitish will contest the upcoming Rajya Sabha polls. His victory, which is a foregone conclusion because of the ruling alliance's comfortable majority in the Assembly, will bring to an end his two-decade-long journey as the CM. In all probability, his successor will be from the BJP, which emerged as the single largest party in the November 2025 Assembly elections. The JD(U) had put up a strong show, which helped Nitish stay remain in the saddle, but it seemed to be only a matter of time before he would step down — voluntarily or otherwise. Bihar is the only Hindi heartland state where the saffron party has not had a chief minister of its own so far.

There is speculation that Nitish's son Nishant Kumar, a rookie in active politics, will join the new government as deputy CM. However, with the BJP going all out to tighten its grip on power in Bihar, the JD(U) is poised to play second fiddle. There is bound to be disquiet among JD(U) leaders over the power imbalance. The challenge for the ageing Nitish would be to keep his flock together and ensure that his party does not cede too much ground to its allies.

Nitish's entry into the Rajya Sabha will present an opportunity to Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) chief and Union minister Chirag Paswan to make deeper inroads into state politics. The turn of events is also significant for the main Opposition party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, which will look to exploit chinks in the ruling coalition's armour.

Tonnes of garbage

Scientific waste disposal needed in Punjab

PUNJAB'S garbage crisis is no longer merely an urban nuisance; it has become an environmental hazard over the decades. With stricter waste management norms set to take effect on April 1, civic bodies across the state are confronting a daunting reality: mountains of legacy waste, weak municipal capacity and the threat of regulatory penalties. Across Punjab's 166 urban local bodies, nearly 41 lakh metric tonnes of legacy waste still remain to be cleared — a task unlikely to be completed before April 2027. Years of unscientific dumping have created sprawling garbage mountains that release toxic leachate, contaminate groundwater and periodically catch fire. At the same time, cities generate thousands of tonnes of fresh municipal waste every day, much of which still ends up mixed and poorly processed.

The upcoming Solid Waste Management Rules are meant to bring order to this chaos. They require stricter segregation of waste streams, mapping and remediation of dumpsites and a time-bound push toward scientific processing. Yet the new regime also exposes how ill-prepared many municipalities remain. Even in districts that claim 100% door-to-door collection, mixed waste continues to be transported to dumping grounds with little segregation or treatment.

Regulatory pressure is mounting. The National Green Tribunal has repeatedly pulled up the state for failing to manage solid waste and untreated sewage, imposing heavy environmental compensation. Civic bodies are reportedly paying around Rs 10 lakh daily in penalties for non-compliance. It is a reflection of the costs of administrative inertia. Punjab now faces a critical test. Bio-mining legacy dumps, enforcing segregation at source and strengthening municipal infrastructure must become urgent priorities. Without stronger planning, funding and accountability, the new rules risk becoming another well-intentioned reform buried under decades of accumulated neglect.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 1926

Education policy of Punjab

WE have already discussed some aspects of the education policy of the Punjab Government, and have pointed out the intensely communal outlook which dominates that policy. If we leave out of account that vicious tendency to promote the interests of one particular community at the cost of another, and merely look at the results achieved during the last five years, the Education Department deserves to be congratulated on its achievement. As a department run largely for the benefit of one community, it has shown satisfactory progress and carried on its campaign to banish illiteracy from that community with considerable success. The enrolment of pupils has increased by 362,660 during the last four years, the number having risen from 556,989 in 1920-21 to 919,649 in 1924-25. The percentage of pupils under instruction to the total population is now 4.44 as compared with 4.07 a year ago. If the figures for boys are taken, then the percentage is 7.28 as compared with 6.6 last year. Of course, the progress, though substantial, is far from adequate. Even on the orthodox basis of calculation that 14 per cent of the population should be at school, barely half the task is completed so far as the boys are concerned, and if the figures relating to girls are also included, then more than three-fourths of the task yet remains to be done. Considerable leeway, therefore, has to be made up before literacy can be said to have fairly advanced in the province. As to the educational institutions for male students, arts colleges have increased from 17 in 1924 to 21 in 1925, high schools from 237 to 254, middle schools from 1,069 to 1,404 and special schools from 1,579 to 2,427.

The inmates are running the asylum

In Trump's topsy-turvy Washington DC, there is a dense fog over the objectives of the attacks on Iran



NAVDEEP SURI
FORMER AMBASSADOR
TO EGYPT AND UAE

AMID the unprovoked and illegal attacks launched by the United States and Israel on the Islamic Republic of Iran on February 28, the rupee is falling, stock markets have crashed, oil prices have soared and there is a looming shortage of LNG and LPG. None of this is linked with the fiscal strategies of the Ministry of Finance or monetary policies of the Reserve Bank of India. And it comes in the wake of the chaos unleashed by US President Donald Trump's tariff tantrums and the turbulence created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Welcome to a brave new world where geopolitics has become the new macroeconomics.

In Trump's topsy-turvy Washington DC, there is a dense fog over the objectives of the attacks. Initially, the stated focus was on Iran's nuclear programme. Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Al Busaidi mediated several rounds of talks in Muscat that brought Iran and the US close to a final agreement. But the guns were locked and loaded, forcing the usually low-key Busaidi to make a desperate public plea. Give diplomacy a chance, he said, because Iran had finally agreed that it would not accumulate or stockpile any enriched uranium.

That didn't prevent Israel and the US from launching a volley of strikes on the morning of February 28 to assassinate Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and several other senior members of the theocratic regime in Iran. Because neither President Trump nor Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could take Yes for an answer.



MINAB TRAGEDY: Bombing a school and killing over 160 girls isn't going to win hearts & minds in Iran. REUTERS

It wasn't just the nuclear programme; it was also Iran's missiles and launchers. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio later clarified. No, the real problem was the regime itself, Trump asserted. Regime change? Surely Washington hadn't already forgotten its disastrous experiments with regime change in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan? In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's alleged nuclear weapons were never found but he was defeated, deposed and captured in 2003. The power vacuum created by the dismantling of the Ba'ath Party gave birth to the Islamic State and a host of other extremist groups. The Americans ended up with 37,000 casualties (dead or injured), a bill of \$2.9 trillion and a battered and bruised country.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban paid the price for hosting Osama bin Laden in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. They were defeated and removed from power in 2001, only to triumphantly return to Kabul in 2021. The Americans suffered over 25,000 casualties and spent \$2.3 trillion in the taxpayer-funded fiasco. In Libya, Muammar Qaddafi was taken down in 2011, but the country

We are, once again, witnessing a case of an aggressive tail wagging a befuddled dog.

went through a destructive civil war and still remains cleaved into two antagonistic parts. Arms flowing into Libya have also fed into Islamist groups in the Sahel, leading to violent insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Regime change has consequences.

Israel, though, has no such misgivings. Netanyahu is quite clear that his end goal is to get a friendly regime in place in Tehran. "This is what I have aspired for 40 years," he crowed. Don't miss this opportunity to take back your country, he told the Iranians. And unlike the Americans who were looking for a quick

exit, Israel is quite prepared for a campaign that would last several weeks. The emerging script suggests that we are, once again, witnessing a case of an aggressive tail wagging a befuddled dog.

For the Iranians, who have been at the receiving end of an unpopular and repressive regime, it isn't a question of simple binaries. Hating the theocratic regime doesn't mean embracing the US and Israel. The Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) Operation Ajax in 1953 to remove then Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and install the Shah hasn't been forgotten. Bombing a school in Minab and killing over 160 schoolgirls isn't going to win hearts and minds in Iran. Nor will reports that the CIA is planning to arm the Kurdish minority to rise against Tehran. Having seen Iraq and Syria next door, they would also realise that even a bad government is better than having no government at all.

Iran's own response to the bombings appears to have caught the US by surprise. The regime has survived the decapitation of its top leaders by pivoting to a collective leadership and a more decentralised command-

and-control structure. They have managed to land some blows on US military bases in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. They have also hit airports, ports, hotels and energy infrastructure in each of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and announced the closure of the Strait of Hormuz to all shipping traffic.

In lashing out at its Arab neighbours, Tehran appears to have reserved a special ire for the UAE, despatching over a thousand missiles and drones at Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah and Fujairah. Effective air defence systems have kept damage to a minimum, but Tehran clearly hopes that its attacks will force the rulers of Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia to use their special relationship with Trump and bring the war to an early halt.

That tactic might backfire. Abu Dhabi has formidable defence capabilities but has so far chosen to act with restraint, as have the other Gulf nations. This is not our war, they have maintained, even as they have asserted their right to respond to Iran's aggression.

Over the last few years, the Gulf countries had worked assiduously to mend fences with Iran. They had actively opposed this war, not only for its potential to destabilise the region but also because a belligerent Israel had started to appear as a larger strategic threat than a weakened Iran. But Iran's actions over the last six days have endangered their economic security and may even push some into joining the US-Israel coalition. It is a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Finally, spare a thought for Canadian PM Mark Carney's spirited plea in Davos for a concert of middle powers to counter Trump's unilateral violations of international law. The last week has shown Carney, along with the leaders of France, Germany, Australia, UK and even India, delicately tiptoeing around the debris of the rules-based order. Because the inmates in Washington DC are running the asylum. And nobody wants to mess with them.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Middle East history is replete with examples of missed and lost chances to make peace. — Richard N Haass

HK Dua was an editor of integrity, courage

ROOPINDER SINGH

THE editorial meeting at *The Tribune* was sacrosanct. It began at 11 am, and Editor-in-Chief HK Dua was never late. So, when the clock ticked past eleven one morning, we were puzzled.

When he finally walked in, he apologised simply, "I'm sorry I'm late." Then, switching to Punjabi, he explained that some senior Army officers had come home and taken up his entire morning. The context was clear to us. *The Tribune* had recently published a report that was bound to embarrass a constitutional authority in Chandigarh, a former General. Curious, I asked him what the officers had said.

"They were speaking about the code of conduct," he replied. "They insisted that no senior officer could violate it, and therefore the person concerned should be given the benefit of the doubt. I told them if any one of them wished to put his name to the statement they were making, I would be happy to publish it." They stayed on for tea, no message came.

That was HK Dua — firm in conviction, soft-spoken in manner and instinctively skilled at handling people. I had the privilege of serving with him throughout his tenure at *The Tribune*.

He strengthened the paper's national presence by hiring correspondents across India and pushing reporters. He supported and expanded the digital initiatives. He placed particular emphasis on improving the visual appeal of the newspaper.

He was also keen to innovate. I recall when he summoned me and asked that we introduce Sudoku. "Numbers have never been my strong suit," I protested. He smiled and said, "I know you will find a way." And somehow, we did.

He was ably supported by a carefully chosen team, especially AJ Philip, who knew the institution intimately, having steered it during the interregnum between Hari Jaisingh's departure and Mr Dua's joining after his diplomatic assignment ended.

Chandigarh's social landscape also changed when Mr Dua and Mrs Aditya Dua began patronising cultural events in the city. Looking back, what stands out is not merely the professional association, but a relationship that outlasted his years in Chandigarh.

We remained in touch. During our phone conversations, he invariably began with, "How is Jaspreet?" and ended with, "Please convey my regards to your Mama." Those courtesies revealed the man behind the public figure.

Even after suffering a stroke, he maintained a disciplined routine, often visiting the India International Centre library to read his favourite newspapers. We would occasionally meet him there — alert, engaged, still deeply connected to public affairs.

On a personal note, he presided over the release of my book *Guru Nanak: His Life and Teachings* in Chandigarh. He proudly smiled as he sat with Mrs Dua and Hari Jaisingh when we released *Sikh Heritage: Ethos and Relics* in Delhi. He also recorded a gracious video message for my retirement. Those gestures remain precious.

HK Dua will be missed — as an editor of integrity and courage, and as a man of civility and warmth.

The writer is a senior journalist and author

epaper.tribuneindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Human touch vital in education

Refer to 'Empower teachers to raise the bar'; we must not forget that teachers mould human minds, they cannot work mechanically. For teachers, real empowerment springs from their passion for answering the unasked questions — their ability to decipher the rhythm of thoughts and their love for connecting with them. The classroom is an absolutely unpredictable world; therefore, the external pressure of fault-finding inspections defeats the very purpose of an unobtrusive teaching-learning experience. Interference by ministers or officials makes the teacher a "king dethroned." To achieve the best results, we must prioritise psychological inputs from our social pillars over the high-tech gadgets of the present day. The bar can be raised tangibly by human touch than by creating a furore.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Let teachers decide own algorithm

Apropos of 'Empower teachers to raise the bar'; inspections should be of infrastructure, not academics. Low performance of any student may be due to many factors. The student-teacher ratio in a classroom should be on top priority. Let academic issues be dealt by teachers at their own level. A teacher should be allowed to decide his/her own pedagogy. Authorities should repose faith in the teaching staff. The policy and the system should be simplified. Let teachers decide their own algorithm and step-by-step solutions to the problems of students.

INDERJIT SINGH, MALERKOTLA

Violation of the right to life

In the wake of escalating tensions in West Asia, we are ignoring the environment, which becomes a silent casualty of war. Amidst the ruins, any citizen loses more than just a home; he/she loses the right to clean water, fertile soil and, most importantly, the right to life. We must stop viewing environmental degradation as an unfortunate byproduct of war and start seeing it for what it is: a calculated violation of the right to life. In the hunger for victory, environment is being destroyed beyond repair to satisfy the egos of world leaders.

SHIVAM AGGARWAL, LUDHIANA

Food adulteration an emergency

With reference to 'Food adulteration'; with barely about 2,000 FSOs on an average for over 55 lakh registered food business operators (FBOs), effective monitoring is practically impossible. Compounding this is the rule that an FBO may be inspected only once a year, a serious lacuna. Inspection responsibility should be shared across the entire administrative hierarchy, from senior officials to FSOs, on the pattern followed in organisations like FCI to ensure frequent surprise checks. About 300 mobile food testing labs exist but many remain non-functional due to staff shortages. Unless the government treats food adulteration as a national public health emergency, with strict on-the-spot penalties and closure of offending units, this menace will continue to endanger public health.

SURJIT SINGH BHATOA, PANCHKULA

Political reasons for Punjab debt

Refer to 'Punjab's debt crosses Rs 4L cr'; the political reasons seem to overshadow the economic reasons. The freebies are meant only to attract voters, even though the financial burdens are enormous. The government should think twice before offering dollops. The Punjab government must withdraw free power, free bus travel for women and the recently launched free Health Card for treatment above Rs 10 lakh in private hospitals. The government is already in economic distress, with greater responsibilities like curbing the drug menace, reining in gangsters and ensuring infrastructure development.

NPS SOHAL, CHANDIGARH

At the cost of taxpayers' money

Apropos of news report 'After schools & hospitals, Punjab goes down AAP colours; Oppn livid'; all governments, whether at the Centre or state, follow such tactics to make their presence felt, the concern here is all this done with the taxpayers' money. After the change in government, the tax payers' money will again be wasted on removing this paint. Instead, the government can spend the same amount in developing public infrastructure and generating public employment. Moreover, people should not fall for these cheap gimmicks of political parties. The judiciary must take suo motu notice of this loot of the public's hard-earned money.

HARWINDER SINGH, BY MAIL

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

Munir's high-risk geopolitical gamble



NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST

In the fast-changing geopolitics of today, Field Marshal Asim Munir's choices are gathering ominously over Pakistan, stretching the country's thin economy, its political capabilities, its military resources and its diplomatic gambles.

Pakistan's de facto ruler, who was a hated figure in the country after jailing its popular politician Imran Khan, has been on a roll after Operation Sindoor, talking up his military's prowess in the four-day war with India despite mixed evidence on the ground — on the airfields from Rawalpindi to Rahim Yar Khan, not forgetting Indian statements about its own 'battle losses'. Indeed, it was by projecting a victory over India that General Asim Munir became Field Marshal.

Even before Operation Sindoor, Pakistan's military-business rulers had found the best way to impress the then newly installed US President Donald Trump in his second term. Crypto diplomacy was the millennialism's engagement of choice with the Trump regime and predictably gave them access to the inner sanctums of the White House.

Soon after, came the terror strike at Pahalgarh, and India's decision to strike Pakistan. Trump's claim of mediating the May 11 ceasefire of Operation Sindoor was repudiated by India, but Pakistan endorsed the claim wholeheartedly, gave Trump kudos and recommended him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Asim Munir got himself invited to lunch at the White House, *mano a mano* with Trump. Later, he also invited Trump to send American companies (ie, Trump's personal friends and golfing buddies) to excavate the country's rich mineral wealth in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

With Trump by his side, Field Marshal Munir believed he could make no mistake. He signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement, with Saudi Arabia, theoretically putting the Pakistan military and its nuclear capabilities at the service of the kingdom as part of a wider push for influence in a region where India had developed a strong profile, especially after 9/11, when Gulf states distanced themselves from Pakistan and began to show impatience with its never-ending financial woes.

Pakistan also joined the Board of Peace, the Trump alternative to the UN, which began as a body tasked by the UN to oversee the implementation of the ceasefire in Gaza, but has now aimed itself, with a self-styled mandate for peace-making around the world.

Munir then turned his atten-



CONFIDENCE: With Donald Trump by his side, Field Marshal Munir (left) believed he could make no mistake. **PH**

tion to Afghanistan. The Pakistan Army steadily ratcheted up the differences between the two countries over the Durand Line that serves as the international border, one that Afghan Pashtuns have never accepted.

It escalated the rhetoric over the Afghan Taliban's safe haven for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. At the end of February, Pakistan declared "open war" on Afghanistan, bombing several places, including in the capital Kabul, and in the provinces of Kandahar, Khost, Paktika, Paktia and Nangarhar. Perhaps Pakistan believed it could tempt the US into joining the war, with the prize of Bagram, which Trump has said he is eyeing because it could serve as a US listening post on China.

Now, within days of opening a front with Afghanistan, Pakistan has to navigate the quicksand of the US-Israeli war

Within days of opening a front with Afghanistan, Pakistan has to navigate the quicksand of the US-Israeli war against its another neighbour Iran.

against its other western neighbour Iran.

After the US-Israeli killing of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as Iran began bombarding the Gulf states that host US military assets, the Pakistani ruling establishment has remained sanguine that its defence pact with Saudi will not be tested yet, as the Saudi-Iran peace agreement is largely holding. But only just, as Iran has bombed the US embassy in Riyadh and Saudi's state-run oil major Aramco has had to shut down the Ras Tanua oil refinery after a drone attack.

At home, it is dealing with several second order consequences of the Iran war as irate Pakistani Shia, and in some cases Sunni Muslims too, took to the streets to denounce the US-Israeli assassination of Khamenei. Public anger spilled onto the streets in Islamabad,

Lahore and Karachi, where 16 protesters were killed when US Marines fired at protesters trying to breach the US consulate compound.

Protesters at Skardu in Gilgit-Baltistan, where the Shia are a sizeable number, burnt a UNDP outpost, Pakistan was quick to express condolences at the "martyrdom" of Khamenei, and expressed concern that a head of state had been targeted in this manner, while a more robust condemnation was articulated at the UN.

Meanwhile, a US plan-in-the-making to use Iran's minorities, the Baloch and the Kurds, for regime overthrow from within Iran threatens to stretch Pakistan's security resources even more. The last thing that Pakistan needs is for Baloch rebels in its Balochistan province to join hands with Iran's Baloch.

On January 31, Pakistan's security vulnerabilities in Balochistan were on full display in a wave of attacks by the militant Baloch Liberation Army. With that, the Baloch insurgency on the Pakistan side was also sending a signal to both the US and China that infrastructure development, mining or any other commercial activity are not welcome unless the local people are made stakeholders and their rights respected. A long war in Iran would increase Pakistan's difficulties in Balochistan.

With Afghanistan, it is unclear what plan Pakistan has beyond raining down

bombs, to attain the objective of eliminating terrorist hide-outs. The Pakistan military should know from its experience with India that cross-border terrorism continues even after punitive military strikes by the affected party.

At a time when the US-Israeli war in Iran is threatening to send an oil shock through the world, a long drawn conflict against the Taliban in Afghanistan would drain Pakistan's finances, adding to its economic woes.

As for the Board of Peace, Pakistan has already had its share of challenges. Days before the board's first meeting in mid-February, Pakistan declared it was willing to send troops to Gaza, but only to monitor the ceasefire, while operations such as disarming Hamas would be out of the question.

And crypto — Pakistan's passport to the White House — whose stock soared last year on the back of Trump's victory, is back to being what it always was — unstable, unreliable, dodgy.

Lest India believe it can take comfort in Pakistan's problems, the sinking of the Iranian ship, IRIS Dena, off the Sri Lankan waters, in a part of the Indian Ocean where India claims to be the net security provider is oddly reminiscent of the time when Pakistan's generals were left spluttering when helicopters crossed into Pakistani territory from Afghanistan in 2011, hit their number one target, and departed.

Lessons from raising a child with autism



LT COL (DR) AMIT KUMAR
FATHER OF A BOY ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

As a doctor in uniform, I have worn the olive green for years, managed trauma in high-pressure environments and made life-saving decisions in seconds. On the battlefield, chaos demands clarity. Emotion is secondary to action. But nothing in my training prepared me for a sentence from a specialist in a calm and composed tone: "Your child has autism."

There was no protocol, no triage drill, no combat manual. Just silence. My wife's fingers tightened around mine; I remember staring at the wall — not because I was brave, but because I was breaking. Bruce Lee once said, "Do not pray for an easy life. Pray for the strength to endure a difficult one." That day, strength felt distant. We were in denial — a phase I am not proud of. I could feel this would be the fiercest battle and, that too, with an invisible enemy. United in resolve, we decided to tackle it head-on.

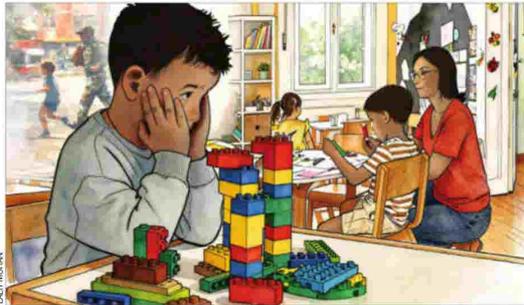
My son was two and a half years old. He didn't respond to

his name, he tore paper into strips, avoided eye contact. My wife saw it, but I refused to; I resisted. As a father, I hid behind denial — because accepting autism felt like accepting defeat. But autism does not wait for your readiness. It arrives, stays and teaches.

New Delhi: Where fear turned into fire

We entered the world of early intervention — speech, occupational and behavioural therapy. Our real training began. Along with it came hefty bills. Finances felt like combat logistics, but quitting was not an option. Autism does not wait. Neural development is time-sensitive. Early years are decisive. My wife took the bravest decision to specialise in autism spectrum disorders. What began as maternal anxiety became professional competence. She studied while raising our son and converted pain into purpose. That decision transformed our journey.

Our son secured admission to a reputed school. On paper, it was inclusion, but in practice, we discovered that inclusion without sufficient numbers of trained special educators, structured shadow support and measurable accountability is fragile. Awareness campaigns are not enough. Schools require autism-specific training, realistic teacher-student ratios and regulatory oversight.



"Absorb what is useful, discard what is not, add what is uniquely your own." That became our model. We absorbed therapies, discarded blind hope, added relentless parental involvement, stopped searching for miraculous cures and began building structured, evidence-based routines at home.

We realised something powerful: Therapists give one hour. Parents shape the other 23.

The day my son ran towards traffic

On a Sunday morning, when he was five, we were in Delhi cantonment, outside a temple. In seconds, he bolted towards the main road. I caught him once; the second time, I couldn't. A stranger stopped him just before the traffic line. That day, I stopped

He is not 'less'. He is wired differently. And I no longer ask, "Why us?" Because Bruce Lee was right: "You fall seven times, stand up eight."

being a passive father and became hyper-aware. Roads became war zones, crowds became unpredictable terrain. I realised autism is not just delayed speech. Sometimes, it is a child who cannot process danger fast enough. I learned to adapt, anticipate, flow around behaviours instead of colliding with them.

Mumbai: When regression broke us again

In 2018, we moved to Mumbai. With relocation, we rebuilt our ecosystem from scratch — new therapists, routines, sensory adaptations. Then Covid struck. Lockdown shattered routines and dismantled structure. Regression followed. One evening, he ran out of the house towards a swing 150 metres away, driven not

by defiance but by an unprocessed sensory need. His speech couldn't clearly explain his need; his behaviour did. My wife said something that changed me: "He isn't being difficult. He is trying to communicate."

That sentence humbled me. I emptied my ego, stopped trying to control and started trying to understand.

Jaipur: Discipline meets love

In 2023, we moved to Jaipur. We applied discipline differently. For 90 straight days, we practised structured behavioural walks with our son and practised behavioural techniques. Interruptions like viral fevers proved to be great setbacks — days when it felt like we were back to zero.

But consistency strengthened his working memory and significantly reduced impulsive road-running. I still remember that evening when he walked 100 metres ahead and turned back responsibly — I did not clap. I did not shout.

I simply looked at the sky and whispered "Thank you. We were never extraordinary. We were just consistent."

What autism taught me

- Progress is microscopic before it becomes visible.
- Setbacks are not reversals — they are rehearsals.
- Inclusion without trained infrastructure is illusion.
- Sleep, structure and sen-

sory regulation are not luxuries — they are foundations.

Most importantly, it taught me that leadership at home is harder than leadership in uniform.

In the armed forces, commands are obeyed.

At home, love must persuade. To every parent fighting quietly

You are not weak because you are tired. You are not failing because progress is slow. You are warriors in civilian clothes.

My son is 17 now. He loves structure and predictability. He is not "less". He is wired differently.

And no longer ask, "Why us?" Because Bruce Lee was right: "You fall seven times, stand up eight."

Autism was never the enemy. Hopelessness was. And we chose not to surrender.

This journey shaped my broader reflection: Autism care in India must move beyond episodic therapy towards ecosystem-based reform. Autism is no longer rare. This is not a niche condition. It is a public health and education priority.

As a combat doctor, I know wars are not won by emotion alone; they require systems and sustained logistics. Autism demands the same seriousness.

Families like mine stand up every day.

It is time our systems stand with us.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Scheme (6)
- Motiveless (6)
- Amount missing (7)
- Pulsate (5)
- Slight amount (5)
- An infectious fever (7)
- Revealed with existing blemishes (5,3,3)
- Misrepresent as something else (4,3)
- A work of fiction (5)
- Modify to suit a purpose (5)
- Cause suffering to (7)
- Insanity (6)
- Jovial (6)

DOWN

- Adulterate (6)
- Europe's longest river (5)
- Personal vanity (7)
- Give trouble (3,2)
- Agitation (7)
- Insignificant person (6)
- To compromise (4,7)
- Decline to use vote (7)
- In serious trouble (4,3)
- Untidy straggling development (6)
- Categorically (6)
- Relating to vision (5)
- To express (5)

Wednesday's Solution

Across: 1 Scholar, 5 Guess, 8 In no time at all, 9 Fable, 10 Sceptre, 11 Coarse, 12 Assist, 15 Inhibit, 17 Adept, 19 Flea in one's ear, 20 Nudge, 21 Exposed.

Down: 1 Stiff, 2 Hang by a thread, 3 Letters, 4 Remiss, 5 Grade, 6 Exact likeness, 7 Salient, 11 Chiffon, 13 Shake up, 14 Stooze, 16 Beige, 18 Tired.

SU DO KU

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

WEDNESDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR
MARCH 6, 2026, FRIDAY

- Shaka Sarwat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 15
- Phalgun Parvishite 23
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 3, up to 5:54 pm
- Ganda Yoga up to 7:08 am
- Viddha Yoga up to 6:52 am
- Haat Nakshatra up to 9:30 am
- Moon enters Libra sign 10:19 pm
- Shri Ganesh Chaturthi Vrat

FORECAST

| CITY | MAX | MIN |
|------------|-----|-----|
| Chandigarh | 33 | 16 |
| New Delhi | 34 | 16 |
| Amritsar | 30 | 15 |
| Bathinda | 32 | 15 |
| Jalandhar | 30 | 15 |
| Ludhiana | 30 | 15 |
| Bhivani | 32 | 15 |
| Hisar | 33 | 15 |
| Sirsa | 32 | 15 |
| Dharamsala | 26 | 11 |
| Manali | 24 | 07 |
| Shimla | 24 | 15 |
| Srinagar | 21 | 05 |
| Jammu | 30 | 16 |
| Kargil | 10 | -04 |
| Leh | 08 | -04 |
| Delhradun | 33 | 14 |
| Mussoorie | 24 | 15 |

TEMPERATURE IN °C



SARYU ROY Jharkhand's lone JD(U) MLA

“The manner in which a person like him (Nitish) was sidelined from the CM's post for RS, it appears that he is being sent to a shelter. ...it seems this was done according to a planned design



MALLIKARJUN KHARGE Congress president

Why lecture us on the doctrines of MAHASAGAR and India being a 'Net Security Provider' in the IOR, when you (PM Modi) can't react on what is happening in your own backyard?



KAPIL SIBAL Rajya Sabha member

In Gaza, 72,000 people died, girls were killed in an Iran school, and all we say is that we have nothing to say. Isn't this sad for a great country like ours — mother of democracy”

Grim fallout for Indian economy

The potential economic impact of the ongoing crisis in West Asia brings back bitter memories of the Gulf War that broke out nearly three-and-a-half decades ago. While the 1991 conflict triggered a forex crisis in India, leaving the then government with no option but to initiate economic liberalisation, a radical reform that became, over time, an irreversible policy direction. This time around, the Indian economy is far more resilient, marked by strong fundamentals and a wide array of international trade options. Despite being the world's fastest-growing large economy, India is now staring at a grim situation as the escalating conflict in West Asia, triggered by the US-Israel strikes on Iran and the subsequent retaliatory attacks by Tehran, casts a long and ominous shadow over the economy. The biggest challenge is in the energy sector. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which carries nearly a fifth of the world's oil supply, could have serious repercussions for import-dependent India. Nearly 52 per cent of India's monthly crude imports — roughly 2.6 million barrels per day — transit through the Strait of Hormuz. A sustained disruption would send India's import bill spiralling, widen the current account deficit, and put immense pressure on the rupee. Being the world's third-largest oil consumer, India will have to bear the brunt of the consequences of the war on Iran. In the case of liquefied natural gas (LNG), India's cushion is much thinner, as additional LNG stockpiling is significantly more challenging than crude oil and petroleum fuels.

Closure of Strait of Hormuz could push up oil prices for India, widening CAD, weakening rupee, and fuelling inflation

This is because India's largest LNG supplier, Qatar, has also halted LNG production after a couple of its facilities were attacked by Iran. Surging crude oil prices and disrupted trade flows threaten to make imports costlier, stoke inflationary pressures, and adversely impact monetary policy. India imports nearly 80% of its crude oil requirements. A weaker rupee, rising import costs, mounting inflationary pressures and a potential recalibration of monetary policy loom large on the country's economic landscape. Whenever the rupee falls against the US dollar, the immediate casualty is the oil import bill. The burden slowly shifts to businesses and households, pushing up inflation and eroding purchasing power. A \$1 rise in crude oil increases India's annual import bill by roughly \$1.5-2 billion, depending on total import volumes. This directly widens the current account deficit (CAD), which has increased to \$13.2 billion, amounting to 1.3% of the GDP, in the third quarter of 2025-26, up from \$11.3 billion in the same period last year. Though the export-oriented information technology sector may gain from the weakening rupee, it has been grappling with slower client spending and the disruptive churn triggered by rapid advances in artificial intelligence. Another area of concern is the safety and security of nearly 10 million Indian migrants spread across the Gulf region.

Myanmar and Manipur refugees seeking shelter in Mizoram pose a growing humanitarian challenge for India



GEETARTHA PATRAIK

During a recent visit to three relief camps near Sairang, on the outskirts of Aizawl, this writer met members of the Matupi tribe from Myanmar who have been living in Mizoram for nearly four years after fleeing military violence. Around 460 refugees are sheltered in these camps. Men and women narrated how their villages were burnt, how supporters of the pro-democracy movement were hunted down, and how families were forced to escape through forests to survive. They were categorical that returning home is impossible: many believe they would be arrested or killed by Myanmar's military junta the moment they cross back. Haanailen, a young inmate in the refugee camp who is studying BCA at North-Eastern Hill University, shared the story of his traumatic ordeal. The young boy reports his family by selling traditional dresses of the ethnic groups in that region online.

Profound Uncertainty What is visible in these camps is not only material deprivation but also profound uncertainty. Most adults now survive as daily-wage labourers or petty traders, while several children have been enrolled in schools in Mizoram and in other northeastern States through community support. Yet, without any legal refugee status, their future remains fragile, dependent largely on goodwill rather than rights. This experience reflects a much larger humanitarian crisis unfolding quietly along India's eastern frontier. Since the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, tens of thousands of civilians — mainly from Chin, Kuki-Zo and allied ethnic communities — have crossed into Mizoram. Relief camps have been established in multiple districts, while



many refugees reside with relatives or in rented accommodations. Alongside them are Kuki-Zo families displaced from Manipur, who fled ethnic violence and found shelter in Mizoram, often in the same localities as Myanmar refugees. What binds these displaced groups is not only shared suffering but also shared ethnicity, language, faith and kinship ties with the host population.

Roots of the Crisis The response of Mizo society and the State government has been deeply humanitarian. Churches, village councils, civil society organisations and government departments have together ensured access to food, shelter, basic healthcare and schooling. But compassion alone cannot substitute for long-term policy, especially when displacement is prolonged, and political solutions remain distant.

The roots of this crisis lie in colonial history. The British drew borders that cut across traditional homelands of Naga, Kuki, Chin and Zo communities, splitting families and clans between what later became India and Myanmar. For generations, movement across these hills has remained fluid, regulated by customary practices rather than passports. The border existed on maps, not in social reality.

It is against this historical backdrop that the Centre's decision to fence the India-Myanmar border has generated deep unease. For many Zo and Naga groups, fencing is seen not only as a security measure but as a political act that further entrenched colonial-era divisions. Community leaders argue that fencing threatens livelihoods, disrupts kinship networks and undermines long-standing cultural continuity. For refugees escaping persecution, such barriers risk converting a humanitarian corridor into a closed gate.

Security Liabilities The Centre's concerns are not without basis. The porous border has long been associated with insurgent movement, arms trafficking and drug trade, and the instability in Myanmar has intensified

these risks. Yet, security-first approaches that ignore humanitarian realities risk deepening alienation in already sensitive border regions. When communities that have historically acted as cultural bridges are treated primarily as security liabilities, trust erodes rapidly.

For Myanmar refugees, the absence of a formal refugee protection framework in India compounds their vulnerability. India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and refugees are largely governed by the Foreigners Act, which was never designed for mass humanitarian displacement. This leaves thousands in legal limbo — unable to work formally, access higher education, or travel safely, and constantly fearful of detention or deportation.

Ethnic Ties The situation of displaced Kuki-Zo families from Manipur adds another layer of complexity. Their displacement is internal, yet their ethnic ties link them closely to Myanmar refugees, blurring distinctions between domestic and cross-border humanitarian obligations. Prolonged ethnic segregation and lack of political reconciliation in Manipur suggest that early return is unlikely for many families, increasing pressure on host States like Mizoram. The long-term risks are evident. Protracted displacement without legal recognition creates conditions for inter-generational poverty, loss of education, informal labour exploitation and social marginalisation. Children growing up in camps risk becoming a "lost generation", disconnected from both homeland and host country. Host communities, meanwhile, face eco-

Without legal protection, border management and sustained regional diplomacy, thousands will remain suspended between uncertainty and survival

nomie strain and rising social anxieties, which can eventually weaken even strong traditions of solidarity.

Lasting Solutions What, then, is the way forward? First, India urgently needs a humanitarian protection framework for refugees, even if not full-fledged asylum legislation. Temporary protection status, work permits, and access to public services would allow refugees to live with dignity and contribute economically instead of surviving on charity.

Second, education must be prioritised. Schooling, vocational training and language education are essential not only for refugee children but also for adults seeking stable livelihoods. Investment in education is the most effective long-term stabiliser in refugee situations. Third, border management must incorporate community participation. Security concerns cannot be ignored, but they must be balanced with social realities. Instead of blanket fencing, mechanisms that allow regulated cross-border movement for families and traditional trade could preserve social ties while addressing security needs.

Fourth, India must play a more active diplomatic role in regional conflict resolution. Lasting solutions for refugees depend on political change in Myanmar and reconciliation in Manipur. India, as a major regional power with strategic interests in Southeast Asia, cannot afford to remain a passive humanitarian host while avoiding political engagement. Finally, support to host States like Mizoram must be institutional and sustained, not ad hoc. Financial assistance, healthcare infrastructure and livelihood programmes should be expanded so that humanitarian responsibility does not fall disproportionately on economically modest border States.

The scenes from the Sairang are reminders that geopolitical crises ultimately translate into human suffering. People who once lived normal rural lives now survive in makeshift shelters, uncertain whether they will ever return home or be allowed to build a future where they are. Mizoram's response demonstrates how empathy and shared identity can uphold humanitarian values even in difficult times. But moral commitment alone cannot resolve structural displacement. Without national-level policy reform and regional diplomatic engagement, refugees will remain suspended between borders and bureaucracies, while host communities shoulder a burden that rightly belongs to the State.

The question is no longer whether India should help, but how it chooses to shape a humane, realistic and durable response to displacement in its eastern frontier — one that recognises history, protects human dignity, and does not sacrifice social cohesion at the altar of narrow security thinking.

(The author is a senior journalist from Assam)

Letters to the Editor

Oil crisis

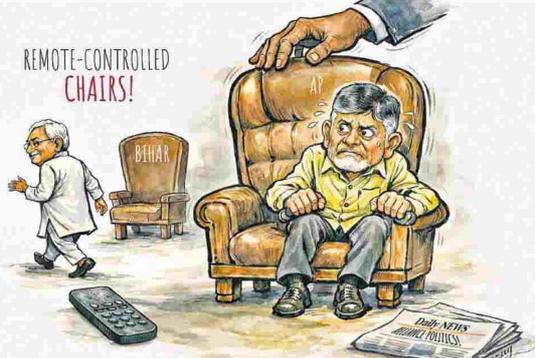
The closure of the Strait of Hormuz is no longer a worst-case scenario but a growing reality that could deeply hurt India's economy. If Brent crude climbs to \$150 a barrel, the country will face a crushing combination of soaring import costs, a falling rupee and painful fuel price rises. China, by contrast, spent the last decade quietly building massive oil reserves. India's strategy of simply switching between Russian and Gulf oil suppliers under American pressure is not a real plan. The stalling of the Chabahar Port project under fresh US sanctions only makes

things worse. Instead of patching problems after every crisis, India must invest aggressively in renewable energy, expand its strategic oil reserves and lock in long-term energy deals to protect itself from the next inevitable shock. **K CHIDANAND KUMAR**, Bengaluru

Sanju shines

Kudos to India for their emphatic win over the West Indies in the quarterfinals at the historic Eden Gardens. The cynosure of India's thrilling win was none other than Sanju Samson. Silencing his critics with an unbeaten 97 was a masterclass in itself. Sanju's resilient yet blitzkrieging innings was a testament to his class, skill and composure. **DILEEP D ANAND**, Alleppey

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

- The Economist **AI is erupting in India** Sam Altman is bullish about India. The co-founder of OpenAI, the firm behind ChatGPT, says the country's adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) has been "unmatched anywhere in the world".
- The New York Times **9 million Indians live in Persian Gulf** India depends on its own citizens' safe passage to the Arab emirates on its southern shore, where for generations they have made businesses and livelihoods for themselves and Indians back home.
- Financial Times **How Middle East conflict affects India**

The fallout from the US and Israel's attack on Iran — and Tehran's subsequent retaliation — has reached India. The most immediate risks are economic. Oil sits at the centre of India's vulnerability to external shocks.

The Indian EXPRESS

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Challenge is to fill Bihar's Nitish-shaped hole

NITISH KUMAR'S exit from Bihar will be a momentous inflection point in a politically turbulent state that has cradled large national movements. Only months after a handsome assembly victory, the state's longest-serving chief minister took the dramatic step of filing his nomination papers for the Rajya Sabha on Thursday. Since 2005, when he first became CM for a full term, Nitish has been the fulcrum of his state's politics, moving it forward in spite of his own flip-flops, smudging caste and communal faultlines, expanding the middle ground, softening the edges. It has become part of the political common sense to talk of Bihar before and after Nitish. Before he took charge, the state had seen a radical upturning of caste politics in the 1990s, with Lalu Prasad leading the grand Mandal reset. But Lalu also presided over a de-institutionalisation. On his watch, too, the promise of "social justice" was drained of its transformative potential, as his vision shrank to his own caste and family. It was left to Nitish to turn that story around, and he did so, spectacularly. He ensured that the authority of the state was restored and that "samajik naya" was threaded with "vikas" or development in "Naya Bihar".

As a leader belonging to a relatively small backward caste, and as a UP legate who saw "social justice" as many-layered change, not caste redistribution, Nitish's vision helped him play the central role. Politically, this meant that he stepped up a coalition of extremes, bringing together, in alliance with the BJP, upper castes with non-Yadav OBCs and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) plus sections of Dalits and Muslims. To Nitish, in particular, goes the credit for the political mobilisation of the scattered EBCs, ensuring that the wheels of Mandal did not stop turning. Another big success came from his sustained efforts to forge a "woman constituency". From the Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana, to reservation for women in government jobs and panchayat bodies, to the Jeevan network of self-help groups, Nitish built a formidable reputation as a leader who addressed women voters, sensitively.

Having prized open space for governance in a state where caste has etched dividing lines, having ensured that a UP-style communalisation is kept at bay despite his alliance with the BJP, Nitish now steps away from the state, no successor in sight. His party is divided, his alliance partner is on the upswing. Whether this moment leads to a backsliding, or to a new chapter that builds on the era of Nitish, will depend not just on the JD(U)-BJP, but also on the RJD and new entrant, Jan Suraj Party. There is going to be a large Nitish-shaped hole in Bihar, how it is filled will write the new Bihar story.

US strike off Sri Lanka bloodies waters near India

A US submarine's sinking of an Iranian warship off the southern coast of Sri Lanka on Wednesday marks a serious escalation of the war in West Asia and an expansion of the theatre of conflict. It is one of the deadliest single incidents of the war so far, with at least 87 sailors killed and many still missing. The torpedo attack on IRIS Dena in the Indian Ocean Region brings the conflict between Iran and the US-Israel alliance to the doorsteps. In a statement on Thursday evening, the Indian Navy said that it has launched search and rescue efforts and is coordinating with its Sri Lankan counterpart.

Washington has said that an enemy ship can be attacked in international waters. Once the ship left India's territorial waters, it did not come under the jurisdiction of New Delhi. But while legal restrictions on warfare in the maritime domain remain the subject of debate, several facts about the targeting of the vessel are disquieting. The strike occurred thousands of kilometres from the principal theatre of war. Moreover, the Iranian frigate was carrying out a routine maritime exercise, the International Fleet Review, in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has said that the ship was a "guest of India's Navy". Though a warship, it was on a peaceful passage, and could scarcely have posed a threat thousands of kilometres away.

The Trump administration has included the destruction of Iran's navy among its war aims. Yet the decision to strike in India's strategic backyard sits uneasily with the close maritime cooperation that New Delhi and Washington have cultivated in recent years to ensure a free and secure Indo-Pacific. True to his style, the US President appears to have acted unilaterally. The consequences of disrupted shipping lanes in the IOR will also have a widespread impact on countries away from the West Asian theatre. The war is already moving along a dangerous trajectory — apart from Gulf countries in the line of fire, a British air base in Cyprus was targeted, while Azerbaijan has accused Iran of launching a drone attack. India must remain vigilant to dangers that may yet unfold.

To remember is to write

BETWEEN 3300 and 3100 BCE, in the city of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia, Sumerian scribes inscribed on clay tablets what would come to be known as cuneiform — lists of barley, sheep and beer rations — for accounting and auditing purposes. Hieroglyphs followed soon after, while early alphabets emerged millennia later. For years, this has served as the neat starting point of recorded human thought. A new body of research has questioned the impulse to register experiences may actually be much older.

The evidence comes from artefacts found mostly in a cave system in southern Germany. Researchers examining objects such as mammoth-tusk beads and bones have discovered sequences of notches, crosses and dots carved into their surfaces, some of which are roughly 45,000 years old. Their repetition and structure suggest patterned meaning, what linguists call a "proto-system" of notation — not quite language with formalised grammar, but something closer to a hunter-gatherer's mnemonic aid. It was utilitarian but also doubled up as a private archive.

The distance between a Sumerian tablet and these patterned sequences is vast. Yet the instinct behind them may not be too dissimilar. To record and preserve the granular textures of experience against the erasures of memory, to be alive to the anxieties of ephemerality, it suggests that the personal has always been the counterpoint to grand history, a small act of defiance against forgetting. Seen in this light, the contemporary emphasis on journaling is a return to an older premise of self-discovery, to what the 20th-century British writer Aldous Huxley put as: "Every man's memory is his private literature".

Our stakes are high in West Asia. Delhi must call for diplomacy, de-escalation



THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

AS THE war ignited by the missiles striking Tehran on February 28 now enters its seventh day, it's clear that it has shattered a fragile regional order and plunged the global economy into a state of high-voltage uncertainty. For India, a country whose energy security and millions of citizens are inextricably linked to the stability of the Gulf, this is not "foreign news". It is a direct threat to our national interests and our aspirations for growth and development.

Analysts have been struggling to discern a coherent logic for this conflict. The tenets of international law don't justify it: The bedrock of the UN Charter is respect for the sovereignty of states and the inviolability of their borders; the use of force is prohibited. There are narrow exceptions for self-defence and Security Council authorisation, yet neither condition has been met. To "claim" pre-emptive self-defence "against a nation that was actively engaged in the most promising diplomatic negotiations in a decade is a legal stretch. Compounding this violation is the precisely conducted elimination of the heart of the Iranian leadership, shattering the unwritten but long-respected convention that heads of state and government are never militarily targeted in warfare. By discarding this norm, the US and Israel have not only disregarded convention but risked chaos. "I got him before he got me," President Donald

Trump said of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Any future outcome risks being marinated in blood feuds rather than statesmanship.

The irony of "Epic Fury" is that its proclaimed objective — denying Iran a nuclear weapon — had, according to Omani mediators, already been achieved through ongoing diplomatic negotiations. Just days before the strikes, significant progress had been reported in Geneva, with Iran nearing a deal to abjure nuclear weapons, freeze enrichment and hold zero stockpiles of weapons-grade material, in exchange for structured sanctions relief. By choosing the battlefield over the boardroom, the US and Israel have signalled that diplomacy is a dispensable tool to the overarching goal of regime change.

However, history remains a harsh teacher: Regime change is rarely, if ever, achievable from the air. While modern weaponry may possess the precision to destroy infrastructure, it cannot boom a new government into existence. Destroying a leadership from the air is one thing, building an alternative in a country of 88 million people quite another. The more likely result is either regime reassertion under new personalities (none of whom seems likely to turn out to be an obliging Iranian version of Venezuela's Delcy Rodriguez) or, worse, a failed-state scenario on a massive scale, creating a power vacuum far more dangerous than the regime it sought to replace.

The consequences of this action are already bleeding across borders. Iranian retaliation has not been confined to the primary aggressors; strikes have hit neighbouring countries that were not overtly hostile to Tehran. These actions, going beyond US bases, have caused tragic casualties among the local and foreign residents of those na-

tions, effectively dragging the entire region into a war they did not seek. We now face the worrying prospect of further indiscriminate retaliation by Iran and its proxies against American interests and civilians anywhere in the world. When a regime feels survival is at stake, the distinction between military and civilian targets vanishes.

The economic toll is equally staggering. The closure of regional airspace and the Strait of Hormuz have sent shockwaves through global markets. As a significant portion of the world's seaborne oil passes through this choke point, prices have spiked — one hopes temporarily — from the pre-war \$65 towards \$83 per barrel, and insurance premia are soaring. Qatar has declared force majeure and suspended its gas shipments, affecting factories around the world. Iran currently appears intent on widening the theatre of conflict in order to disrupt the Middle East's civil aviation hubs and stall the movement of oil and gas from the region, calculating that the economic shock plus the damage wreaked on the "safe haven" reputation of its thriving neighbours, could persuade Washington to rein in the fighting.

Uncomfortable questions persist about the strategic logic of unleashing war. Was this gamble for regime change inspired by a desire to create a unipolar West Asia, integrating currently sanctioned Iranian oil into world markets under a more friendly government? Such a theory is plausible, given that the stated reason, nuclear weapons, had already been settled at the negotiating table, and because regime change would achieve a number of broader geostrategic objectives: Reduce Russia's energy leverage over Europe and dilute China's clout in the region by pulling Iran and its energy resources into the West's

orbit. But the escalation may not unfold as the United States and Israel expect, and the resulting instability is likely to inflict significant damage on every actor involved.

It is estimated to have enough ballistic missiles for a couple of weeks of fighting, though half its missile launchers are said to have been destroyed and the remainder are not easy to hide from the "eyes in the sky" of modern technology. How much longer the US and Israel can sustain their barrage is uncertain, but one clue is that President Trump speaks of ending the war in four to five weeks. The threat of American "boots on the ground" seems a bluff, to signal determination rather than real intent. America may accept a solution short of regime change — perhaps a new government willing to seek accommodation — but such a prospect seems highly unlikely in the current climate of escalation. The Iranian regime could survive in a degraded state, prompting an era of proxy attacks, assassinations, terrorism and economic disruption.

For India, the stakes are high. Millions of Indians working in the Gulf now face an uncertain future, while thousands of travellers remain cut off from transit hubs like Dubai, though recent evacuations of stranded passengers have eased the strain. Our domestic priority of affordable oil is undermined, threatening the very growth that fuels our development efforts. India calls for de-escalation and diplomacy is a necessity. Our path to development requires peace and stability in our extended neighbourhood. We must lead the international community in demanding that the missiles flying in all directions stop, before the West Asian abyss grows wide enough to engulf us all.

The writer is MP, Lok Sabha, and chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

In sinking of the Dena, a Catch-22 for India



C UDAY BHASKAR

THE SINKING of the Iranian naval ship IRIS Dena by a US submarine in the Indian Ocean off Sri Lanka's coast, in international waters, on March 5, is diplomatically and militarily questions for India. This act of war took place soon after IRIS Dena participated in India's International Fleet Review (IFR) at Visakhapatnam in February. This was a major national maritime event graced by the Indian President and has an inherent military symbolism.

Akin to the *shahmatid yajna* of old, international fleet reviews conducted by major maritime powers are a demonstration of professional naval credibility and an acknowledgement by the regional and global peer group of the host nation's sovereignty and primacy in the proximate maritime domain.

Given that the Dena was sunk 40 nautical miles from Sri Lanka, the politico-diplomatic optics are embarrassing for India, to say the least. The related military questions are also complex and discomfiting. The Dena was sunk by a US naval nuclear-powered submarine. It is being claimed as the first such "kill" with a torpedo by an American "boat" since World War II. Delhi will be in a Catch-22 situation over this issue, which raises two questions. One, was India unaware of such submarine activity in its proximate waters? If yes, this raises further questions on the competence index of India's underwater domain awareness. Two, if India was aware of such activity, was Delhi informed/apprised of the proposed US action when the Dena departed Visakhapatnam for Iranian waters? An affirmative answer to both questions could lead to disorienting consequences for India, both in the domestic and regional context. Hopefully, more details will emerge in the near future about the sequence of events.

The Sri Lanka government and navy are to be applauded for swift search and rescue and picking up the survivors. The latest reports indicate that the Indian Navy is coordinating with Sri Lanka to support the rescue efforts. This is encouraging and in

keeping with maritime protocols of rescue operations at sea.

The US has justified the torpedo attack as one targeting an enemy warship in international waters. It will be further justified as there being no mercy in war. However, American compliance with international humanitarian law and the maritime code regarding saving lives at sea is a grey zone when it comes to what happened to the Dena. My sense is that this will be debated in professional circles for a long time.

It is nobody's case that an attacking submarine should loiter to pick up survivors. But if the scenario were flipped — had a US platform been in similarly dire straits and there were American survivors at sea to be picked up — what would the Indian and regional response have been? The more critical fallout of the Dena sinking is that a regional war, which was geographically limited and confined to air power and missile strikes, has now been expanded to the global maritime domain.

The Indian Ocean region has critical global shipping lanes, including ones for hydrocarbon/energy imports used by all the major Asian economies. India imports almost 88 per cent of its crude oil, which transits these sea lines and is vulnerable to escalation. Wider conflict spill-over could disrupt sea lines of communication, raise insurance costs, and trigger rerouting, thereby impacting India's economy and energy security.

India has always been wary of major power conflicts spreading into the South Asian neighbourhood. There is a sense of uneasy *deja vu* about Iran. The Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both in 1979, roiled the region for decades. The probability that the Dena is the trigger for something similar cannot be ruled out. A dispassionate discussion in India and with the affected regional nations is warranted. The sinking of the Dena should not become a polarising debate in India.

The writer is director, Society for Policy Studies, New Delhi

'Boong' shows why small films deserve big love



ALAKA SAHANI

WHEN MANIPURI filmmaker Lakshmi Priya Devi's debut feature, *Boong*, won the BAFTA for Best Children's and Family Film, she thanked the jury for showing "such big love to a small film". The moment established how a modest budget film shot with a cast of mostly inexperienced young actors and a script that's deeply rooted in local realities can resonate with a global audience with the sheer power of its storytelling.

With the BAFTA boost, *Boong* is now set for a theatrical re-run in select cities on March 6. Even though it had earlier travelled to many prestigious festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival where it had its world premiere in 2024, and received accolades, *Boong* did not get the kind of attention it deserved from film-lovers when it first hit the big screen in September 2025.

With hyper-masculine tales on a grand scale holding sway at the box office, it was easy to ignore an indie-spirited movie like *Boong* that had to be watched with subtlety. Yet, in doing so, the audience missed one of the most heartwarming big-screen experiences of recent years. At the MAMI Mumbai Film Festival in 2024, viewers in the packed auditorium responded with delight to the titular character's adventure, as he goes in search of his father, determined to bring him back home to surprise his mother. The poignancy of the story was balanced by the film's humour, and its warmth shone through in the depiction of *Boong*'s relationship with his mother and his loyal friend Raju.

Watching the work of storytellers like Lakshmi Priya is also an opportunity to get acquainted with authentic voices emerging in Indian cinema. Filmmakers from the Northeast have been making compelling films with a distinct texture and sense of place, as seen in Dominic Sangma's *Rapture*, Pradip Kurba's *The Elysian Field* and Tribeny Rai's *Shape of Momo*, among others. Yet, these films escape the attention of large sections of the audience. It's true that unique voices and stories often find a way to stand out, like the indie gem *Sorry, Baby*, which has emerged as a strong awards season contender in the US even as several big films compete for the top awards. The nudge it got from A24 studio, as well as Julia Roberts' shoutout on the Golden Globes stage, has certainly helped. Closer to home, similar support from friends within the industry saw the Marathi-language *Sabar Bonda* and the Bengali film *Baksho Baruti* enjoy a remarkable journey last year.

Boong might have beaten international box-office successes like *Zoonaid* and *Lilo & Stitch* to win the BAFTA, but this week it will face the test of drawing viewers to theatres. Its director-writer, who had earlier spoken of a "general ignorance in mainland India" about the Northeast, has expressed hope that people will take this opportunity to watch *Boong* in theatres. Now that the Manipuri-language movie has won international glory, perhaps theatre-goers will celebrate this homegrown story.

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40 YEARS AGO

March 06, 1986



Rajneesh arrested in Greece

ACHARYA RAJNEESH, ousted from the US last November, was arrested at his villa in Agios Nikolaos and was to be immediately expelled from Greece, local police said. Followers of the guru said Greek police officers smashed windows to break into the cliff-top villa while the guru was taking an afternoon nap. "They gave no reason for the arrest. They just burst into Rajneesh's room and took him away. They also took his lawyer as well," a follower told the Associated Press by telephone.

PM hits out at Opposition

PRIME MINISTER Rajiv Gandhi devoted a major part of his 70-minute reply to the de-

bate on the motion of thanks on the President's Address in the Rajya Sabha to a frontal attack on the Opposition despite their repeated reminder that he was not replying to any of the points raised by them during the debate. Apart from indirectly accusing the opposition parties of pro-rich bias, the Prime Minister alleged, "Opposition has a vested interest to see that the poor in the country do not improve".

India's demands from Sri Lanka

INDIA HAS taken a serious view of the situation in Sri Lanka. There are indications that further dialogue with the Sri Lankan government on the ethnic crisis is possible only if the killing of Tamils is stopped. India will continue

its efforts for a political solution after normalisation of the situation to enable refugees to return to Sri Lanka with dignity and honour.

No headway in J&K

PRIME MINISTER Rajiv Gandhi held discussions with J&K leaders and with senior colleagues on the serious situation in the state. No solution to the crisis appears to have emerged as yet. Chief Minister G M Shah and the Deputy Chief Minister D D Thakur are staying in Jammu and are available for further consultations. The former chief minister, Farooq Abdullah, was also contacted. A central minister is believed to have contacted him to seek his assistance in making the situation in the state return to normal.

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

What comes after the US-Israel campaign, in Iran and in West Asia?

Post-war Iran could be more revanchist



MOHAMMED AYOOB

THE BATTLE for Iran's soul has most probably been lost already. Even if all the objectives of the attack on Iran as enumerated by US President Donald Trump are achieved, the endgame in all probability will turn out to be vastly different from that imagined in Washington.

A major objective as articulated by Trump was to decimate the leadership of the Islamic Republic to pave the way for regime change. This has been achieved partially. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as well as several of his trusted lieutenants, have been killed. There is little doubt that the air campaign has the capacity to destroy what little is left of Iran's nuclear production and enrichment capabilities over the next few weeks. Iran's missile and drone stocks are likely to be exhausted and/or destroyed within the next couple of weeks. Tehran's non-state allies such as Hezbollah and Hamas are in such disrepute that they are unlikely to take part significantly in any military campaign in the near future. The Houthis in Yemen are too engaged fighting off their local enemies and too far away to make any difference. Therefore, it is highly likely that Trump and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu will declare victory in a few weeks.

Where will this leave Iran? There are only two possibilities. First, it could leave Iran in chaos with multiple factions fighting over its carcass, especially since there is no organised opposition group with the effectiveness and legitimacy to take control of the levers of state power and impose its rule over the whole country or at least most of it. Regime change that would bring a pro-American group to power does not appear to be a real possibility.

Second, and the more probable scenario, is that of an Iran rising from the ashes and vowing retribution. There are several good reasons why this will be the outcome.

One, Iran's military and political structure as it currently exists cannot be effectively destroyed by an air campaign alone. It would need hundreds of thousands of American boots on the ground to achieve this goal. This option has never been on the table in Washington.

Two, Iran is not Iraq. It has a long history of statehood and has existed as a uni-

fied entity more or less within its current geographical contours at least since the 16th century with the establishment of the Safavid Empire. It is true that Iran also has minority populations, especially the Azeris, the Kurds and the Baluch. However, the Azeris are well integrated into the Persian core. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, was an Azeri himself, as were some other leading figures in the government and the opposition. The Tehran bazaar, the principal economic institution in the capital, is dominated by Azeri businessmen. The Kurds and the Baluch have much smaller populations, live in peripheral areas, and are in no position to destabilise the state. Considering these facts, it is clear that the Persian centre will hold.

The questions that then arise are (a) who will control the Iranian centre at the end of the air war and (b) will the new rulers of Iran be willing to follow American-Israeli dictates. The successors of the present regime are likely to be hardline military figures. They are likely to survive with the most acute sense of resentment against the humiliation heaped on Iran because they were expected to be the guardians of national dignity and state security. One can almost take it for granted that it would be a revanchist regime.

It would not be difficult for the successor regime to deflect criticism towards the Americans and Israelis because of the suffering inflicted on the Iranian population by America's "war of choice" and the economic travails the people have suffered because of sanctions.

When suffering crosses the boundaries of tolerance, it produces a reaction that often translates into revanchism. Iran is a highly likely candidate for such a reaction. The only beneficiary of this campaign will be Israel because it will make it impossible in the short term for Iran to level the playing field in terms of nuclear weapons capability.

But will an Iran bent on revenge be in America's and the region's interest in the long term? Policymakers in Washington should have pondered over this question very seriously before making the decision to attack Iran with the goal of overthrowing the regime. In the long term, the US and its Arab allies will have to deal with an ultranationalist and revanchist Iran bent on avenging the humiliation inflicted upon it by the air campaign. This is likely to increase the instability already present in strong measure in West Asia, affecting among other things oil and gas supplies to the rest of the world.

The writer is university distinguished professor emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University

Military success won't bring stability



R SWAMINATHAN

IN HINDSIGHT, the joint attack by the United States and Israel on Iran is not a sudden escalation but the culmination of developments unfolding for nearly a decade, making the conflict inevitable.

In 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the multilateral agreement designed to ensure that Iran's nuclear programme remained peaceful. At that time, the JCPOA was functioning effectively with extensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) certifying that Iran was complying with its obligations and that its nuclear activities remained within peaceful limits. Iran was adhering to the enrichment ceiling of 3.67 per cent, maintained its uranium stockpile below 300 kg, and restricted the number and type of centrifuges in operation. Significantly, in 2015, Iran shipped out approximately 11,000 kg of uranium enriched to 20 per cent to Russia.

Trump argued that the JCPOA did not permanently prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and had failed to address Iran's ballistic missile programmes or its regional activities, which Washington characterised as state-sponsored terrorism through proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and others. The US withdrawal and the subsequent re-imposition of sanctions marked a turning point. Iran gradually ceased adhering to its commitments. By June 2025, Iran had enriched approximately 408 kg of uranium to 60 per cent purity, a level far closer to weapons-grade, although all such material remained under IAEA safeguards.

At the same time, Iran's regional position was undergoing significant erosion. Not only did Israel inflict devastating losses on Hamas, it also decimated Hezbollah in Lebanon. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 deprived Iran of a key strategically. Thus, Iran's ability to project power externally was sharply reduced, leaving only the Houthis in Yemen and certain militias in Iraq as instruments of influence. Israel's 12-day war against Iran in June 2025 exposed profound weaknesses in the latter's air defence systems. Israeli strikes penetrated Iran with ease, targeting military infrastructure and missile sites, creating conditions for direct US intervention. In Operation Midnight Hammer, the United States dropped bunker-buster bombs on Iranian nuclear facilities.

This marked the first direct US attack on Iran's territory. For decades, successive US administrations had refrained from such action, despite the hostage crisis in 1979 when dozens of American diplomats were held captive for more than 400 days, the 1983 Beirut bombing that killed 242 American military personnel, and Iran's rhetoric, particularly its repeated chants of "Death to America" and "Death to Israel".

Although Trump declared that Iran's nuclear programme had been obliterated, questions persisted regarding the whereabouts of the country's stockpile of uranium and Israel's concern over its remaining missile capability, about 40 per cent of which was said to have been destroyed during the 12-day war. Washington began its coercive diplomacy, deploying substantial military assets close to Iran and broadening negotiations to include missile restrictions, despite the clear understanding that Iran would never willingly surrender what it viewed as its primary deterrent against Israeli attack. The significant concessions offered by Iran had no impact, and war became inevitable. Although regime change has been articulated as a US objective, its feasibility remains doubtful. Iran's political system is deeply institutionalised, and without American ground forces, an option Trump has not exercised so far, the regime is likely to survive. Mojtaba Khamenei, the 56-year-old son of the late Ayatollah Khamenei, is emerging as the frontrunner to become the Supreme Leader.

The human and material toll for the US has not been substantial so far. Six US military personnel have been killed. Iran has launched numerous missiles and drones against Israel and US positions, but most have been intercepted. The rate of Iranian missile launches is declining. Israeli civilian casualties remain limited, with approximately 10 deaths, while six fatalities have been reported in Gulf countries.

In contrast, destruction within Iran has been extensive. More than 800 people have been killed, over 2,000 military targets have been struck, 17 Iranian naval vessels have been sunk, including a warship in international waters off Sri Lanka. Analysts estimate that 50 per cent of Iran's missile launchers have been destroyed. Will Iran attacking its Gulf neighbours result in the normalisation of its relations with Israel and the further expansion of the Trump-sponsored Abraham Accords? Past interventions in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan offer sobering reminders that military success does not translate into lasting political stability. The hope is that good sense will prevail to end the hostilities soon.

The writer is former governor of India to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Vienna, and former ambassador to Egypt

Delhi excise case verdict offers lessons on blatant abuse of power



JASMINE SHAH

ACROSS THE WORLD, governments that throw their political opponents in jail for long periods without trial, often by running sham investigations designed only for theatrical purposes, are called authoritarian regimes. Last week's 600-page verdict by the CBI trial court in the Delhi excise policy case laid bare a truth that is known by India's opposition parties — under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has joined this ignominious club.

No doubt, many politicians have been charged with corruption in independent India, many jailed and later freed after court orders. But the Delhi excise policy case stands a league apart for multiple reasons.

This is the first time a sitting chief minister, the leader of a national opposition party, was imprisoned for as long as seven months without trial on allegations of corruption, that too right before the 2024 general elections. The sheer brazenness of this act becomes clear from the fact that Arvind Kejriwal was jailed not because of any money trail or hard evidence implicating him but purely on the basis of statements of two "approvers" — co-accused who spent long periods in jail themselves, who gave a clean chit to Kejriwal in multiple statements, but allegedly changed their versions after being promised bail and an end to their physical and mental suffering.

The absurdity doesn't end here. These two individuals were not ordinary approvers. One of them turned out to be a BJP donor who gave Rs 60 crore through electoral bonds, and the other was given an NDA ticket to fight the 2024 Lok Sabha elections from Andhra Pradesh.

That this case was driven solely by political vendetta was further made clear when Kejriwal was denied life-saving medicines while incarcerated, to be allowed later only after the Supreme Court's intervention. Together with Manish Sisodia, who was incarcerated for 17 months, the top AAP leaders spent a total of 82 months in jail. All through this, many AAP leaders and their families were subjected to untold harassment from investigative agencies and a damning media trial. The message was subtle but clear: If they can do this to one of the tallest opposition leaders, what chance do others who cross the government have?

The Delhi excise policy case also stands apart for the fact that, unlike any other case of alleged corruption, it occupied space on prime time TV for thousands of hours over nearly three years. Every leak from the investigative

agencies was treated as gospel truth and was run as a "breaking news" without any kind of verification, and for the sole purpose of damaging the image of a national opposition party and its tallest leader. This, to a large extent, influenced the outcome of the 2025 Delhi assembly elections.

And finally, this case stands apart for the fact that after studying evidence from over 500 raids and five charge-sheets running into 40,000 pages, the trial court, in an extraordinarily well-argued judgment, came to the conclusion that the case didn't meet even the bare minimum threshold of evidence to merit carrying out a trial. The court held that the CBI had carried out a "pre-meditated and choreographed exercise" where roles were retrospectively assigned to fit a preconceived narrative. The court went to the extent of ordering departmental proceedings against the CBI officer leading the investigation. To put things in perspective, this is one of the starkest condemnations by any court in India's history of the complete politicisation of the CBI and the ED.

How did we get to this point in Indian politics? Under PM Modi, laws have been amended, cases have been opened and shut (often timed with elections or someone joining or leaving the BJP) for the sole purpose of electoral benefits for the BJP. The worst of this excess has been directed at leading opposition faces such as Kejriwal, who is battling not one but more than 80 civil and criminal cases by all of the Centre's agencies put together.

The political calculation behind this indiscreet abuse of power is simple yet chilling. In the best-case scenario, you permanently get rid of your political opponents. In the worst case, as the Delhi excise case shows, your political opponents will still suffer long periods in jail, lose substantial political capital and a few elections, even if the case falls through later at the trial stage.

There is absolutely no downside for the Centre's investigating officers for prolonged incarceration and reputational loss of opposition leaders, apart from substantial legal costs.

The investigation into Delhi's excise policy and the recent verdict are already a watershed moment for Indian democracy. It doesn't need to stop here. The case provides the perfect opportunity to stop this wholesale politicisation of India's central investigative agencies. In March 2025, US courts awarded \$120 million (over Rs 1,000 crore) as compensation to two private individuals (John Fulton and Anthony Mitchell) for their wrongful incarceration by the City of Chicago.

It's time that all opposition parties, the media, the civil society and the judiciary in India come together to demand a similar price for blatant acts of abuse of power by the government against voices opposing it.

The writer is a senior AAP leader and author of *The Delhi Model*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Personal grudge

WHEN THESE incidents dominated headlines — a communal incident in Uttarakhand, where a Hindu gym owner stood up to goons threatening an aged Muslim shop owner, an extraordinary act of bravery in our country; convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's emails with Indian public figures were made public; the Budget announced seven new high-speed rail corridors when the original Mumbai-Ahmedabad link is delayed; when India and the US worked out a framework towards a trade deal — Tavleen Singh found it far more important to write about the fascism and nepotism of North Korea and link it to Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi ("Democracy, North Korea style", *IE*, February 15). Whatever happens across the globe or in India, almost every second article of hers lambasts and lampoons the Gandhis. She is trained to personally nurse whatever grudges she has against them but perhaps should not air them in the garb of a commentator in a leading national newspaper.

Suniti Gupta, Gurgaon

Strike on girls' school

THE US and Israel continue to pound Iran, reducing the lives of 90 million Iranians to a daily test of endurance. The US claim that this war is fought in the interest of Iran is belied by the

fact that more than 1,000 Iranian civilians have lost their lives ("What does international law amount to when children in Iran become acceptable as collateral damage?", *IE* Web, March 4). The deadly strike on a girls' school has claimed the lives of over 100 innocent schoolgirls. It is not an act of inhumanity, what is it? Washington speaks of "regime change" in Tehran. By the same logic, Tehran must have the right to speak of "regime change" in Washington. But then military might and economic wherewithal to impose sanctions — which the US has had for so long make all the difference. This is a collective failure of our civilisation.

David Milton, Marathancode

Much-needed thaw

THE INDIA-Canada relationship was at its nadir as the Trudeau administration accused India of involvement in the Hardeep Singh Nijjar killing ("India, Canada mend fences amid uncertainty", *IE*, February 4). However, there is finally light at the end of the tunnel. This thaw was much needed, especially when US President Donald Trump has created an atmosphere of enmity with his tariff shenanigans and war with Iran. New Delhi and Ottawa have rightly locked deals. Mutually beneficial paths are the only way forward.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

In AI era, teach science, not tools



RAHUL NIGAM

ACROSS CAMPUSES today, the message to students is unmistakable: Learn AI or risk being left behind. Yet, the question remains: For how long will today's tools be tomorrow's advantage? The frameworks students master in their first year often look different by the time they graduate. Programming environments evolve, libraries are rewritten, and entire platforms disappear. In a world where AI systems can generate code, design architectures, and optimise complex workflows with minimal oversight, the shelf life of narrowly technical training is shrinking.

Aligning education with emerging technologies is both sensible and necessary. The difficulty begins when responsiveness to

market demand displaces foundational learning. A curriculum shaped primarily by employability can produce graduates whose expertise is bound to current platforms rather than to durable intellectual frameworks.

What endures across technological cycles is the ability to reason from fundamentals. Scientific training develops the discipline to identify assumptions, trace causality, test limits, distinguish correlation from mechanism, and ask whether an answer is plausible. As automation expands, the premium shifts from implementation to judgement. And judgement is formed over years of grappling not only with equations but also with the constraints those equations must respect.

Technological success today is often narrated in terms of software breakthroughs and algorithmic advances. Yet, ven fields that appear purely computational remain shaped by physical limits. Nations that lead

in AI today built their capabilities on sustained investment in fundamental research long before AI became commercially fashionable. Technological dominance has rarely been the outcome of short-term skill training alone. The current AI surge stands on foundations laid in laboratories that valued curiosity as much as application.

This global pattern also has local implications. For many years, the Indian IT story was built on becoming the world's execution engine. That model created large-scale employment and strengthened the middle class. Yet, it was also heavily dependent on routine and process-driven work, and routine is what AI is beginning to absorb efficiently. If universities continue producing engineers trained mainly to operate existing platforms, they risk typing student futures to a shrinking segment of the value chain. The next phase of growth will not come from

using tools more efficiently but from designing new ones, which would require moving from execution to invention.

The central question around education, then, is which intellectual foundation remains relevant across decades of technological upheaval. Mastery of current tools may open the first door, but mastery of principles determines how many doors remain open thereafter.

The argument is not against modern skills but against reducing education to transient technical proficiency. Technologies will continue to evolve at an accelerating speed. The laws governing energy, matter, stability, and causality will not. An education grounded in those enduring principles prepares students for repeated reinvention in a world where change is the only constant.

The writer is associate professor at BITS Pilani

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

What are 'gravity bombs' which US is planning to shift to in Iran?

Arav Shah
New Delhi, March 5

ON WEDNESDAY, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Iranian air defences had been severely degraded over the course of the last four days and that the US military would begin to deploy 500-pound, 1,000-pound, and 2,000-pound precision gravity bombs. This announcement signalled a move away from cautious, "stand-off" ammunition strikes to direct bombardment.

Munitions used so far

Until now, the US has relied on expensive, long-range "standoff munitions", which are launched from outside the range of Iran's air defence systems and strictly dismantle adversarial early-warning radars and surface-to-air missile batteries. This ammo is deployed by US naval destroyers and stealth aircraft. This reduces the possibility of pilot casualties by keeping them away from the conflict. The Tomahawk cruise missile and the LUCAS (Low-cost Unmanned Combat Attack System) drones have been the front-running standoff munitions for establishing US-Israeli dominance over Iranian airspace in the past few days.

What is a gravity bomb?

A gravity bomb, historically known as a "free-fall" bomb, is an unpowered munition. Unlike a cruise missile like the Tomahawk, it lacks an internal engine. Once released, its trajectory is dictated entirely by gravity, aerodynamics, and the speed and altitude of the dropping aircraft. Despite their terminology likening them to World War-era relics, these variants are the modern workhorses of the US Air Force. Deployed heavily since the turn of the century in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria (against ISIS), they have also been used by Israel in Gaza and Lebanon.

The US has modernised these free-fall weapons into highly accurate "precision ammunition" by attaching Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) kits. These tail sections, equipped with GPS and steerable fins, allow the bomb to glide precisely to specific coordinates.

Conventionally, the weapons are strictly conventional, packing hundreds of pounds of standard chemical explosives, cost roughly \$25,000 to \$30,000 with a JDAM kit, and are deployed by theatre commanders. The current campaign relies on the conventional Mark 80 series.

The US arsenal also includes nuclear gravity bombs, such as the B61 and B83 series. Nuclear gravity bombs measure their yield in kilotons or megatons of TNT. They require explicit authorisation from the US President, as their use would signal a global nuclear escalation.

Why the shift?

The shift from standoff missiles to conventional gravity bombs comes down to a trade-off between cost and risk. Missiles cost millions of dollars each but keep pilots perfectly safe. Gravity bombs are relatively cheap and allow for high-volume bombardment. The catch: the pilot must fly directly over or very near the target to drop them. Therefore, deploying gravity bombs is only a viable tactic once a military achieves "air supremacy." Hegseth's announcement is a declaration predicated on the assumption that the Pentagon has neutralised the Iranian anti-aircraft threat.

What is the US Air Force deploying now?

The US stockpile of conventional gravity bombs is centred on the Mark 80 series. These munitions can be dropped by a wide range of aircraft, from the F-15E Strike Eagle and F-35 stealth jets (tactical fighters) to heavy strategic bombers such as the B-52 Stratofortress.

WEST ASIA WAR EXPANDS

The legal framework that governs maritime conflict



AMRITA NAYAK DUTTA, ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR & SANDEEP SINGH

A US submarine on Wednesday torpedoed Iranian warship IRIS Dena off the coast of Sri Lanka, outside its nautical boundary.

The ship was returning after participating in the International Fleet Review and MILAN-2026, a multilateral naval exercise organised by the Indian Navy off Visakhapatnam last month.

The sinking of the frigate, in which at least 80 sailors were killed, has widened the theatre of the war between US-Israel and Iran—beyond West Asia and the Gulf to India's immediate neighbourhood.

It also ignited a debate in India about maritime security in the Indian Ocean, a region where New Delhi maintains a significant naval presence.

Several Indian Navy officers maintained that once a ship enters international waters, there is not much of a role any country can play in protecting it from an adversarial force. Here's a look at what maritime law and conventions say.

Conventions and laws

International maritime law falls under the purview of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The US is not a signatory to it.

But it does not contain explicit provisions regulating the conduct of belligerent parties during armed conflict, as its primary focus is on peacetime governance.

Instead, the law of naval warfare operates in parallel with UNCLOS during conflicts. So, it doesn't matter if the Dena was directly participating in the conflict. It was a warship of the Iranian navy and, therefore, a legitimate target.

The UN Charter, too, addresses the use of force in international waters. Article 51 of the Charter, concerning the Right of individual or collective self-defence, provides an exception to the prohibition of the use of force as stipulated in Article 2 (4) of the Charter. Article 51 allows UN members to exercise their right to self-defence in the event of an "armed attack".

Alternatively, the Casebook of the International Committee of the Red Cross cites

HOW A MARK-48 TORPEDO WORKS

The Mark-48 torpedo is the US Navy's main sub-launched weapon for attacking ships and other vessels

● Introduced in 1972 and built at a Navy base in Virginia, the Mark-48 heavyweight torpedo has been updated periodically.

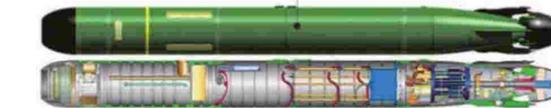
● It uses sonar to find its target and dive down underneath it

1700 kg

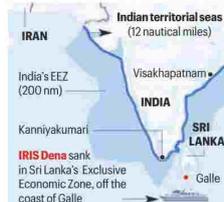
approximate weight of the most recent version

● There, the equivalent of roughly 500 pounds of TNT detonates

● This creates a bubble of gases that rises upward and snaps the ship's spine (keel) through metal fatigue



● The impact of the underwater explosion rips the ship into two or more pieces, causing it to sink quickly.



● The warship is likely to have been armed with basic weapon systems, including close-in weapon systems and area defence systems at the time of the attack.

A 'PRIZE SHIP'

● IRIS Dena, described by US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth as a "prize ship", sank off the coast of Sri Lanka after a torpedo attack.

● Dena was returning to Iran after taking part in a naval exercise last month in Visakhapatnam.



● The ship was on a peaceful passage, and it wasn't in the conflict zone. Even as the US has justified its action, this is a big escalation in the ongoing war, said a senior official with the Indian Navy, who did not wish to be named.

A RARE ATTACK

Since World War II, submarine torpedo strikes that sank major warships have been relatively rare.

Here are the prominent instances:

INS KHUKRI (DECEMBER 9, 1971)
Pakistani submarine PNS Hangor sank the Indian frigate off Diu. The attack killed 176 sailors.

ARA GENERAL BELGRANO (MAY 2, 1982)
UK sub HMS Conqueror struck the Argentine cruiser during Falklands War. The attack killed 323 sailors.

ROKS CHEONAN (MARCH 26, 2010)
The South Korean corvette sank after a suspected torpedo attack by North Korea.

The last American submarine to fire a torpedo on an enemy vessel was the USS Torsk, which sank a 750-ton Japanese vessel on August 14, 1945.

authorisation by the UN Security Council as grounds for a strike. While this measure dates back to the 1990 Gulf War, it may not be feasible. Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which outlines such authorisation, requires a majority vote from the council members with none of the permanent members—including the US—exercising their veto rights.

The sanctions on the ship

The Iranian warship was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department in February 2023, along with executives of an Iranian drone company called Paravar Pars. In statement, the US Department of the Treasury said that Iran was supplying UAVs for Russia's combat operations to target critical infrastructure in Ukraine.

Turning to Iranian Kurds, US seeks out old ally in West Asia

Rishika Singh
New Delhi, March 5

AS THE conflict in West Asia spreads, the US is turning to some older, non-state allies for support. Israel and US intelligence agencies, the Mossad and the CIA, respectively, are reportedly arming the Kurds to ensure an on-ground presence against the Iranian regime.

The US has long supported the ethnic group with thousands of trained fighters to bolster its own strategic aims in West Asia.

Stateless group

The Kurds are the world's largest stateless ethnic group, numbering around 25 to 35 million. They are spread across Turkey, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, northwestern Iraq, and southern Armenia, and are a minority in these countries.

Reputed to be fearless fighters, the Kurds have served as mercenaries in armies for centuries, but never had their own independent national homeland.

After World War II, the Kurdish Ottoman diplomat Mehmet Sherif Pasha proposed a new Kurdistan covering parts of modern

Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. However, the Treaty of Sevres, which partitioned the old Ottoman dominions, marked a smaller territory, entirely in today's Turkey. After negotiations with the Allies, Turkey signed the Treaty of Lausanne, which ended the idea of a self-governing Kurdistan.

Over time, the Kurds made attempts at establishing a de facto Kurdistan and attracted Turkish repression, including bans on the Kurdish language, songs, and dress. The Kurds in Iran have also had grievances with both the Islamic Republic regime and the Pahlavi dynasty before them.

In 1978, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK in Kurdish) sought to establish an independent Kurdistan, leading to violent clashes with the Turkish state. In 2013, the PKK declared a ceasefire, but this collapsed when Turkey fought the Islamic State (IS) in 2015 and started to bomb PKK targets in Iraq.

Role in Syria, Iraq

As the IS swept across Syria and Iraq in the early 2010s, the only fighters who were able to resist the onslaught were the Syrian Kurdish militias, the most powerful of

Iran's other minorities

● Apart from Kurds, Iran also has a sizable population of other ethnic minorities.

● These include the Azeri Kurds (comprising around 15 to 20% of the total population of 90 million) and the Baloch (around 2 to 3%).

● Not all of them are equally interested in politically mobilising against the government.

which was the People's Protection Units or the YPG. In 2014, as the US joined the war against ISIS, it found in the YPG a helpful regional ally. The Kurds also served as a counterpoint against the Iranians and Russians, who supported the Syrian regime.

This was not the first such extension of support. As Al Jazeera reported, "The US provided tactical support in the form of no-fly zones that protected Kurdish groups during the 1991 uprising (in Iraq), although Washington was criticised for prompting the revolt and then abandoning people as Iraqi forces under Saddam Hussein responded violently." The no-fly zone allowed the creation of a de facto Kurdish-controlled region in northern Iraq, officially recognised in 2005.

In Syria, once the Kurds had forced ISIS out of the northern region, they took over the recaptured land along the Syria-Turkey border. The YPG has close links with the PKK, and for Turkey, this constituted a serious security threat.

Possible shift

Over time, the Kurds developed their own governing institutions in parts of

The sinking of the frigate, in which at least 80 sailors were killed, has widened the theatre of the war between US-Israel and Iran

However, sanctions don't mean that the ship cannot participate in a peacetime multilateral maritime exercise, but largely remains restricted to business or transactional activities.

At the time of the attack, the ship is likely to have been armed with basic weapon systems, including close-in weapon systems and area defence systems.

What experts say

Vice Admiral G Ashok Kumar (Retd), former vice-chief of the Indian Navy and the country's first national maritime security coordinator, pointed out that there is no restriction on a war zone in the maritime domain. "It is very sad for us that the incident happened as the ship was returning from an international event organised by the Indian Navy. But in the maritime domain, there is no restriction of battle or war zone, and the war started after they departed India," he told The Indian Express.

"The warship officer added that the incident took place in the exclusive economic zone of Sri Lanka, and hence, they could quickly get into the search and rescue operation. "The fact that they were so close to the border might have meant that they were aware of some threat," he said.

However, Rear Admiral Sudhir Pillai NM (Retd) argued in a Substack post that the use of force against a foreign warship on the high seas is presumptively unlawful unless clearly justified as self-defence or as part of an armed conflict.

In his Substack essay, he noted that a military strike in such circumstances could have been valid if it met the grounds for self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter.

A senior Navy official said that the US submarine attack to down the Iranian warship in international waters while it was on a peaceful passage is a "big escalation" in the ongoing US-Israel-Iran war.

"The ship was on a peaceful passage, and it wasn't in the conflict zone. Even as the US has justified its action, this is a big escalation in the ongoing war," said a senior official with the Indian Navy, who did not wish to be named.

He further said that while warships have measures to counter torpedo attacks, the Iranian ship would have likely been taken by surprise.

"We would not have expected an attack as they were on a peaceful passage and not in the conflict zone and were struck early morning. They may not have anticipated such an attack in international waters," the official said.

AGRICULTURE

Why India's rice production and export strategy requires a rethink

Harish Damodaran
New Delhi, March 5

INDIA HAS been the world's largest rice exporter since 2011-12. In 2024-25, its export of 21.69 million tonnes (mt), according to the US Department of Agriculture, was way above Thailand's 7.86 mt and Vietnam's \$8.06 mt, the other top exporters. In 2024-25, India also became the world's biggest rice producer, with its estimated 150 mt output surpassing China's 145.28 mt. The challenge lies in sustaining this leadership position, from an environmental and financial standpoint.

The environmental dimension

Paddy (rice with husk) is a water-guzzling crop. As saline irrigation, for covering one acre of land to a depth of 2.5 cm, requires 101.715 litres of water. For paddy, the water level in the field has to be maintained at about 5 cm for extended periods, primarily for controlling weeds: water acts as a natural herbicide against the weeds that, unlike paddy plants, cannot

survive in submerged conditions. The number of irrigations for paddy ranges, depending upon the crop's duration and planting time, from 20 to over 30. Taking 25 irrigations at 5 cm depth, a paddy crop grown under the conventional transplanting-cum-continuous flooding system would consume about 5 million litres of water per acre. Assuming a paddy yield of 2.5 ton per acre, it translates into 2,000 litres for every kg of harvested grain and 3,000 litres for rice at two-thirds milling recovery. So, for every kg of rice India ships out, it also indirectly exports 3,000 litres of water.

Financial sustainability

The table shows India's exports of rice, both basmati and non-basmati, in quantity as well as value terms for recent years. In 2023-24 and 2024-25, basmati exports, at 5-6 mt, were less than half the 11-14 mt of non-basmati rice. But the value of exports from both was more or less same: \$5.8-5.9 billion for basmati and \$4.5-4.6 billion for non-basmati. The average unit

India's Rice Exports (April-March fiscal years)

| | Basmati | | Non-Basmati | |
|------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Quantity (IN LAKH TONNES) | Value (IN \$ MILLION) | Quantity (IN LAKH TONNES) | Value (IN \$ MILLION) |
| 2020-21 | 46.3 | 4,018.41 | 131.49 | 4,810.8 |
| 2021-22 | 39.44 | 3,537.49 | 172.89 | 6,133.63 |
| 2022-23 | 45.61 | 4,787.65 | 177.92 | 6,356.71 |
| 2023-24 | 52.42 | 5,843.3 | 111.17 | 4,573.41 |
| 2024-25 | 60.65 | 5,944.49 | 141.3 | 6,527.98 |
| Apr-Dec 24 | 42.42 | 4,322.7 | 93.33 | 4,405.26 |
| Apr-Dec 25 | 46.99 | 4,097.45 | 105.21 | 4,208.25 |

value realisation from basmati exports was Rs 829-923 per kg, as against Rs 34-392/kg for non-basmati during the two years.

Basmati rice, thus, fetches more dollars from every kg of grain going out of the country. That's not all. Basmati paddy consumes less water. Non-basmati varieties are mostly transplanted in June at the peak of summer, while basmati varieties are suitable

for transplanting in July with the monsoon. Simply put, basmati exports bring more bang for not only every kg of rice produced, but also for every litre of water consumed. "We should export more of basmati. In non-basmati, too, we must promote short-grain aromatic GI (geographical indications)-protected varieties like Kalamamak and Admachini (from eastern Uttar Pradesh), Ka-

tarni (Bihar), Gobindobhog (West Bengal), Badshah Bhog (Chhattisgarh), Koruput Kajaera (Odisha), Wyanand Jeerakasa and Gandhakasala (Kerala), and Seeraga Samba (Tamil Nadu). The idea is to move from a commodity rice to a high-value and less water-intensive rice export," says Ashok Kumar Singh, former director of Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI).

Phase-out plan

India's basmati shipments have risen from 0.6-0.7 mt (worth \$400-450 million) annually in the early 2000s to 5-6 mt (\$5.8-5.9 billion) during the last two years, thanks largely to blockbuster varieties bred by IARI scientists. These combine traditional basmati's unique attributes (aroma, non-stickiness and elongation upon cooking) with the higher yields of modern dwarf varieties.

Pusa Basmati-1509, a variety developed by the Singh (he has been selected for the Padma Shri award this year), yields 2.5 tonnes of paddy per acre with a seed-to-grain maturity of only 115-120 days. This

compares with the hardly one tonne from traditional tall varieties such as Tarori and Dehraduni, which also take 155-160 days from nursery sowing to harvesting.

The total area planted to rice in India's registered GI regions for basmati is around 62 million hectares (mh): 3.1 mh in Punjab, 1.3 mh in Haryana, 1.5 mh in western UP, 0.2 mh in Uttarakhand, 0.1 mh in Jammu and 0.05 mh in Himachal Pradesh. Within that, the actual basmati-sown area is just over 2.1 mh, including 0.8 mh each in Punjab and Haryana and 0.5 mh in western UP.

"Basmati cultivation can be expanded to cover the entire 6.2 mh GI area. It will boost India's basmati production and exports, while making rice farming more sustainable in Punjab and Haryana. Also, the government can step up procurement of non-basmati paddy in eastern UP, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam, where groundwater depletion is not significant and farmers aren't receiving minimum support prices," notes Singh.

FULL REPORT ON

WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED

Opinion

FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2026

Sustaining Budget inflows

Sharper focus on non-tax receipts has short-term utility, but taxes need to take centre stage soon

WITH THE SUBSTANTIAL relief being extended to taxpayers denting tax revenues—the largest stream of inflows into the exchequer—the Centre appears to be setting its sights on non-tax revenue instruments in the medium term. It recently rejigged the National Monetisation Pipeline 2.0 (FY26-FY30), by revising the mop-up target upward by 67% to ₹16.7 lakh crore. A significant part of these funds would reach the exchequer in due course, as dividends or profit share. A day after presenting the Budget FY27 in Parliament, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the pace and direction of disinvestment should set the tone for revenue generation, and added that there would be a lot more on disinvestment, by bringing more public float from CPSEs (central public sector enterprises) and asset monetisation. Under “miscellaneous capital receipts”, which includes proceeds from the sale of CPSE equities, ₹80,000 crore is projected to be raised in the next fiscal year, compared with barely ₹35,000 crore mopped up so far in the current fiscal year.

“Non-tax revenues”, as specified in the Budget, have grown at much faster rates than tax receipts in recent years—by 40.8% in FY24, 33.5% in FY25, and 24.4% (revised estimates) in FY26. Unprecedented jumps in “surplus transfers” from the Reserve Bank of India have helped cushion the Centre’s fiscal position in recent years while ensuring the central bank remains well-capitalised. State-run oil marketing companies, which have benefited from subdued oil prices, have also been generous with their dividend payouts. These apart, financial and quasi-sovereign investment vehicles have of late emerged as significant dividend contributors. While CPSE disinvestment per se has faltered, faster asset monetisation is set to be reflected on Budget receipts too. The increased focus on non-tax revenues, and now taxes on non-debt capital receipts, marks the realisation that imposing fresh taxes—even selectively on the rich and wealthy—would be an unwise step at this juncture and prove counterproductive.

However, this strategy can’t be a long-term anchor of fiscal consolidation. Tax and non-tax receipts differ fundamentally: the former entails a mandatory payment obligation imposed by the government on individuals and businesses, with set timelines for the transfers. On the face of it, tax payments are unrequited in nature. Non-tax contributions to the government coffers include fees, fines, dividends, and profits from government-owned firms, assets, and services. These are largely voluntary in nature, exhaustible, and not as synchronised with the current state of the economy, as tax revenues are. For instance, the fee charged on the use of telecom spectrum, a sovereign resource, needs to be paid only when a firm chooses to acquire and use it. The state can’t ordain the sale of spectrum. Similarly, companies enjoy certain freedom and flexibility in deciding the quantum of dividends to pay shareholders and how to stagger the payouts.

The instant jump in non-tax receipts also results from the government’s persuasive power, as it is uniquely placed and empowered compared to other economic actors. Exercising these powers has its limits. Uneconomic dividend transfers could, for instance, limit the capacity of CPSEs to make fresh investments and debilitate their profitability sooner than later. Despite the relatively high growth of non-tax revenues, these are still a quarter of the Centre’s net tax receipts. A sustainable revenue strategy for the government must inevitably be driven by taxes. The objective must be to return to this proven revenue model as quickly as possible.

This oil shock hits differently for the US

WITH THE US and Israel bombarding Iran, the surge in oil prices brings to mind the inflationary energy shocks of the past half century. But that may be the wrong way to think about what’s unfolding in the economy today.

While the 1970s and 2022 shocks supercharged US inflation, a sustained conflict with Iran would primarily hit the American economy through slower growth. Modern central bankers know to look through supply-driven energy price volatility when adjusting policy rates, and rising bond yields suggest that markets may be misreading the Federal Reserve’s reaction function. In fact, today’s Fed policy moves are likely to understand the growth-dampening effects of the war on a brittle labour market and geopolitical developments are unlikely to lead to policy rates that are higher for longer.

First, consider the inflation backdrop. The energy price spike comes against subdued inflation pressure in the rest of the consumer price index. Only about 15% of the CPI by weighting is currently inflating at a pace of 4% or more. The same statistic was at 62% when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Although pump prices are still among the most salient in household inflationary psychology, consumers aren’t likely to experience the shock as part of a broad increase in the price level. And while high prices have become a persistent complaint, inflation expectations have been relatively well-anchored in recent quarters, as measured by swaps and consumer surveys.

Similarly, labour market slack is primed to act as a disinflationary force. Not only is the unemployment rate higher than it was during the last energy shock, but job openings have also plummeted and payroll growth has flattened in just about every industry outside of health care. Whereas higher pump prices led workers to demand higher wages in 2022, they have no such bargaining power today. Average hourly earnings for production and non-supervisory employees grew at a modest 3.8% in January. In February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, they were growing 6.8%.

The story is more concerning for growth and workers. Businesses lacking the pricing power they’ve enjoyed in years past may adjust to higher energy prices by shrinking payrolls. Worse, the proliferation of artificial intelligence may give them the pretext to do so, as growing concern after Black laid off close to half its staff this week ostensibly due to technological progress.

Household finances are also more tenuous than in the recent past. The effective rate on outstanding mortgage debt sits at 4.2%, the highest since early 2012, and debt service ratios are at the highest since early 2020. Student loan, credit card, and auto loan delinquencies have all moved higher, too. In such an environment, Fed Chair Jerome Powell (and Fed chair nominee Kevin Warsh) should think the Fed mustn’t let a supply shock draw it into an unduly tight policy stance.

The outcome, of course, all depends on the extent to which the Third Gulf War affects the flow of vessels through the Strait of Hormuz. As my colleague Javier Blas has written, the US needs to get the Strait reopened. While much of the conversation centres on export shipments, Javier says that the world also pressing needs to get ships into the Persian Gulf, lest the region run out of storage and have to resort to slowing production. As an example, Iraq has already cut output at the Rumaila oil field, and Bloomberg News reported that the country appears poised to shutter about 3 million barrels a day of output if the conflict carries on.

But even under a more pessimistic scenario in which oil shoots above \$100 a barrel, it seems somewhat odd for investors to bet on tighter-for-longer policy rates. At the time of writing, trading in Fed funds futures suggest diminishing odds that the central bank will cut rates twice in 2026. It’s plausible, of course, that policymakers may opt to stand pat while they monitor to ensure inflation expectations don’t lose their anchor, since inflation is seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet that would be a temporary posture. What’s harder to comprehend is why investors have pared bets on rate cuts for late 2026 and early 2027, after the growth drag has hit.

That sort of interpretation treats this shock too much like the more inflationary ones from the past. And under the surface, it’s clear this is a very different economic



JONATHAN LEVIN
Bloomberg

ATTENDING THE GLOBAL AI IMPACT SUMMIT WAS A RARE AND RARE EXPERIENCE—LISTENING TO THE THOUGHTS OF WORLD LEADERS PROMISES EARTH-SHAKING POSSIBILITIES. IT IS PROBABLY CORRECT TO SAY THAT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) COULD BE THE HARBRINGER OF THE NEXT INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION—4IR—AFTER THE PREVIOUS REVOLUTIONS BROUGHT ABOUT BY THE STEAM ENGINE, ELECTRICITY AND MASS PRODUCTION, AND INTERNET/DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY. THE VISIONS PAINTED BY TECHNOLOGY LEADERS SUCH AS GOOGLE’S SUNDAR PICHAI AND DENNIS HASSABIS, OPEN AI’S SAM ALTMAN, ANTHROPIC’S DARIO AMODEI, META’S ALEXANDER WANG, AND OUR OWN EXPERTS/INVENTORS SUCH AS SARVAM AI’S FOUNDERS, PLUS THE PRESENTATIONS AT THE TECH COMPANIES’ STALLS, GAVE A DAZZLING DISPLAY OF THE POTENTIAL OF AI FOR MANKIND.

The impact of AI in the fields of science, health, education, agriculture, climate change, finance, commerce, and more are unfolding with dazzling or, as some feel, alarming speed. In medicine, AI promises personalised treatment instead of a one-size-fits-all, helping radiologists to detect critical diseases, or automatically producing medical notes after listening to doctor-patient conversations. In fact, India’s AIIMS is cooperating with Google to raise the level of quality in health services and patient care. In agriculture, AI has been harnessed for early plant disease detection and cure recommendations, in weather prediction and in advice on ideal planting times and water use, fertiliser and pesticide usage, predicting diseases in cattle, and so on. AI deployment has accordingly led to a substantial increase in yields in various use cases.

AI in education is enabling individualised teaching according to the specific needs of each student, providing round-the-clock coaching, and relieving teachers from drudge work like tabulating attendance or grading multiple choice questions. In governance, AI can and is helping individuals to connect to essential services in multiple languages. Prevention of fraud and ensuring compliance with legal and regulatory mandates is an area of growing deployment of AI, especially in financial businesses such as banking, insurance, and stock market operations. The list of uses where AI can be an essential tool is expanding by the day. Several Indian startups are using the services of Google and other AI biggies to relay the above benefits to Indian citizens. Large Indian corporates are prioritising the use of AI to bolster their services and products, including for enhancing product efficiencies.

On the other hand, there is no shortage of pessimists about the future with AI. There can be no doubt that agentic AI will automate and thereby replace many white-collar jobs, in particular the routine ones such as data entry and customer service, as well as entry-level jobs like data



VINOD DHALL
Former Chairman, Competition Commission of India, and Senior Adviser, Touchstone Partners

SUMMIT TAKEAWAYS

INDIA’S FOCUS HAS BEEN AT THE DEPLOYMENT LEVEL, HIGH INVESTMENT IN INFRA BODES WELL FOR AI GROWTH

The AI India Impact

INDIA’S FLOURISHING STARTUP ECOSYSTEM AND AN ABUNDANCE OF AI TALENT HAS SEEN THE BIRTH OF SEVERAL DEPLOYMENT-LEVEL APPS AND TOOLS

analysts. Already, the announcement by Anthropic of the launch of its Claude Cowork sent shock waves through the software industry globally including in India, and led to a steep fall in their stock market valuations.

At the summit, however, a few significant collaborations were announced. For example, Infosys and Anthropic announced that the Indian IT firm will be developing AI solutions for targeted industries such as financial services and telecom. The Tata Group announced a tie-up with OpenAI that will likely enable access for thousands of its employees to advanced ChatGPT. However, the Indian software leaders were slow to wake up to the potential of AI to disrupt their business models. The Indian IT industry has faced similar upheavals before, and one hopes the current slump is a temporary occurrence rather than a long-term hit.

At the same time, AI will probably also create new types of jobs, but that could happen with a time lag and will necessitate training people in new skills and at scale.

At the societal level, the spread of near-realistic deepfakes makes it difficult for the public and even institutions to distinguish facts from fiction. These

WEST ASIA RIPPLES

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi

The world has entered a volatile phase. Stormy seas lie ahead. India’s oil supplies are under threat, with more than 40% of our imports transiting the Strait of Hormuz



VINOD DHALL
Former Chairman, Competition Commission of India, and Senior Adviser, Touchstone Partners

tools can be manipulated for political and other aims. AI creations carry the biases of the data on which they are fed or trained. Dark algorithms can perpetuate discrimination in activities such as recruitment and loans. AI can be used as a malignant tool for government surveillance and targeting of opponents or dissenters, something that was a point of disagreement between the Pentagon and Anthropic. AI, it is feared, can hugely exacerbate economic disparities in societies as the economic fruits can be captured by the rich and tech corporates. Finally, it can bring about an existential crisis as the AI creatures become more intelligent and more powerful than humans. As people like Amodei point out, we should be worried about the evolution of powerful AI that can morph into an “AI country” populated by artificial superintelligence and dark power with no ethical guardrails.

India’s focus at the AI summit and otherwise has been at the deployment level, with the aim of delivering equitable growth, improving public services, and addressing the country’s most pressing challenges while ensuring safety, ethics, and inclusivity. India’s flourishing startup ecosystem and an abundance of AI-related talent, encouraged also by the government’s AI Mission, has seen the birth of several deployment-level apps and tools, as well as indigenous foundation models like Sarvam AI. High levels of investment in AI-specific infrastructure, both from global giants and Indian corporates such as by Reliance, Adani and Google, Meta and Yotta, bode well for the accelerated growth of AI technology in the country. These will likely spur the development of AI at scale and its deployment in a host of fields. Some of this is already happening.

Resilient fundamentals meet volatile flows



UPASANA CHACHRA
Chief India Economist, Morgan Stanley

INDIA’S EXTERNAL SECTOR is under scrutiny amid a widening divergence between volatile capital flows and steadily strengthening balance-sheet fundamentals. Heightened global uncertainty has softened capital inflows and intermittently pressured the currency. In our view, however, external accounts continue to display resilience. While cyclical noise has intensified, there are no signals of deeper macro vulnerability.

India has historically run a current account deficit (CAD), consistent with a growth model that prioritises investment beyond domestic savings. Over the past decade, however, both the size and composition of the deficit have improved materially. During FY16-25, the CAD averaged about 1% of GDP, less than half the average of the preceding decade.

This benign trend reflects structural shifts rather than cyclical tailwinds. Merchandise exports have remained largely steady, as reflected in India’s plateauing share of global goods exports. Instead, three secular drivers have underpinned improvement: (i) favourable terms of trade led by declining oil intensity, which has fallen from 0.18 in the early 2000s to about 0.12 currently amid relatively stable global oil prices; (ii) a structural upswing in services exports, supported by the offshoring boom and the rise of global capability centres that increasingly extend beyond traditional software into business services, with services exports’ global market share rising by around

130 basis points (bps) since 2019; and (iii) robust remittances, now tracking at about 3.2% of GDP, with India emerging as the world’s leading recipient, aided by a shift towards higher-skilled migration to advanced economies rather than Gulf-centric flows.

The resilience of the “invisibles” component has acted as a stabilising force, offsetting weakness in goods exports amid volatile global trade conditions. That said, recent geopolitical developments pose risks of a temporary widening in the CAD via higher oil and non-oil commodity prices, depending on the duration of disruptions. A 10% increase in oil prices can widen the CAD by roughly 30 bps of GDP.

In contrast to the improving current account, the capital account has weakened over time. Historically, it ran a surplus of around 4% of GDP during FY06-15, but this fell to about 2.2% of GDP in FY16-25. Cyclically, capital flows have become increasingly fragile. On a four-quarter trailing basis, the capital account has recorded net outflows and remains close to all-time lows as of Q2 December 2025.

Since January 2024, foreign institutional investor (FII) flows have oscillated between net inflows and outright outflows. Tighter global financial conditions, a stronger US dollar, and elevated uncertainty have weighed on sentiment.

In 2025, cumulative FII outflows amounted to \$11.3 billion. Following the announcement of the India-US trade deal, sentiment has improved modestly, with inflows of around \$3.6 billion recorded in February 2026.

Net foreign direct investment (FDI) has also remained constrained, despite resilient gross inflows. In 2025, gross FDI rose 10% year-on-year to \$90.8 billion. However, net inflows were subdued at \$4.4 billion, as repatriation exceeded \$50 billion and outward FDI accelerated, surging to \$34.6 billion.

The interaction of the current and capital accounts is reflected in the balance of payments (BoP), which has typically remained in surplus. In FY25, the BoP slipped into a marginal deficit of about 0.2% of GDP, driven largely by capital outflows. We expect the BoP to remain in deficit in FY26 as well, given lacklustre flows, marking the first instance of two consecutive years of BoP deficits.

Despite turbulence on the flow side, fundamentals provide meaningful weight. The external balance sheet remains fortified, supported by substantial foreign-exchange reserves, comfortable import cover, and a manageable external debt profile. Official assessments suggest India performs well on debt sustainability metrics relative to peers. Fundamentals therefore

India’s external narrative remains anchored in steady fundamentals that have helped offset volatility in global capital flows

remain strong enough to anchor stability, even as capital flows stay uneven.

The recent rupee weakness should be viewed through the combined lens of dollar strength driven by interest-rate differentials, volatile portfolio flows, and trade-related uncertainty. With the US trade deal now in place, downside risks appear limited. Relatively cheap valuation versus fundamentals, improving capital-flow prospects, and a better trade outlook should offer support. The RBI’s short forward position of over \$60 billion is likely to cap sharp appreciation, favouring measured gains instead. On a real effective exchange rate basis, the rupee remains undervalued, supporting export competitiveness.

India’s external narrative remains anchored in steady fundamentals that have helped offset volatility in global capital flows. Near-term risks stem from the duration of geopolitical tensions and the real potential impact via higher commodity prices, weaker export growth, and pressure on remittances. Over the medium term, rapid advances in AI pose emerging risks that warrant monitoring. Policy efforts to enhance competitiveness—particularly through strengthening domestic manufacturing and boosting merchandise exports—will be critical to sustaining growth and reducing external vulnerabilities. On the capital account, favourable growth differentials and deeper integration into global bond indices should, over time, support a more constructive flow environment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tech imperialism

Apologies of “Tech’s ethical limits” (FE, March 5), the clash between artificial intelligence (AI) developers and government defence priorities exposes a troubling double standard in corporate morality. While firms enforce strict boundaries against domestic surveillance, these frameworks evaporate when their systems are deployed in foreign conflicts. This hypocrisy suggests industry principles are dictated

by national security and commercial survival rather than universal rights. As modern warfare relies on algorithmic speed, creators are rapidly losing control over their technologies’ ultimate applications. Further, when one company demonstrates restraint, competitor competitors readily step in to secure lucrative state contracts. We must urgently establish international agreements to regulate military AI before unchecked technological imperialism permanently

redraws the global order.

—K Chidnanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Limit of technology

Technology ushers in convenience, innovation, and new ways to solve problems, but its speedy expansion poses serious ethical issues. Sensitive issues like invasion of privacy, excessive surveillance, misuse of personal data, and algorithmic bias show that technology is not always neutral or harmless. When innovation moves

faster than laws or ethics, it can harm individuals and society. Hence, clearly defined ethical boundaries are vital to guide how technology is created and used. Governments, companies, and people must work together to ensure accountability and responsible practices. The real limit of technology lies not in what we can build, but in what we choose to use responsibly.

—PV Prakash, Mumbai

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Editor's TAKE

Nepal's vote tests the old political order

The Gen Z has changed the rules of the game; the election results will show whether Nepal's political establishment has understood the message.

It has been 20 years since Nepal overthrew its monarchy and charted its course in parliamentary democracy. However, the end of monarchy was not the end of Nepal's woes. These twenty years have been tumultuous, to say the least. The political establishment that took over has not lived upto the expectations of the people. The governments were mostly keen to secure their place and survive rather than to deliver on the development of the country. Corruption, coalitions and internal feuds have defined the parliamentary democracy for all these years. Power alternated mainly among the Nepali Congress and various communist factions, including the CPN-UML and the Maoist Centre, often through fragile coalition governments, but not much changed for the people.

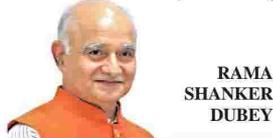
Unemployment and corruption grew, as did the frustration amongst the youth, who finally came on the streets in September last year to protest and changed Nepal politics forever. The elections underway in Nepal are not ordinary elections, it is going to be a litmus test for the old political establishment and also people's view of the Gen Z uprising. With nearly 19 million voters deciding the 275-member House of Representatives, the election has become a referendum on whether Nepal's long-dominant political class can regain legitimacy or whether a new generation will reshape the country's political trajectory. Political instability has marked the democracy and allegations of corruption have eroded public trust.

This election, therefore, marks a turning point. The most visible sign of change is the emergence of younger candidates and unconventional political figures who have captured the imagination of Nepal's urban youth. Among them is Balendra Shah, the rapper-turned-politician and former mayor of Kathmandu, who has positioned himself as a symbol of generational change. His challenge to veteran Marxist leader and former prime minister KP Sharma Oli in Jhapa district has become one of the most closely watched contests of the election. At the same time, established parties have attempted to adapt to the new political mood.

The Nepali Congress, one of the country's oldest parties, has chosen the relatively younger Gagan Thapa as its leader, signalling a cautious attempt at renewal. Traditional leaders are emphasising experience and stability, arguing that governance requires institutional knowledge rather than political experimentation. Structural realities of Nepal's electoral system make a dramatic political overhaul unlikely. The mixed system of first-past-the-post and proportional representation often produces fragmented results and may lead to yet another coalition government. Nevertheless, the politics of Nepal have changed for sure. The Gen Z uprising has set the agenda—one centred on accountability, transparency, and economic opportunity. Whether led by veterans such as Oli or younger leaders like Thapa—or influenced by new voices such as Shah—Nepal's next government will face a restless and politically awakened generation.

From Indian rootedness to global competence

The implementation of NEP-2020 has ushered in a positive transformative shift, positioning the Indian higher education system to align more closely with the evolving demands of the 21st-century economy



RAMA SHANKER DUBEY

The Indian higher education system is undergoing a massive transformation, shifting from a theoretical, colonial-era mindset and rote-learning model to an India-centric framework that takes pride in nation's rich cultural heritage while embracing experiential learning, skill development, innovation, and entrepreneurship. This shift fosters a more dynamic, self-reliant, and globally competitive academic ecosystem.

The focus of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) on the holistic development of students by incorporating Indian values, ethics, duties, and the integration of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into curricula, has significantly influenced the development of national consciousness and cultural rootedness among students, thereby strengthening nationalistic feeling and pride in Indian identity.

The great educational institutions of ancient India Taxila, Nalanda, and Vikramshila were founded upon the principle of holistic development of students - the development of mind, body, intellect and soul. Famous Indian educational philosophers such as Swami Vivekananda, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore consistently emphasised that the central aim of education should be the holistic development of students.

The IKS is the most ancient and the most richly endowed heritage in the world. It embodies an extraordinary confluence of spirituality, science, art, logic, and a profound philosophy of life. It has always been devoted to the pursuit of truth and the welfare of humanity. The principal pillars of IKS are the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the philosophical systems (Darshanas).

India has offered the world six distinct ways of seeing and understanding reality—these are its six classical schools of philosophy. On the one hand, we rose to the loftiest heights of spiritual realisation; on the other, our revered Rishis and Acharyas laid the foundational principles of mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, medicine, economics, governance, environmental ethics and various domains of knowledge.

It is widely recognised across the globe that the Vedas constitute primary source of both spiritual and worldly knowledge. With the incorporation of the great intellectual and intellectual contributions of ancient India into present-day curricula, such as the reference to the discovery of fire by Rishi Atharva in the Rigveda and Yajurveda; the surgical principles of Acharya Sushruta in the Sushruta Samhita (600 BCE); the concepts of atomic theory, gravitation, and motion described by Maharshi Kanada in the Vaisheshika Darshana



BY FOSTERING FLEXIBLE CURRICULAR STRUCTURES AND ENABLING CROSS-DISCIPLINARY MOBILITY, NEP-2020 EQUIPS STUDENTS WITH A WIDE RANGE OF COMPETENCIES, INCLUDING CRITICAL THINKING, EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION, DIGITAL LITERACY, AND ADVANCED PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

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The Pioneer

(600 BCE); students are developing greater national pride, courage, self-reliance and confidence in the richness of our national intellectual heritage and respect for India's civilisational legacy. Beyond reinforcing awareness of India's civilisational contributions to global knowledge, the rapid integration of IKS into academic curricula will help preserve and revitalise the country's rich intellectual traditions across diverse fields.

The implementation of NEP-2020 has significantly reoriented the skill development landscape within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The integration of vocational education into mainstream curricula, along with the introduction of skill enhancement courses, experiential learning, internships, apprenticeships, and project-based learning, has strengthened skill competency acquisition, helped bridge industry skill gaps, and enhanced self-reliance, innovation, and employability. The Pradhan Mantri National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (PM-NAPS) has been crucial in promoting structured apprenticeship programs, imparting industry-linked practical training to the students.

By promoting entrepreneurial skills among students, NEP-2020 has fostered a strong startup culture within HEIs. Initiatives such as Startup India, the National Innovation and Startup Policy (NISIP) of the Ministry of Education, Government of India, the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), and various State Startup Policies have collectively accelerated the development of vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems on campuses. From approximately 400-500 startups in 2016, India has grown to over 2 lakh DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade)-recognised startups as of December 2025, making India the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world.

By fostering flexible curricular structures and enabling cross-disciplinary mobility, NEP-2020 equips students with a wide range of competencies, including critical thinking, effective communication, digital literacy, and advanced problem-

solving skills. The credit accumulation mechanism enabled by the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) facilitates lifelong learning and continuous skill upgradation, thereby enhancing learner mobility and adaptability. Twenty-first century skills such as digital proficiency, creativity, leadership, and ethical reasoning are essential competencies for effective participation in a knowledge-driven global economy.

To cultivate students with global competencies, it is imperative to produce high-quality graduates specialised in critical fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, data analytics, cybersecurity, semiconductors, green energy transitions, etc.

This requires reorienting our curricula to incorporate intensive practical, hands-on training in these areas. India is home to numerous HEIs that consistently produce exceptional talents in AI and computer science and many of such graduates are currently among the leading innovators and technologists in Silicon Valley. Encouragingly, this long-standing trend of outward migration is beginning to reverse and we have to retain this highly skilled talent pool, enabling them to drive innovation and create long-term value within India.

AI innovation labs are being established across major Indian technology hubs, positioning the country to emerge as a global centre of excellence in AI-powered consulting, advanced analytics, cyber defence operations and education. This underscores India's growing strategic role in the global AI ecosystem. AI-led cyber research hubs established in leading Indian tech cities have the potential to play a pivotal role in safeguarding critical digital infrastructure and strengthening national cyber resilience. AI-powered consulting, advanced analytics, cyber defence operations and education, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, strengthening research capabilities, improving administrative efficiency, and expanding accessibility.

AI, as existing in curriculum design, real-time skills assessment, and the effective management of smart campuses. However, as a matter of caution one has to remember that the Indian vision of education does not rest solely on the transmission of information; rather, it emphasises holistic development, mentorship, empathy, moral guidance, and the cultivation of critical thinking, the qualities that are inherently human.

The implementation of NEP-2020 has ushered in a positive transformative shift, positioning the Indian higher education system to align more closely with the evolving demands of the 21st-century economy. It seeks to nurture students who take pride in Indian heritage while simultaneously developing global competencies and critical twenty-first century skills essential for meaningful employment, entrepreneurial leadership, and the effective resolution of complex global challenges.



An artiste dressed as 'Vishnumurthy' daily performs 'Ottekola', a dance ritual, at the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple, Kulkunda, in Dakshina Kannada district

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Unlocking the mystery of chanting

Chanting God's names has that power over the mind and the rest of the body.

I was thrilled beyond belief. Surely, I began to search for supporting evidence. I read a book # 10,25, in which Lord Krishna has specifically mentioned that He is chanting among the yajnas and the single syllable "Aum" in speech. The word "yajna," translated into English, means "sacrifice."

The word "sacrifice" is explained as giving up the fruits of one's 'karmas' (acts) to benefit others. Lord Krishna has glorified this as the highest yajna; it is better than even meditation, which is superior to knowledge. (12.12) Now returning to the benefits of chanting God's names and, yes, Aum, it connects with God. In the case of a person, that person has to be within hearing distance or willing to respond.

In the case of God, He, being omnipresent, God will definitely hear and in case of chanting His names, will be much pleased. In the famous case of Hanumanji chanting Rama, Rama, Rama... Lord Ramachandra asked Hanumanji about the reason for chanting His name. Hanumanji replied that it made Him blissful. Lord Ramachandra was much pleased.

In another famous instance, Draupadi was in grave danger of being dishonoured, getting disrobed in the royal court. She chanted, "Krishna, Krishna, Krishna..."

in utter desperation. We know what the Lord did for her. How does chanting God's names or Aum work? How does a sanitiser work on an infected surface? Chanting has a similar effect on the mind; it calms it down, removes other thoughts, especially negative ones. Chanting is surrender to the Divine, and God is bound to take notice. God is much pleased as one is doing what He has instructed us to do, which is chanting, being the highest yajna. Chanting is a spiritual activity and must be done sincerely and regularly to experience its benefits.

Believe me, I have found chanting as the best way to get sleep, whether at night or during the day, as just one benefit among many. Why don't you try to wash your mind like soap washes a cloth? Just keep washing and feel the difference. After chanting God's names for nearly four decades, I realised its calming power arises because the mind itself is God's creation.

Chanting connects us with the Divine, quiets restless thoughts, and unites inner peace. Practiced sincerely and regularly, it purifies the mind—much like cleansing—bringing spiritual strength, clarity, and deep, lasting tranquility.

The writer is a spiritual teacher

AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

2ND OPINION

I have been chanting God's names for close to four decades. I do because it helps me in many ways. I will give details later in this article. I continued chanting because it was working, but I never knew how. I tried to repeat the name of my friend, but it gave me no benefit whatsoever. Then, something had to be different with God's names. Recently, one early morning, I prayed to my Lord about disclosing the mystery of chanting His names and its effect on me. I said, "My Lord guided me as I had sincerely prayed for an answer. A hint came about the source of the mind: who created it? It was easy—God has. Then, it clicked; He must know how to calm the mind, being its creator. Chanting God's names does that. Not only calms the mind, but it also gives all kinds of benefits.

SILENCE AMID ESCALATION: QUESTIONS OVER THE US-ISRAEL STRIKE ON IRAN

The world seemed to know the reason for the latest escalation even before US Secretary of State Marco Rubio publicly acknowledged it: American strikes on Iran were triggered by Israel's plan to attack Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had earlier claimed that Iran was building new underground facilities that could soon make its ballistic missile and nuclear programmes immune to external strikes.

Without an independent assessment of whether these Iranian sites posed an imminent threat, US President Donald Trump moved swiftly, outlining war aims that included destroying Iran's ballistic missile capability and naval strength, preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, and curbing its support for proxy forces across the Middle East. US

Vice-President JD Vance echoed this position, asserting that Washington's goal was to ensure Iran could never possess nuclear weapons. For many observers, the sudden Israel-US offensive defies logic and raises troubling questions about the use of force. Equally striking has been the muted response from much of the international community. Apart from Vladimir Putin, most world leaders have remained largely silent. The continued helplessness of the United Nations has also drawn concern. India, too, faces a delicate choice. Whether Prime Minister Modi will endorse such escalation remains uncertain. New Delhi's silence risks appearing less like neutrality and more like a diplomatic credibility to prevent further deterioration.

BIDYUT KR CHATTERJEE / FARIADOD

Merkel's tribute to Manmohan Singh

During a visit to New Delhi, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel once paid a thoughtful tribute to former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, remarking that he gave her the courage to ask questions. Her comment reflected the intellectual depth, humility and openness that defined Dr Singh's leadership. His scholarly temperament created an environment where meaningful dialogue could flourish, encouraging discussions guided by logic and substance rather than political theatrics. Dr Singh's reform-oriented and pro-globalisation policies significantly strengthened ties between India and Germany. Through economic liberalisation, encouragement of foreign investment and support for technology partnerships, he helped lay a durable foundation for bilateral cooperation.

The impact of those policies is visible today. Germany has emerged as one of India's most important trading partners in Europe. Collaboration in areas such as renewable energy, climate technology and green hydrogen has expanded steadily. German companies including Siemens and Volkswagen have deepened their presence in the Indian market. Merkel's remarks serve as a reminder that the seeds of partnership sown through vision and patience in the past are today yielding meaningful results.

VRS NARULA / PATIALA

Samson's knock that redefined his career

Appropos "Sanju needed a break after NZ series: Gambhir" (The Pioneer, March 3), India may have finally discovered a true match-winner in Sanju Samson. His scintillating unbeaten 9 off just 50 balls at Eden Gardens was not merely a fine innings but perhaps a turning point in his international career. Without that knock, Samson might well have drifted into obscurity after the World Cup. Interestingly, Samson's quiet and unassuming personality contrasts with the enigma that his cricketing journey has often been. His talent was never in doubt, but chronic inconsistency frequently held him back. While he displayed flashes of brilliance early on, they seldom translated into sustained performances. His intermittent presence in the team cannot be blamed entirely on circumstances; consistency is the only way a player can claim a permanent place.

However, Sunday's innings suggested a more mature and composed Samson. Playing with remarkable calm and clarity, he anchored India's charge into the semifinals. At his best, the 31-year-old makes batting look effortless. There was hardly any sign of nerves, and his confident body language spoke volumes. As coach Gautam Gambhir rightly observed, the Eden Gardens knock could well prove to be a "career-defining" moment for Samson.

GANPATI BHAT / ANOLA

India's quiet culture of everyday giving

A survey by the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy at Ashoka University reveals the remarkable generosity embedded in Indian society. Nearly seven in ten Indians donate to charity in some form, demonstrating that philanthropy in the country is not limited to wealthy benefactors but is sustained by ordinary citizens. The report estimates that India's total household charitable giving stands at around \$40 billion annually, covering cash donations, in-kind contributions and volunteering. Among the 68 per cent of respondents who reported giving, the largest share (48 per cent) donate in kind—such as food, clothing or household goods—followed by cash donations (44 per cent) and volunteering (30 per cent). Everyday giving has also grown steadily, rising from \$34,000 crore in 2019 to \$37,000 crore in 2023. The patterns of giving are distinctive. Nearly 46 per cent of individual donations flow to religious organisations, while 42 per cent go directly to beggars or the destitute. Only about 15 per cent reaches non-religious non-profit organisations. A striking feature is the largely informal nature of giving.

Just 10 per cent of donations passed through formal channels in 2019. This contrasts sharply with the West, where philanthropy is highly institutionalised. India's philanthropy, by comparison, is personal.

YASH PAL RAJHAN / JALANOHAR

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



Open letter to Justice Ujjal Bhuyan

Constitutional morality, if it is to retain credibility, must be applied uniformly — unaffected by the identity of either the victim or the perpetrator, and courageous enough to confront uncomfortable truths across communities and institutions alike

FIRST Column



BALBIR PUNJ

Respected Justice Bhuyan, On 21 February last, addressing a seminar in Hyderabad, your Lordship reflected on what you described as India's enduring "deep societal faultlines" that persist even after seventy-five years of constitutional democracy.

In illustrating this proposition, your honour cited two separate and seemingly "random" instances: first, that of a PhD scholar in Delhi allegedly denied accommodation after her Muslim identity became known; and second, an incident from Odisha in which school-children were reportedly prevented by their parents from partaking of a mid-day meal prepared by a Dalit woman.

Let me state at the outset, without reservation, that discrimination based on religion or caste is morally indefensible and constitutionally impermissible. Yet, the question that inevitably arises is whether the articulation of "deep societal fault-lines" can remain selective?

It is in this context that I was struck by a contemporaneous development that received comparatively muted attention within the very circuits that routinely and justifiably raise concerns over caste-based oppression. Around the same time that your remarks were widely reported, an incident of violence involving Dalit victims surfaced in Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh.

The complainant, Akash Kumar, alleged that a social gathering, which featured DJ music and dance, had paused for local Muslim residents to perform prayers. After prayers, the music resumed, but around 15 to 20 men allegedly barged in with sticks, assaulting attendees, including women. He added that the assailants used casteist slurs and vandalised the property.

An FIR was registered under relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act against individuals, including village head Moeen Khan, Matlub Ali, Mohd Adil, Akram Khan, among others.

The silence that followed in certain sections of civil society raises uncomfortable but necessary questions: Why is it that "hate crimes" acquire differential moral urgency depending upon the religious identity of the



EXPRESSIONS OF SOLIDARITY AGAINST INJUSTICE MUST NOT BE CONTINGENT UPON THE IDENTITY OF EITHER VICTIM OR PERPETRATOR

The writer is an eminent columnist, former Chairman of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), and the author of 'Trust with Ajudas: Decolonisation of India' and 'Narrative ka Mayajal'.

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accused? If the perpetrator is presumed to belong to the so-called "upper-caste Hindu" category, the outrage is immediate and national; yet when the accused emerges from a minority community, there is silence.

Surely, constitutional morality of which Your Lordship spoke so eloquently—demands a rejection of precisely such selective indignation.

You also observed in your address, as media reports, that constitutional morality requires democratic institutions to exercise restraint and adhere to foundational values rather than bulldoze through on the strength of numbers, authority and power. This is, without doubt, a salutary reminder.

However, it would be equally apposite to acknowledge that constitutional morality also demands intellectual honesty in confronting patterns of coercion, deception, or exploitation—irrespective of the ideological discomfort such acknowledgement may generate.

The recent controversy surrounding the film 'The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond' has brought into public discourse the vexed question of coercive religious conversion through romantic entanglement.

At a press conference in New Delhi on 23 February, the filmmakers were joined

by 33 women from different parts of the country, survivors of forced religious conversion, including cases allegedly facilitated through deceptive interfaith relationships.

Several of these unfortunate women recounted experiences of physical abuse, coercion, and forced consumption of beef following marriage, an act that, for many Hindu women, carries deep civilisational and religious significance.

Among those who narrated her ordeal was Tara Shahdeo, a national-level shooter from Ranchi. Her case dates back to July 2014, when she married "Ranjeet Singh Kohli", whom she later discovered to be "Raqibul Hasan". According to her testimony, within days she was subjected to physical and emotional abuse, alongside sustained pressure to convert.

She has publicly recounted her ordeal in stark and unambiguous terms: "I have spent 40 days in hell, and all I could think of is how to escape. They also took me to the magistrate's house, and I was told that I had to eat beef."

Tara further stated that her marriage had been arranged following recommendations from influential quarters. In her words: "In my case, a judge brought the marriage proposal for that

person... At the judge's request, we agreed to the marriage."

In October 2023, a Special Court of the Central Bureau of Investigation in Ranchi delivered its verdict: Raqibul Hasan was sentenced to life imprisonment; his mother, Kaushar Rani, was awarded ten years' rigorous imprisonment; and Mushtaq Ahmed, then Registrar of the Jharkhand High Court, was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The issue is not merely that an individual concealed his identity in order to perpetrate a criminal act—for individuals of criminal disposition exist across communities. The deeper concern arises when such deception appears to be facilitated or normalised within broader local networks, including clerical intermediaries and, in certain allegations, family complicity.

Most of such crimes aren't committed by lone wolves but, in most cases, by organised social and familial networks. What's the doctrinal glue that binds such a team for this sort of evil activity? Shouldn't civil society reflect on this?

There have been numerous cases described as 'love jihad'. This social menace has assumed the characteristics of an organised criminal enterprise. A newspaper article, constrained by limited

space, barely scratches the surface of this complex issue.

Interfaith marriages in India are neither novel nor unlawful. Religion should never impede consenting adults acting in good faith. Yet when religious identity is intentionally concealed as part of a structured strategy to convert through deception, the matter transcends personal autonomy and becomes a matter of societal concern.

Expressions of solidarity against injustice must not be contingent upon the identity of either victim or perpetrator. Unless every instance of discrimination, irrespective of community, is subjected to consistent scrutiny, the perception of selectivity will persist, corroding public confidence in the neutrality of moral discourse.

Your Lordship, when talking of "societal faultlines", can one ignore the dispensation of our law courts? A 2007 survey by Transparency International found that "77 per cent of Indian respondents" perceived the "judicial system" to be "corrupt" at the time.

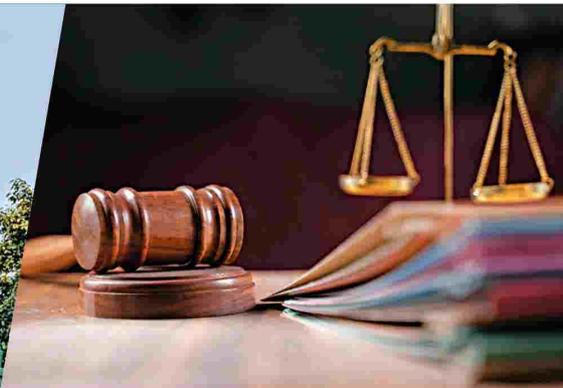
During contempt proceedings in August 2020 before the Supreme Court, then the Attorney General K. K. Venugopal submitted that nine former Supreme Court judges had publicly spoken about corruption in the higher judiciary—seven of them immediately after retirement before the Bench declined to hear him further on the issue.

More recently, Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal informed Parliament on 13 February 2026 that the Office of the Chief Justice of India had received 8,630 complaints against sitting judges over the past decade, which are processed internally through the judiciary's in-house mechanism. The revelation came in response to a written question posed by DMK MP V.S. Mathewarun.

Your Lordship, corruption is a ravenous termite, steadily eating away at and hollowing out our system from within. To combat this menace, the system must identify corrupt politicians, expose venal officials, discipline unscrupulous businessmen, and punish them suitably.

But can we achieve all this without a fair, honest, and efficient judiciary? Judges, by virtue of their office, speak not only through their judgments but also through the normative reflections they occasionally offer in public fora. Selective outrage and amnesia don't serve any purpose.

With respectful regards — Balbir Punj



The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

How Assam's sisters are rewriting the State's economic script



UMESH RAJ

SAMRIDHI PRAKASHI

Post-covid Assam has been one of the fastest-growing states in India, with a nominal rate of growth of 13 per cent in 2024-25 and average per capita income growth of more than 10 per cent over the past 3 years. While the pursuit of sustained growth is often seen to be driven by industrial corridors and infrastructure, the most potent lever for growth in modern Assam is not made of steel or concrete, but of "heart Shakti".

Data from the most recent Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reveal a dramatic acceleration in women's economic engagement. By 2023-24, Assam's overall Female FLFR surged to 50.2 per cent, a figure that stands in stark contrast to the national average of 41.7 per cent. This momentum is most visible in rural areas where participation jumped from a modest 20 per cent in 2021-22 to a staggering 52.8 per cent by 2023-24. (Assam Economic Survey, 2025-26)

As the state aims to become a USD 143 billion economy by 2030, the transition of women from passive beneficiaries of welfare to active economic agents has seen to be moving from the periphery to the very heart of the state's economic strategy. With a female labour force participation rate (FLFR) that now significantly outstrips the national average, Assam is charting a unique course of empowerment that balances quantitative surges with the need for deep, qualitative structural shifts.

The rise in FLFR is not merely a product of business-as-usual trends but the outcome of deliberate and targeted policy interventions. The flagship Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan (MUUA), popularly known as the "Lakshmi Bai" mission, represents one of the most ambitious attempts to formalise rural entrepreneurship in India's history. Targeting 40 lakh women associated with Self-Help Groups (SHGs), the mission aims to ensure an annual income of at least Rs 1 lakh for every member.

As of early 2026, 8.8 lakh women have already achieved this "Lakshmi" status. Success stories from districts like Nalbari and Sivasagar showcase the potential of this model: women like Bijumoni Devi are earning ₹1.80 lakh annually through pickle-making, while others like Anita



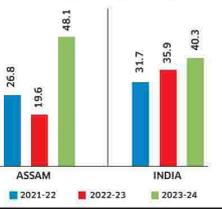
Thakurिया have reached incomes of ₹2.23 lakh through animal husbandry. The program follows a structured approach, starting with Rs 10,000 seed capital and progressing to ₹50,000 based on performance, shifting the narrative from one-time grants to sustained business growth. Also, empowerment in Assam is increasingly being defined by the removal of operational barriers to human capital. The "Nijut Moina" scheme 2.0 aims to provide monthly stipends to over 10 lakh girls students, bridging down the gap of the financial agent, which directly impacts educational continuity. (The Hindu, 2026)

No reason for complacency

Although recent data point to a rise in FLFR, this is not always an unambiguously positive development. In many cases, an increase in female labour force participation is interpreted as a sign of household distress, where stagnating or inadequate male wages compel women to enter the workforce to supplement family income. Moreover, a look beyond the headline numbers shows participation spike is almost entirely driven by a massive shift into self-employment. In rural Assam, the share of women engaged in self-sustained ventures skyrocketed from 18.5 per cent to 77.3 per cent over a seven-year period from 2017-18 to 2023-24. A distress sign also comes from the data that salaried positions in rural women fell from 58.8 per cent to just 15.2 per cent (IWWAGE, 2025). To ensure that this is not merely "distress entrepreneurship" driven by compulsion, the state must focus on scaling these micro-activities into viable, high-growth rural enterprises. Even if the current rise in FLFR is partly distress-led, policy should aim to create conditions that enable women to remain in the labour force, sustain gainful employment, and contribute meaningfully to the economy, while simultaneously strengthening their economic agency.

Way forward
There are clear pathways to make this happen.

FEMALE WORKER POPULATION RATIO



Women's Capability Index (WCI) indicates that 31 per cent of women in Assam still experience multidimensional deprivation in health, dignity, and autonomy.

A critical barrier is the prevalence of anaemia, which affects 65.9 per cent of women aged 15-49, making Assam one of the most impacted states in the country. This health crisis is a serious concern, as calculations suggest that anaemia among females in India is estimated to cost nearly 1.2 per cent of the country's GDP. (Government of Assam, Women's Conditions in Assam, 2025)

Furthermore, safety remains a primary concern for workforce entry. Approximately 12 per cent of women feel unsafe while using public transport, with the fear being significantly more acute in rural enclaves (14 per cent) compared to urban centres (7 per cent). (DES Assam, 2025) In such a scenario, true empowerment, therefore, requires a "Credit-Plus" approach, which pairs financial capital with improved health outcomes, safer transit corridors, and also dismantling of the gendered care burden that keeps millions of women at home.

While Assam's GDP has expanded by 45 per cent over the last five years, far outpacing the national average of 29 per cent, the state's vision of a USD 143 billion economy rests also on the continued mobilisation of the women empowerment schemes put forth.

By focusing and leveraging the state's traditional family value systems and also aggressively tackling modern infrastructural and health deficits, Assam is proving that gender-responsive policy is one of the most effective forms of economic stimulus. The transformation is already visible; the challenge now is to ensure it becomes universal.

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Middle East: A dangerous return to the 'just war' era



SIDHARTH MISHRA

The recent US and Israeli airstrikes in Iran, which resulted in the death of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have dramatically escalated tensions in the Middle East. Iran's retaliation through attacks on Israeli targets and several American military bases across the region has further intensified the crisis.

American President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have defended the military operations by accusing Iran of long-standing anti-American and anti-Israeli activities. They allege that Tehran has consistently supported militant groups and has been secretly developing nuclear weapons capabilities that could eventually be used against Israel and the United States.

On this basis, Washington has described the strikes as acts of anticipatory and pre-emptive self-defence. Trump has also accused the Iranian leadership of turning against its own people. He has argued that the Khamenei regime suppressed freedoms and violently crushed protests during successive uprisings in recent months, leading to the deaths of thousands of Iranians. For some observers, the strikes may be viewed as a form of justice against an authoritarian regime accused of destabilising the region.

However, such actions also set a troubling precedent. Unilateral military operations carried out without broad international approval risk legitimising vigilante justice in a world that still claims to operate under an international legal order shaped by the United Nations. In the aftermath of these strikes, the international community appears increasingly divided. Some countries have strongly condemned the attacks as violations of international law and national sovereignty, while others have supported them as justified responses to security threats.

The growing number of conflicts in recent years has also exposed the limitations of the multilateral legal order established under the United Nations. Despite its mandate to maintain international peace and security, the UN system has often appeared ineffective in preventing war or mediating disputes between powerful nations. This perceived helplessness has raised serious doubts about the relevance and effectiveness of existing international institutions and has prompted calls for reform in their structure and functioning.

Another emerging trend is the shift from multilateral diplomacy toward bilateral, trilateral and

regional arrangements. Countries increasingly rely on strategic alliances and friendly nations to resolve disputes rather than turning to universal institutions such as the United Nations.

From an ethics perspective, unilateral military operations targeting political leaders raise serious concerns. Such actions undermine the principle of state sovereignty and risk normalising extrajudicial killings and unilateral punishment by powerful states. While regimes such as those in Iran and Venezuela have faced accusations of human rights violations, bypassing international legal procedures undermines due process and global norms. Civilian casualties resulting from such strikes further intensify moral and humanitarian concerns. Critics also argue that these actions reveal a pattern of double standards in international affairs.

This has led to accusations of hypocrisy and of America positioning itself as a self-appointed arbiter in global affairs. The current situation also evokes memories of the pre-World War I era, when war was widely accepted as a legitimate method of resolving disputes between nations.

During that period, states frequently resorted to unilateral military action, reprisals and countermeasures without a clear legal prohibition on the use of force.

It was only after the devastation of the Second World War that the United Nations Charter established a clear legal framework restricting the use of force. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits nations from using force

against the territorial integrity or political independence of other states, except in cases of self-defence following an actual armed attack. The UN Security Council was entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining international peace and security.

However, the resurgence of unilateral military actions suggests that the world may be drifting away from these foundational principles. Conflicts in the Middle East, the Russia-Ukraine war and other regional tensions have already inflicted immense human suffering and destruction. If such conflicts continue unchecked, they could push the world toward a larger humanitarian catastrophe. The international community must therefore confront a critical question: whether it will passively accept such conflicts as inevitable or work collectively to strengthen global institutions, reform existing mechanisms and develop effective alternatives for peaceful conflict resolution. Only through such efforts can the world hope to avoid a return to the destructive era of unrestrained

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INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



إذا زَفَرَاتِ الْخَبِّ صَعَدْنَ فِي التَّحْدَى
رُودُنْ وَلَمْ يَفْتَحْ لَهُنَّ طَرِيقُ
(السُّنْمَةُ الْقُدَيْرِي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

When love's sighs rise up within the heart,
they are turned back, for no path opens for them.

Al-Simma Al-Qushayri
(Umayyad-era Arab poet)

Opinion

The risks of Iran's military escalation against Gulf states

HASSAN AL-MUSTAFA



Hassan Al-Mustafa is a Saudi writer and researcher specializing in Islamist movements, the evolution of religious discourse, and relations between the Gulf states and Iran.
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Let us imagine the following scenario: When US and Israeli forces struck Iranian territory on Saturday, the Iranian forces limited their response to targeting Israeli and US naval vessels at sea — nothing more. What would have happened then? In that case, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, along with Jordan and Iraq, would have remained outside the circle of military targeting. These countries would have responded as they did during the 12-day war between Tehran and Tel Aviv in June 2025, when they unequivocally and without exception condemned the "Israeli aggression" against Iranian territory, describing it as a violation of sovereignty and international law.

Such a hypothetical scenario would have worked in Iran's favor, strengthening its political, humanitarian, security and negotiating position, and presenting Tehran

to Arab and international public opinion as a wronged state subjected to military attack by external powers and targeted by a far-right government in Israel.

Iran, however, squandered this reservoir of political strength and sweeping sympathy. From the very first day, its missiles and drones were directed toward all GCC states without exception, including Oman, which had been mediating negotiations.

Ali Larjani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, wrote on X, addressing the Gulf states: "We do not believe in, nor do we intend, to attack you." He added: "However, when the bases located in your countries are used against us, and when the United States relies on these forces to carry out operations in the region, then we will target those bases." He further stated: "These bases are not part of the land of those countries; rather, they are American soil."

In these remarks, Larjani misses the mark. Countries in the region, foremost among them Saudi Arabia, have explicitly declared that they will not allow their territories, airspace or territorial waters to be used as launch points for strikes against Iran. Secondly, the Iranian attacks have not been confined to what Tehran considers US bases at Al Udeid, Al Dhafra and Juffair, but have instead extended to civilian, economic, diplomatic and tourist targets.

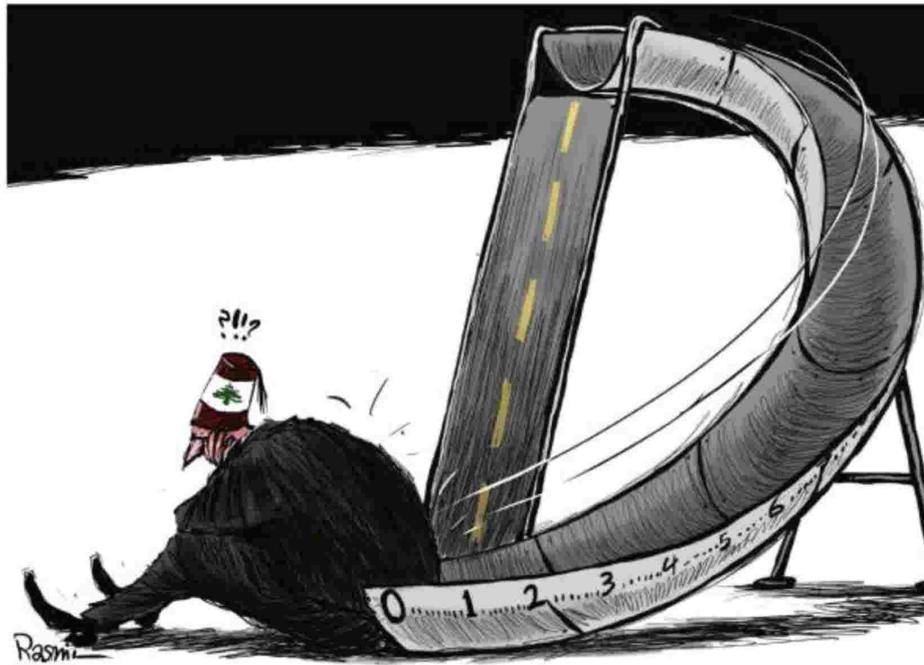
The escalation against Saudi Arabia represents dangerous conduct that could push the region into a spiral of violence, which Riyadh neither seeks nor desires and is striving by all means to avoid.

For this reason, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a strongly worded statement in which it reiterated its "full right to take all necessary measures to protect its security, territorial integrity, citizens, residents and vital interests, including the option of responding to the aggression."

To date, Saudi Arabia has not exercised the option of "responding to the aggression," as it seeks to halt the war between Israel and the US on one side and the Iranians on the other. It is working to spare the Gulf region the catastrophic repercussions of continued confrontation or its expansion, as diplomacy remains the only viable and safe exit for all parties.

Riyadh possesses considerable patience, grounded in strength, rationality, forward-looking calculation and restraint from emotional or impulsive reactions. However, if Iran continues targeting the Kingdom and other Gulf states, if civilian casualties occur and if energy supplies, security and the economy are affected, then other options may emerge. These are options Iran should not compel its neighbors to adopt. They will seek to preserve the fragile security that, if it were to collapse, would leave Iran itself as the greatest loser, deepening its isolation, draining its capabilities and stalling its development.

From the very first day, its missiles and drones were directed toward all GCC states without exception



As US officials struggled to build a credible case for the attacks on Iran, the Israelis were far more candid

A war of choice that is spinning out of control

OSAMA AL-SHARIF



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More than 72 hours after the US and Israel launched what they described as a preemptive strike against Iran, the world is waking up to a grim reality: the Middle East has entered a regional war that is rapidly spinning out of control. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have declared regime change as the campaign's central objective — and achieving it has become the sole measure of victory.

Yet, for all the clarity of that stated goal, the justifications for launching what is fast becoming a globally disruptive regional war remain strikingly thin.

As US officials struggled to build a credible case for what has been widely dubbed a war of choice, the Israelis were far more candid. Netanyahu acknowledged that he had been working toward this war for decades.

That neither the US nor Israel had any

legal basis for attacking Iran speaks volumes about how Trump's unilateral approach to foreign policy operates. On Monday, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth declared that the US would not fight a "politically correct" war and would not be bound by international law or rules of engagement.

The opening strikes decapitated Iran's political and military leadership, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Yet the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps survived and responded with a barrage of missiles targeting Israel, US bases in the region and sites across several Gulf states. By striking civilian, economic and commercial targets in neighboring Gulf countries, Iran forfeited whatever sympathy it might have commanded as the aggrieved party.

In a single move, Tehran transformed itself from victim to aggressor — a strategic blunder whose consequences will reverberate for years.

A prolonged conflict that destabilizes Gulf

economies will not remain a Middle Eastern problem for long; its reverberations will be felt on Wall Street and across the investment landscape that underpins American economic confidence.

By declaring the destruction of the Islamic Republic as their objective, the US and Israel have guaranteed that Tehran is now fighting its own existential war. Iran's targeting of Gulf states appears to be a deliberate strategy to cripple the global economy, raise the stakes of the conflict and prolong it long enough to generate a regional and international backlash against Washington and Tel Aviv. The IRGC's calculus is simple: the only path to victory is to survive the onslaught while driving up the cost of the war for everyone else.

The political fallout is already being felt. Trump tying his presidency so tightly to Netanyahu's ambitions risks becoming a defining liability for Republican candidates in the November midterm elections.

It would serve Trump well to disentangle himself from Netanyahu, whose ambitions extend well beyond dismantling the Iranian regime. Israel, moreover, is already moving to consolidate its control over much of southern Lebanon in its drive to eliminate Hezbollah — yet another geopolitical crisis the region can ill afford.

There is little sympathy for the Iranian regime. But this bilateral attack has opened a Pandora's box and the spillover is already being felt far beyond the region. This is, at its core, a war that no one truly wanted or supported — save Israel, the pro-Israel lobby and a residual faction of hard-liners in Washington.

Trump still has room to pursue a settlement with a weakened Iran, one that could underpin Gulf and regional stability — even over Netanyahu's objections. He must pause and reckon seriously with what his war of choice is unleashing — for America, for the region and for the world.

Opinion

Jordan's foreign policy highlights its resilience

HANI HAZAIMEH



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For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

Few countries embody the perils and complexities of Middle Eastern geopolitics as vividly as Jordan. Situated at the crossroads of competing powers, rival ideologies and shifting spheres of influence, Jordan does not observe the regional storm from a safe distance — it lives at its very heart.

Geography has made it a buffer, a conduit and, on too many occasions, a front line for crises not of its own making. In such an environment, strategy cannot be driven by abstraction or slogans, it must be driven by sober calculation and an unflinching commitment to national survival.

Recent events have brought this into sharp relief. Iran has launched a series of missile and drone strikes that targeted sovereign territories across the region, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Jordan itself — a stark violation of national borders and international law.

Jordan's condemnation of these strikes is not merely rhetorical. When Iranian projectiles cross into international airspace or strike near civilian areas in neighboring states, the notion of sovereignty becomes far more than an abstract principle; it becomes a matter of life and death. The targets were not just military outposts but also civilian infrastructure

and population centers — precisely the sort of reckless conduct that undermines the fabric of regional order and fuels broader instability.

In this context, Jordan's foreign policy — often described by critics as cautious or "balancing" — reveals itself not as ambiguous but based on realism. Balancing is not an ethical failing; it is a survival strategy. Jordan knows its borders are finite, its resources limited and its population under pressure from decades of conflict and displacement around it. Its

priority is not to curry favor with any single power but to ensure that its territory, its people and its political autonomy remain intact in the face of forces far larger than itself. Sovereignty does not mean isolation, it means the disciplined management of external relations consistent with national interests.

It is worth challenging simplistic narratives that mistake strategic engagement for subservience or that assert any foreign military presence inherently undermines sovereignty. In today's interconnected world, defense partnerships and alliance structures are tools of deterrence and stability, not necessarily a loss of autonomy. The crucial question is not the presence of external forces but the terms of engagement, the limits of use and, above all, the control retained by the host nation.

Sovereignty in the modern age is not the absence of relations but the capacity to manage them on one's own terms.

Jordan's approach reflects this nuanced understanding. Its security cooperation with Western partners — including forces present to bolster deterrence or assist in border management — is not an ideological alignment but a pragmatic choice in a region rife with nonstate actors, spillover conflicts and transnational threats. This calibrated engagement helps buffer pressures from collapsing states and violent extremism without ceding decision-making authority that would compromise national dignity or strategic autonomy.

But Iran's recent actions demonstrate a troubling disregard for precisely these dynamics. By targeting countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations — including those that have engaged Tehran as interlocutors — it risks alienating potential friends before it even confronts adversaries.

Consider the broader implications: Jordan and its neighbors have worked for years to maintain a fragile regional equilibrium. This includes economic cooperation, shared security frameworks and diplomatic efforts to mediate disputes between larger powers. When missiles fly indiscriminately, these painstaking strands of cooperation unravel.

Those who do not understand geography will never truly grasp politics. Jordan's stance has never been shaped by sweeping ideological commitments. Instead, it has been shaped by the terrain it occupies and the threats that emerge from it. When Iranian missiles cross borders, they do not merely challenge sovereignty; they challenge the fundamental premise upon which Middle Eastern stability depends — that borders are sacred and interstate conduct is bound by international norms.

Jordan's policy, therefore, must and will remain rooted in realism. It is neither isolationist nor blindly aligned. It is, above all, protective of the national interest. Its sovereignty is not threatened by engagement, it is protected by astute diplomacy and a clear-eyed understanding of the forces that surround it.

In this moment of heightened volatility, the world should recognize Jordan not as a timid actor but as a state that understands the true nature of power in a fractured region. Its measured responses, its emphasis on defense — both diplomatic and operational — and its refusal to be dragged into reckless conflict reflect not weakness but resilience. In a neighborhood where some actors still confuse provocation with strategy, Jordan's tight-rope walk is not a sign of indecision but of disciplined statesmanship.

In today's interconnected world, defense partnerships and alliance structures are tools of deterrence and stability

Jordan's stance has been shaped by the terrain it occupies and the threats that emerge from it

This Ramadan, we must fight for health

DR. HANAN BALKHY



Dr. Hanan Balkhy is the World Health Organization's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Ramadan was always my favorite time of year growing up in Jeddah. I cherished the iftar meals prepared with care, the visits to Makkah to see my grandparents and pray at the holy mosques, and the eager anticipation of children awaiting the arrival of Eid. The holy month carried a sense of joy and closeness — families united, laughter echoing late into the night.

This year, I find myself thinking of families across our region — in Gaza, Iran, Lebanon, Sudan, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Yemen, the list growing by the day — and how they are experiencing Ramadan.

No festive gatherings. No easy laughter. Instead: anxious parents glued to news broadcasts. Cars packed with families fleeing renewed hostilities. Sleepless nights in basements, shelters or school buildings, waiting in fear for what may come next.

This year, the holy month unfolds under fire. The Eastern Mediterranean region has

become the global epicenter of emergencies. Today, one in seven people across our region requires humanitarian assistance, accounting for half of global humanitarian needs. Fifteen World Health Organization-graded health emergencies are under way, eight at the highest level.

Conflict, displacement and disease now feed one another in a relentless cycle. Our region hosts 40 percent of the world's internally displaced persons — placing immense pressure on fragile systems and increasing cross-border health risks. At the same time, 40 disease outbreaks across 13 countries — from cholera and measles to dengue and mpox — are spreading through communities already weakened by instability.

Attacks on healthcare are mounting. In 2025 alone, the Eastern Mediterranean region accounted for 40 percent of global attacks on health facilities and 90 percent of global deaths linked to such incidents.

For millions, fasting is no longer a spiritual discipline but an imposed reality.

Nearly 80 million people across the region are food insecure, while famine conditions have been confirmed in parts of Gaza and Sudan.

With conflict comes the indignity of lost access to essential services: safe childbirth, routine vaccination, dialysis, insulin, mental health care. As violence escalates and displacement grows, these needs do not diminish — they multiply.

The WHO's emergency health teams are building up supplies and scaling up support for communities affected by renewed hostilities, while continuing to serve those in the line of fire or recovering from recent crises. But funding for our emergency operations is at an all-time low.

Last year, only 55 percent of the needs outlined in the WHO's emergency appeals for the Eastern Mediterranean were met. This year, the shortfall stands at 70 percent. Without an urgent injection of support, suffering will deepen — and more essential health services will close.

At a time when so many are taking up

arms, we — as public health advocates — must take up the fight for health. We must defend disease surveillance, keep clinics functioning and ensure uninterrupted treatment. We must protect the most vulnerable.

This conviction is deeply rooted in our faith. The Holy Qur'an (Surah Al-Ma'idah, 5:32) teaches: "Whoever saves one life, it is as if he has saved all of mankind."

Public health is the daily expression of that principle. Every clinic kept open, every vaccine delivered, every patient treated affirms the equal value of every human life.

This Ramadan, that is the work before us: ensuring sustained support for health services, protecting health workers and facilities, securing safe access for those delivering care, and investing in systems resilient enough to withstand crises.

In a season devoted to compassion and shared responsibility, there can be no clearer expression of solidarity than protecting life itself.

Without an urgent injection of support, suffering will deepen — and more essential health services will close

Every clinic kept open, every vaccine delivered, every patient treated affirms the equal value of every human life



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COMMENT

Editorials

Whole-process people's democracy key to finalizing new five-year plan

That nearly 3,000 deputies to the 14th National People's Congress will be taking part in the annual gathering of the country's top legislature, which begins on Thursday, once again demonstrates the vitality of China's whole-process democracy. High on their agenda will be the finalizing of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30). China's five-year plans stand out for the structured breadth of input that precedes their adoption. Between May 20 and June 20 last year, authorities conducted an online consultation on the plan that generated more than 3.11 million public submissions. The drafting process was further informed by 60 field research missions involving 1,020 national lawmakers, producing 50 sector-specific reports. Meanwhile, the NPC Standing Committee reviewed 22 oversight reports over the past year, adding another layer of scrutiny.

From a governance perspective, a notable feature of this input is its institutionalized participation across multiple channels. Direct elections at the county and township levels involve more than 1 billion voters and produce over 2.6 million grassroots deputies. Sixty neighborhood legislative contact points funnel local feedback directly into national lawmaking. Structured political consultation through the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee — the country's top political advisory body — meanwhile organized 98 consultative activities in 2025 alone, including 13 biweekly forums and 18 expert consultations on topics related to the plan.

Taken together, this forms a full-chain model — linking agenda setting, drafting, deliberation, implementation and oversight. The institutional logic is straightforward: in a vast and diverse country, reducing information asymmetry and aligning policy with long-term development objectives requires formalized channels for pooling collective wisdom and expertise.

Ultimately, governance models are judged by outcomes. When China launched its first five-year plan in 1953, its GDP was estimated at roughly \$30 billion. Last year it stood at about \$20 trillion. Over more than seven decades, the five-year planning mechanism has functioned as a rolling road map for industrialization, urbanization and technological upgrading through pragmatic reforms and down-to-earth actions. For many observers, it offers a key to understanding the logic of China's economic transformation.

China's progress has been achieved amid pro-

found domestic adjustments and a turbulent global environment spanning decades. Likewise, the 15th Five-Year Plan will unfold against fresh headwinds. But as the spokesperson of the 14th NPC Standing Committee pointed out at a news conference on Wednesday, it has been through overcoming one difficulty after another that China has developed to be what it is today.

Indeed, whether the forthcoming plan's prescriptions will succeed in practice will depend on implementation. But China's track record suggests that predictability itself can become a macroeconomic asset. Investors value clarity about regulatory trajectories, industrial priorities and macroeconomic guardrails. China's five-year plans delineate sectoral priorities, from advanced manufacturing and digital infrastructure to agricultural modernization and expanded social services. By articulating medium-term goals and rolling out to-do lists, they help anchor expectations.

The contrast with policy volatility elsewhere is striking. In some major economies, fiscal standoffs, sudden tariff shifts or regulatory U-turns can unsettle markets overnight. In a world marked by geopolitical uncertainty, speculative policymaking and self-serving partisan struggles in some countries, China's model that emphasizes continuity and iterative adjustment produces a much-desired stability dividend.

That China is now a major trading partner for about 150 countries and regions reflects the coordination of domestic development with international engagement — an approach that integrates internal modernization with participation in global supply chains — a key requirement for the 15th Five-Year Plan.

The NPC session, therefore, is a focal point in a broader governance ecosystem that blends grassroots electoral representation, cross-sector consultation, centralized strategic planning and coordinated local implementation. It is conducive to balancing short-term objectives with long-term goals, managing structural adjustments and narrowing regional disparities, while sustaining productivity gains.

When a single social media post can rattle the economy in some countries, the world's second-largest economy's consistent emphasis on scientific policymaking contributes stability and certainty to the world.

By drawing on the wisdom of the whole nation, China's development path signals that modernization is a collective and inclusive national endeavor requiring broad-based effort with the people as the beneficiaries.

Nuclear and humanitarian concerns alarming

Safeguarding nuclear security and addressing global humanitarian crises have long been rhetorical talking points championed by Washington and Tel Aviv on the international stage. Yet these appeals have largely amounted to empty political posturing, designed chiefly to shift blame onto other parties.

Laying bare this hypocrisy are the catastrophic consequences of the joint US-Israeli attacks on Iran that were launched on the weekend. The two issues they have pressured the world to address have been severely exacerbated by their actions. Iran's nuclear facilities have been targeted, and civilian sites — including a girls' elementary school in Iran's southern province of Hormozgan — have been bombed. These developments demand the close vigilance of the entire international community, for they may well be only a prelude to further tragedies across the region.

This dangerous trajectory underscores the pertinence of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's latest appeal for an immediate ceasefire, delivered during his telephone conversation with his Israeli counterpart on Tuesday. In his phone conversation with Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, Wang reiterated China's opposition to the US-Israeli military strikes against Iran, saying force cannot truly solve problems and, instead, it will only bring new problems and severe aftereffects.

His call for an immediate halt to military operations to prevent the conflict from further spreading and spiraling out of control should be heeded by all parties involved, especially given that the world now stands on the brink of a nuclear crisis and faces a growing humanitarian tragedy.

It is imperative that all parties involved cease hostilities immediately and return to the negotiating table because the stakes are too high and the consequences too dire. On Tuesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that the widening conflict in the region raises the risk that nuclear proliferation issues could spin out of control.

As International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Rafael Grossi has emphasized, the attack on the Natanz nuclear facility in Isfahan Province on the weekend has severely compromised nuclear safety and security. Further attacks would likely be disastrous.

And if the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in Bushehr Province is attacked by the US and Israel, it could result in a core meltdown, similar to the Chernobyl disaster, causing nuclear pollution across the Persian Gulf.

The humanitarian impact of the conflict has rapidly expanded beyond Iran's borders, affecting neighboring countries, with civilian casualties reported across the region. In Lebanon, around 30,000 people have been displaced as Israeli air strikes target Hezbollah strongholds, exacerbating an already dire refugee crisis. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has highlighted the severe disruption to humanitarian operations, as restricted airspace and insecurity hinder the delivery of essential aid.

In addition, the conflict has devastated cultural heritage, with the Golestan Palace in Tehran damaged during an air strike on Monday, highlighting the threat to UNESCO World Heritage sites and the urgent need for adherence to international laws to protect these irreplaceable treasures.

China, alongside some other countries, has called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to diplomatic negotiations, which are in line with all parties' interests.

The alternative — a prolonged conflict with escalating humanitarian and nuclear risks — is untenable. The world cannot afford to descend into a cycle of retaliation and destruction.

Thus, the urgent need for peace in the Middle East cannot be overstated. The humanitarian crisis and nuclear safety risks demand immediate action from all parties involved. The international community must rally behind efforts to de-escalate tensions and promote dialogue.

Cal Meng



Opinion Line

Artificial intelligence helps seniors adapt to digital age

China's breakneck digitalization has had a sad subplot: the generational divide. Elderly patients waited in line at hospital windows while younger patients booked online appointments from home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many found themselves unable to access public places, as health codes and QR code scans — both of which required smartphone registration — became mandatory at every entrance.

Government initiatives to maintain cash payments and manual counters offered some relief in the rapidly established cashless society, but the "digital divide" still seemed an inevitable price of progress.

However, something remarkable is happening. China's AI development is helping those previously sidelined in the internet age to finally catch up.

During the Spring Festival holiday last month, millions of urban professionals returned to their hometowns expecting to serve as tech support for baffled parents. Instead, they found mothers and fathers not only using AI chatbots like Doubao, but teaching their children new tricks. My former professor in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, now uses AI to polish his bilingual social media posts, research historical sites during travels, and decode medication instructions. "It never argues with you," he told me with a laugh — a small comfort, he added, with his only daughter work-

ing far away in Beijing. The pivot is no accident. AI assistants possess features that the less tech-savvy find more accessible. Voice input eliminates the need to type on tiny keyboards. Read-aloud functions bypass poor eyesight or literacy challenges. Conversational interfaces feel less like operating a machine and more like asking a patient friend for help. For seniors who found smartphones bewildering, talking to an AI assistant feels natural.

This marks a fundamental shift from the mobile internet era, which often excluded the elderly. The learning curve was steep; the shame of asking younger people — already impatient from busy work schedules — for help was steeper. AI's "infinite patience", as one Beijing-based AI trainer described it, removes that emotional friction.

China's policymakers recognized the problem early. A 2023 law on building a barrier-free environment, the first of its kind in China, explicitly mandates accessible information access for the elderly, requiring government websites and public service platforms to accommodate their needs.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology has pushed thousands of apps to launch "senior modes" with simplified interfaces and larger text. By 2025, over 3,000

websites and apps had completed the revamp.

But AI is achieving what regulation and redesigned apps could not: it is making technology genuinely intuitive. Adoption among seniors is accelerating through family help networks, not government mandates — word-of-mouth in WeChat groups is proving more powerful than any public service announcement.

Yet risks remain. A 2025 study by Shanghai Jiao Tong University found persistent "literacy gaps" between generations, with nearly one-third of users — young and old alike — almost completely unaware that AI can fabricate information with complete confidence. My former professor learned this the hard way when Doubao misspelled a famous local merchant's name in his post, drawing embarrassing corrections from followers. Access, the lesson suggests, must be paired with digital literacy.

Yet, a technology often feared for its potential to displace jobs is proving unexpectedly adept at inclusion. China's elderly, once left on the platform watching the digital train depart, are finally finding a seat. The destination is a society where "digital divide" becomes a historical term, and where 310 million senior Chinese citizens can navigate the future with confidence — and a little help from their AI friends.

— LI LEI, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Bid to better link scientific research and industry

Editor's note: Substantial improvements in scientific and technological self-reliance are one of the major goals that China has set for itself. *National Business Daily* spoke to Zhang Xiaoping, former deputy head of the National Development and Reform Commission, on how this can be achieved. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

It is essential for China to accelerate the commercialization and application of its research achievements and shift the focus from pursuing sheer quantity to emphasizing high-value invention patents and quality-driven innovation.

Compared with some developed economies, China still faces constraints in transforming research breakthroughs into market-ready technologies. Closer collaboration between research facilities and industry is essential to ensure that scientific advances continuously enhance productivity and sustain long-term competitiveness.

The integrated development of education, science and technology, and talent cultivation is also critical. Traditionally, academic promotion has relied heavily on metrics such as the number of published papers, research projects undertaken and teaching hours completed. However, the extent to which research output is transformed and applied in real economic activities should be incorporated into the evaluation systems and given more weight. Some reforms have already piloted such reforms in research institutions, and broader adoption would help create more incentives for innovation-driven development.

At the same time, the priority should be to accelerate the development of renewable energy while promoting

green and low-carbon transformation in energy-intensive sectors such as steel, metallurgy, chemicals and building materials. Expanding the use of wind and solar power will be key to gradually reducing the carbon intensity across industries.

Greater efforts should also be directed toward cultivating emerging and future-oriented industries. Compared with traditional sectors, these industries generally have lower energy consumption, higher technological intensity and stronger value-added potential. They are the new drivers of high-quality growth. As the world's top manufacturer, China accounts for nearly 30 percent of global manufacturing measured by value added and has ranked first worldwide in manufacturing scale for 16 consecutive years. Upgrading manufacturing and accelerating its green and low-carbon transformation will therefore be central to achieving the country's overall green transition goals.

But China's green transition faces structural constraints. Coal still serves as the backbone for more than 50 percent of China's primary energy consumption. Although its share in power generation has been declining, coal remains the cornerstone of electricity supply. The country's industrial structure also relies heavily on heavy industry, with the output of steel, cement and electrolytic aluminum

each exceeding half of global production. Moreover, rising global economic uncertainty and the emergence of green trade barriers, including higher tariffs imposed by some countries on Chinese electric vehicles, have added external pressures on China's transition toward comprehensive green development.

The rising energy demand from the use of artificial intelligence, transportation, construction and household consumption must also be addressed. As living standards improve and the penetration of home appliances and vehicles continues to rise, promoting green transformation in everyday consumption patterns becomes increasingly important.

To improve the absorption and utilization of green electricity, new approaches are being promoted, including coordinated development of generation, grid, load and storage systems, as well as the construction of zero-carbon and low-carbon industrial parks and factories.

Alongside expanding generation capacity, equal emphasis is being placed on strengthening transmission and storage capabilities. The development of smart grids and virtual power plants is part of this comprehensive strategy. Through such combined efforts, China aims to build a more stable and resilient modern energy system.

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OPINION

The Democrats' Instant 'No'



UNRULY REPUBLIC
By Barton Swaim

On Saturday, Donald Trump became a war-time president. The conflict in Iran will likely dominate his attention from now until he leaves office in 2029. Some of his extracurricular fixations—personal vendettas, online fofoery—could get less attention. Whatever the war's outcome, by authorizing a direct attack on a dangerous regime, Mr. Trump has given his remaining time in office to a president's highest duty—protecting America's homeland, military bases and allies from menace.

Liberal commentators and Democrats on the Hill responded to this momentous turn of events in precisely the way they would have responded if Mr. Trump had done the opposite: with imputations of incompetence and foul motives. If the president hadn't called a massive fighting force to the Persian Gulf and launched an attack, his despisers would have accused him of wasting resources on-ly in the blank—ignoring the real threat in Tehran.

Democrats, with a few brave exceptions, accuse the administration of proffering a variety of "rationales" for the war, with the implication that it acted in pursuit of some hidden goal. They ignore the possibility that an administration might have more than a single reason for assaulting an enemy.

The Iranian regime's enduring malignity, together with its people's demonstrated willingness to be free of it, makes the administration's explanatory duties easier. Anyway, as our experience in Iraq reminds us, it's possible to overexplain and overplan. What's more interesting is the Democrats' instantaneous and intense hostility to the operation.

Their stated reasons are basically three. First, it's "illegal" and "unconstitutional." Second, the threat from Iran wasn't "imminent." Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine, writing for the *Journal* on Sunday, combined these two: "As a member of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees, . . . I can state plainly that there was no imminent threat from Iran to America sufficient to warrant committing our sons and daughters to another war in the Middle East—especially without the congressional debate and vote that the Constitution requires."

Hoey. If the Constitution requires congressional approval, there's no "especially" about it. The senator has seen the long list of war-making decisions taken by presidents on both parties in the absence of congressional votes. As for his denial that the threat was "imminent," I wonder what the word could mean: Iran has attempted to assassinate assorted American dignitaries, including the president. It funds terror groups across the Middle East and slaughtered 30,000 demonstrators a few weeks ago. Its rulers express Nazi-like ambitions of anni-

lating its enemies, even as they don't bother to hide a mad hunger for long-range missiles and nuclear technology. For Mr. Kaine, I guess, imminence would mean the ayatollah's finger poised above a red button labeled LAUNCH.

The third stated reason for opposition, this one invented on the fly, has to do with Secretary of State Marco Rubio's supposed admission that Israel dragged the U.S. into war.

A savvy party would have waited before lashing out against the attack on Iran.

In context, Mr. Rubio was explaining why the launch happened on Saturday, Feb. 28, instead of some other day, not why it happened at all. But parts of the Democratic base will thrill to the claim that Israel made us do it.

Those are the stated reasons for Democratic hostility. The unstated reasons?

The Democrats' reaction to the attack on Iran arises partly from the pusillanimity urge to avoid all friction with the progressive left. That's the same urge that led the Biden administration to modify its Mideast policy in deference to the Muslim vote in Michigan, which Kamala Harris lost anyway.

Then there is the experience of Iraq. In 2002, 81 House Democrats and 29 Senate Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, voted to autho-

rize force in Iraq; six years later, Barack Obama defeated Mrs. Clinton and won the presidency on the strength of having opposed the war. Democrats have internalized that lesson.

The differences with the Iraq war are several. The obvious one is the absence of a ground invasion in Iran, but others deserve a mention. Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons in the past, and his need to represent himself as a Middle East bad boy prevented him from proving he didn't have the weapons anymore. In 2026, the Khameini regime hasn't managed to get a deliverable nuclear device, but for years it has advertised its aim to get and use one.

Which takes us back to Mr. Obama. He premised his foreign-policy outlook on the proposition that the George W. Bush administration had everything exactly wrong. This led him to hold Gulf allies and Israel at arm's length and to embrace Iran. In one of history's great displays of educated gullibility, legions of foreign-policy experts accepted the belief that Iran's rulers would learn the benefits of civilian-use nuclear power and join the community of nations. That delusion more than any other prevented U.S. policymakers for more than a decade from acknowledging Iran's constant, active malevolence.

A savvy opposition than today's Democrats would have practiced some circumspection in the early days of Epic Fury. Now they'll benefit only if America fails.

qualifying their level of support or opposition, people tend to have more definitive opinions on longstanding issues that are top of mind than they do on Iran.

This suggests the White House must spend more time explaining its actions in Iran and why they're important to American interests. That could cause some who hold wish-washy opinions to move into the president's corner.

This can't be just left to the eight-minute Truth Social video the president posted early Saturday morning or to a few brief calls by him to journalists.

Congressional Republicans did a credible job of supporting the president's action on the Sunday morning talk shows. But the defense of the administration's actions in Iran needs more comprehensive, persistent, credible explanations of the objectives from the president and his top people. These must be offered in all possible venues and channels if he's to sway public opinion. That's important. For what Abraham Lincoln said is still true: "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed."

Mr. Rove was senior adviser and deputy chief of staff for President George W. Bush and is author of *"The Triumph of William McKinley"* (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

BOOKSHELF | By Melik Kaylan

The Shadow In Twilight

The Indian Caliphate

By Imran Mulla
Hurst, 280 pages, \$34.99

In the early 1920s the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the dynasty's rule was abolished by the new Turkish Republic led by Mustafa Kemal. Soon Kemal's followers, known as Kemalists, put an end to the institution of the caliph, thus depriving, to this day, the Sunni Muslim world of its equivalent of a pope—a pope with political and military powers.

Good riddance, some might say. A more secular Islamic world is a preferable one. Or one could argue the opposite: The presence of a unifying caliph might have, as it had for centuries, moderated the expansion of marginal extremist movements such as Wahhabism or, in our time, Islamic State.

The caliphate didn't disappear immediately, however. Before its complete demise, it was almost brought to the Indian princely state of Hyderabad, where it could have taken root. Instead, Hyderabad itself was abolished, in 1948, by the postcolonial Republic of India—and with it all dreams of perpetuating the 1,300-year-old caliph tradition.

The captivating and ornate story of the caliphate's final gasps is recounted by Imran Mulla, a British journalist and commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, in his debut book, *"The Indian Caliphate."*

Mr. Mulla begins by efficiently threading out a highly complicated history. And so we learn about the various mainstream caliphates over the centuries, the Umayyads and the Abbasids, and ultimately the Ottoman sultan-caliphs based in Istanbul who took on the role of "God's shadow on earth." We are introduced to Crown Prince Abdulmejid II (1868-1944), the son of Sultan Abdulaziz and one of his consorts. The Kemalists initially bestowed upon Abdulmejid the largely symbolic title of caliph after they deposed his cousin of ruling power in 1922. Abdulmejid thus became, uniquely, the caliph of the Turkish Republic and the only caliph not to be sultan—until he, too, was deposed and exiled in 1924.

Abdulmejid is a poignantly tragic figure. The first decades of his life were spent under palace arrest in Istanbul, meant to keep him from vying for power—as Ottoman princes did, bloodily, in centuries past. Abdulmejid loved European culture, quoted French and German poetry, and played the cello, violin and piano. He made accomplished "Orientalist"—often erotic—paintings, "imitating art that reflected the wildest ideas European painters had about Islamic courts," Mr. Mulla writes. "Ottoman elites internalized and even embraced European ideas about their own Empire. These elites aspired to become Westernized, which they saw as civilized and modern." Well, yes, especially if you wanted to paint humans, which Islamic law forbade.

As caliph, Abdulmejid was ordered to keep a low profile. Instead he took to wearing colorful robes while making grand processions to Friday prayers and giving interviews to the foreign press. This irked the country's new rulers. After 15 months, he found himself exiled to Switzerland (and then to France) with his family and entourage. Meanwhile, the All-India Muslim League had launched the Khilafat movement, at first to fund and preserve the caliphate, and then to resurrect it in exile.

The caliphate was abolished soon after the birth of modern Turkey. Some tried to keep it alive in the Indian princely state of Hyderabad.

As Mr. Mulla tells us, in the 1920s India was "in many ways the epicenter of the Muslim world," still under British rule, home to a large portion of Islam's population before partition. Indian Muslim leaders approached Abdulmejid to arrange a marriage between his daughter, Princess Fatma, and the elder son of Osman Ali Khan, the seventh nizam (ruler) of Hyderabad. The union would potentially create a new caliph lineage relocated in India. Meanwhile, Abdulmejid and his family lived a glitzy Riviera life, attending dances, we are told, with "four or five kings and any number of princes, dukes and counts." Khan's younger son fell for Durrushehvar's fetching cousin, and so the two couples wed in Nice in 1931 in an elaborate wedding before taking ship for Hyderabad. The nizam's court, with its sumptuous palaces, its concubines, its rituals and recitations of poetry and music, was the chief inheritor of the archaic grandeur of the moguls.

Mr. Mulla subtly guides us to a sympathetic view of these rarified figures, in their swank and privileged world, caught out of time and defeated by vast historical forces. In the background, the Indian independence movement gathered pace, as did the rift between the country's Hindu and Muslim populations. The nizam juggled between his obligations to the colonial raj and to India's rising independence leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The British, while struggling desperately to keep India from dividing along sectarian lines before and during World War II, were set against the revival of the caliphate. In December 1931, they colluded with the Turks to prevent Abdulmejid from attending a global summit of Muslim leaders in Jerusalem, where his foreign supporters had planned to acclaim him caliph. To this day, the Turks know or care little about Abdulmejid and Khilafatism, nor is it taught in schools.

Mr. Mulla's chronicle of the years-long drama adds up to an exceptional feat of investigative research. He sifts through long-forgotten memoirs, archives and personal papers. He tracks down aging civil servants and former royals, often inviting us along on the quest. At one point, he identifies a lost deed, by which Abdulmejid transferred the caliphate to the nizam's family.

Perhaps the book's greatest feat is its depiction of the historical moment when the modern overpowered the ancient—a world, now lost, of floridly costumed courtiers, fabled princes, exotic vices and perfumed palaces.

No doubt it was time. But it's not at all clear that the present is any improvement.

Mr. Kaylan writes about culture and the arts for the *Journal*.

Trump's Iran Challenge Is at Home

By Karl Rove

President Trump's decision to unleash Operation Epic Fury against the Iranian regime was a historic act. The U.S. and Israel decapitated the Iranian government in a hall of precision-guided weapons, before obliterating what little remained of the country's air defenses after last year's attack on its nuclear facilities.

Now the U.S. and Israel are decimating Iran's military facilities. They're destroying its capacity to build missiles and, reportedly, drones. They're savaging the Revolutionary Guard's bases and depots. They're providing the beleaguered citizens of that once-prosperous country hope that better days might be ahead.

The effort has showcased military and intelligence brilliance and gutsy leadership. It began with the American president and the Israeli prime minister. It has continued with leaders of half a dozen Middle Eastern and eastern Mediterranean countries.

Despite all this, the White House must deal with two stark realities: No one knows how this will end, and the war against the mullahs in Tehran isn't popular at home.

Only time will tell if leaders in the White House, State Department, National Security Council, Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Department have devised

ways to bring about a new Iranian leadership that renounces terrorism against the West. The military campaign's brilliance so far does suggest that the good guys have a plan to prevail.

But the lack of domestic support needs attention. Seven national polls conducted within last Saturday and Tuesday asked Americans

The operation is brilliant, but the explanation leaves much to be desired.

if they approved of the military action. The RealClearPolitics average of these surveys found that 41.3% of those polled approved while 48.7% opposed going after Iran.

No rally-round-the-flag effect there. Support for the president and his policy didn't get a patriotic boost when the shooting started. Not even as U.S. planes, warships and fighters successfully pounded the leaders of a country that has chanted "Death to America" for some 47 years and backed that threat by spending the country's oil riches to support terrorism across the globe.

There are, however, two factors in recent polls that should give Team Trump some solace and, more importantly, encouragement that they

must act now to address this issue.

First, the results are often affected by how the inquiry is posed. A Feb. 27 CBS poll asked if Americans would favor "U.S. military action against Iran to stop them from making nuclear weapons." The answer was 51% yes, 49% no.

That's 10 points better than the results of asking, "What is your view of the U.S. decision to take military action in Iran?" as CNN did in its March 1 poll. The response to that broke 41% approve, 59% disapprove.

If the administration and others remind Americans of Iranian efforts to develop nuclear weapons, support will likely rise—as the second positive polling point also suggests.

The data suggest that public opinion about the military campaign against Iran isn't as solid as it is on other White House policies.

In the CNN poll, 16% strongly approve of Mr. Trump's decision "to take military action in Iran," while 31% strongly disapprove. More than half of respondents only "somewhat" approve or disapprove.

By comparison, the Feb. 27 CBS poll found 23% strongly approve of Mr. Trump's presidency generally, while 47% strongly disapprove. That left 30% whose opinion was only "somewhat" approve or disapprove. If given the choice of

An Urgent Need to Contain Turkey

By Bradley Martin

While neutralizing the regional threat posed by Iran, the U.S. and Israel must ensure that Turkey doesn't take its place.

After the Iraq war, Iran exploited the power vacuum left by Saddam Hussein. It sent Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps terrorists to train Shiite jihadist groups across the border to embolden the U.S. in a costly occupation while expanding Iran's regional influence.

"Iranian forces killed and maimed hundreds of American service members in Iraq," President Trump said on Saturday. "The regime's proxies have continued to launch countless attacks against American forces stationed in the Middle East in recent years, as well as U.S. naval and commercial vessels and international shipping lines." Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticized the

U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran as a "clear violation" of international law. Mr. Erdoğan also said he was "shocked" by the death of Iran's former supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Mr. Erdoğan, whose country is a key member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, spared no sympathy

If the Iranian regime falls, beware Ankara's regional influence.

for the thousands of innocent Iranians who lost their lives during January's protests. He urged the Turkish government to coordinate with Tehran on arresting people who protested against the Iranian regime in Turkey. NewsNation's reporting suggests that some of those arrested were later executed in Iran.

Mr. Erdoğan wants to lead the Islamic world and believes himself to be the guardian of Islam, a kind of modern-day Ottoman sultan. This explains why Turkey has been a bad partner for NATO when it comes to Iran. Ankara in 2012 reportedly divulged to Iran the identities of up to 10 Iranian citizens who were spying for Israel and gathering information on Iran's nuclear program.

The U.S.-led Delta Force raid in 2015 on the compound housing Islamic State's chief financial officer, Abu Sayyaf, found undeniable links between the terrorist group and Turkish officials. At the time, ISIS was earning millions of dollars a month selling oil on black markets.

Turkey has also used the Syrian refugee crisis to extract concessions from the European Union. Examples include the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, under which the EU has agreed to provide €6 billion in aid to Turkey in exchange for Ankara's commitment to stop irregular migration into the bloc, and the 2020 border crisis, in which Mr. Erdoğan announced that Turkey would not accept prevent refugees from entering Europe, an act the Greek government labeled "extortion diplomacy."

Should NATO continue its relationship with Turkey? What should its role be in the Middle East after the Iranian regime falls? When considering these questions, U.S. shouldn't forget that Turkey opposes U.S. foreign policy and is a headache for its allies.

Mr. Martin is executive director of the Near East Center for Strategic Studies.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Washington Iran War Pessimists

When the Marines headed toward the beach on the Tarawa atoll in 1943, things didn't go well. The tide was lower than expected, so the landing craft were hung up on a reef. Marines became easy targets for the Japanese defenders, and hundreds died that day, with more than 3,100 killed or wounded in the four-day battle.

We shudder to think what the reaction would be in Washington if the battle of Tarawa were fought again today. The New York Times wrote after Tarawa in 1943 that "we must steel ourselves now to pay that price" going forward. Today it would be calling for Franklin Roosevelt's impeachment, as would a parade of outraged right-wing podcasters.

This history seems apt given the remarkable pessimism in the media and political class about the U.S. bombing campaign against the terrorist regime in Iran. Five days into the war, you'd think from the coverage and commentary that the U.S. is losing.

Financial markets are said to be in turmoil, the war is "engulfing" the region and maybe the world, the U.S. is running out of missiles, the war is a gift to Russia, and there's no plan for how this ends—these are only a few of the dire media themes.

It's true that war is unpredictable and this one could take bad turns. The six U.S. dead and others wounded are heart-breaking. But judging from the Beltway panic, you'd think America is destined for defeat and deserves it. Rarely have we so many seemed so eager to predict American humiliation.

Yet on the evidence so far, the war is going better than expected. Iran's political and military leaders were killed in the first hour in a remarkable display of intelligence collection and precision bombing. Iran's missile stocks, its launchers and production are gradually being destroyed. Its navy may soon be reduced to a few fast ships, if they dare to leave shore.

Gen. Dan Caine, the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, said Wednesday that "Iran's theater ballistic missile shots fired are down 86% from the first day of fighting, with a 23% decrease just in the last 24 hours." Their "one-way attack drones" are down 73% from opening salvos.

The Pentagon says U.S. dominance of the air is so complete that it no longer needs to use as many "standoff" weapons that fire from a distance. Instead it can use more precision-guided gravity bombs that the U.S. has in far greater numbers. Israel and the U.S. are now turning these weapons against the regime's means of domestic control—the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the paramilitary *basij*.

As for the markets, the surprise so far is how relatively mild the disruption has been. The prices of oil and gasoline are up, but Brent crude is barely higher than it was amid Operation Midnight Hammer last June. A long-term shutdown of oil and natural gas through the Strait of Hormuz would do greater harm, but President Trump says the U.S. Navy may escort tankers. U.S. equity markets dove at first but have since largely recovered.

All of this looks like progress toward achieving the war aims that President Trump laid out on Saturday. The Iranian nuclear sites and missile and naval forces are being degraded to an extent that it would take years to rebuild them, and U.S. casualties have been light.

Yes, regime elements remain in control, and no one knows whether the Iranian people will be able to rise up and overthrow them. Even if they do, the outcome is impossible to predict. A pro-Western regime might emerge, as could rule by leaders who are part of the current regime but swear off designs to build a bomb, dominate their neighbors, or spread terrorism around the world.

A worse outcome is also possible, such as a long civil war that creates refugees that destabilize some neighbors. Wars always lead to surprises, and Mr. Trump took a risk in choosing to bomb again. We wish he had prepared the country better before the war.

But now that the war is underway, and our troops are in harm's way, our perhaps old-fashioned view is that we ought to hope for American success, both military and strategic. The world will be safer if there is a better regime in Tehran that isn't bent on the mission of "death to America." And maybe, before anticipating or cheering failure, we could wait and see how it goes.

Rarely have so many seemed so eager to predict American defeat.

Gavin Newsom's Climate Tax Hike

Why is Gov. Gavin Newsom trying to increase California's dependence on foreign oil? That will be the effect of his administration's plan to raise the state's cap-and-tax program, which California refiners warn could drive them out of business.

California's cap-and-tax policy requires refiners and manufacturers to reduce their CO2 emissions or buy indulgences from the state to offset their emissions. The program's hefty costs have caused manufacturers to shift operations out of the state and raised gasoline prices by an estimated 24 cents a gallon.

Now Mr. Newsom's regulators on the California Air Resources Board (CARB) are proposing to slash the supply of allowances. This will increase allowance prices and state revenue—but also costs for businesses and consumers. Chevron warned Tuesday that CARB's plan could add \$1.21 a gallon to California gas

prices, which are currently \$1.54 higher than the national average.

A study by Capitol Matrix Consulting estimates that CARB's plan would cost in-state refineries \$5.5 billion to \$9 billion over the next decade and "eliminate a significant portion, if not all, of California refiners' future annual net earnings." Several refineries have closed in recent years because of the state's high cost of doing business.

As a result, California is having to import much of its gasoline—and even more if regulators finalize their plan. PBF Energy Inc., which operates two refineries in California, warns the cap-and-tax hike "will effectively drive in-state refiners out of business while importers are completely shielded from these costs."

When he runs for President, we look forward to hearing Mr. Newsom explain why he's outsourcing jobs and importing more foreign gasoline.

His regulators are cutting allowances for his tax-and-cap policy.

Ominous Texas Signals for Republicans

If Republicans didn't realize their midterm election trouble before, they should after Tuesday's primary results in Texas. Democrats are climbing over one another to vote, and control of the Senate is in play.

Texas has been a GOP majority state for a generation, but on Tuesday as many Democrats turned out to vote as Republicans with some 94% counted. Hispanic voters in particular swung hard for Democrats compared with 2024.

This is emphatically consistent with the results in other elections in the last year. President Trump is inspiring Democrats to turn out, as he might put it, like no one has ever seen before. Republicans hoped that redistricting would give them five more House seats from Texas, but a Democratic wave like Tuesday's could nullify that result.

Redistricting cost the GOP one of its better incumbents, as former Navy SEAL Dan Crenshaw lost his Houston-area primary to state Rep. Steve Toth, who is the Marjorie Taylor Greene of the Texas House.

Tuesday's marquee primaries were in the U.S. Senate race, and the news was good for Democrats there too, as they nominated state Rep. James Talarico. The seminarinar is a stalwart progressive but masks his policy views in Obama-like moderate sounds. Democratic primary voters showed they want to win by rejecting firebrand Rep. Jasmine Crockett.

Republicans will have a Senate runoff in May between incumbent John Cornyn and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. Mr. Cornyn edged the AG, 41.9% to 40.7%, but he also spent some \$50 million to do it. The runoff will be a test of whether Texas Republicans want to retain control of the Senate.

Mr. Cornyn is a solid conservative who would be the favorite over Mr. Talarico. But Mr. Paxton

As Democratic turnout surges, the GOP Senate majority is in jeopardy.

was impeached by Republicans in the Texas House and has been dogged by charges of corruption. His specialty is culture-war trolling.

Mr. Paxton would be an underdog against Mr. Talarico. If Mr. Trump wants a GOP Senate, he'll endorse Mr. Cornyn as Majority Leader John Thune has been urging.

The Texas Senate primary matters because the 53-seat GOP majority is vulnerable. Democrats are favored in North Carolina after Mr. Trump pushed incumbent Thom Tillis out of the race. Susan Collins is the best possible GOP candidate in Maine, but Mr. Trump said recently she should never be elected again after she voted for a war powers resolution.

An open seat in Iowa is no sure thing as Mr. Trump's tariffs weigh on the farm economy. Democrats have a good shot in Ohio with former Sen. Sherrod Brown as the Democratic challenger to appointed Sen. Jon Husted. Dan Sullivan, the highly effective GOP incumbent in Alaska, has also drawn a well-known challenger in former Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola. Republicans have strong candidates for open seats in Michigan and New Hampshire, if Mike Rogers and John Sununu can buck the national tide.

Holding the Senate is crucial to the Trump Presidency because the House is all but lost already as more than 30 GOP incumbents are retiring or running for another office. A Democratic Senate means no Supreme Court confirmations in Mr. Trump's final two years, and good luck replacing Cabinet members.

Republicans point to Mr. Trump's ability to raise money, but cash can be overwhelmed by voter enthusiasm. The GOP has to hope voters feel better about the economy by the autumn, or the Texas primary results will be a forecast, not an omen.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Iran, Trump and Negotiating Regime Change

Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh are right to insist that Iran's regime is weaker than it appears and that doing nothing isn't a morally neutral choice ("Iran's Regime Is Down, but It Isn't Out," op-ed, March 2). But the harder truth, shown by history, is that regime collapse doesn't reliably produce regime change. Collapse can empower tyrannical forces, if those are already organized and armed.

And so with Iran now. There is no clean option available. On the one hand, continued pressure harms innocents. On the other, inaction empowers repression. It isn't cynical to acknowledge this moral tragedy.

And yet, while collapse in Iran might remove authority, it will not remove chaos. If pressure is to be justified, it must not simply eliminate the bad regime, but also preserve the civic structures that might survive it. Otherwise moral resolve becomes a poor stand-in for wisdom about what comes next.

WILLIAM P. WEBBLE
Naples, Fla.

Messrs. Gerecht and Takeyh overlook a key fact when they state that the Iranian leaders "understand now

that they wouldn't be getting bombed if they had the bomb." Since Israel has been getting bombed for years by all of Iran's proxies, Israel has shown enormous restraint. Israel has a large number of nuclear weapons both land- and sea-based and could have launched them at any time. The difference lies in the willingness to use those weapons.

THOMAS E. NUGENT
Charleston, S.C.

Messrs. Gerecht and Takeyh touch on what may be an important but overlooked consideration when they note President Trump's "sincere motivations" and say that his "sense of pride and authority—almost Roman in intensity—works when played against the Islamic Republic." The president has rarely been called noble, but I suspect that the attempt on his life in Butler, Pa., left him a changed man. He is secure in knowing that what he is doing in Iran is right. And consequently he is willing to accept the risks inherent in his decision, including the political and personal ones.

STEVEN LAURIA
Naples, Fla.

Energy Affordability Runs Through the Grid

The editorial "AI and the Data Center Backlash" (Feb. 27) gets it right by drawing attention to the issue of transmission costs and by stating that "connecting new data centers to the grid raises transmission costs."

Transmission spending is projected to skyrocket with the Edison Electric Institute, the trade association that represents electric utilities, forecasting transmission spending to be \$43.7 billion in 2026 and \$45.5 billion in 2027. That is only the initial capital cost. When financing costs are added, the costs to ratepayers' quadruples to more than \$340 billion over the life of these projects.

The issue does not need to be resolved by passing new laws but by enforcing an existing one. FERC has

not enforced Order 1,000, which requires utilities to compete with one another when building new transmission lines. Competition lowers costs through a competitive bidding process and by providing cost containment measures to prevent price escalation during the construction process.

Data-center demand will increase prices, and they should pay their fair share, but the more effective solution to Americans' affordability concerns is enforcement of Order 1,000. If President Trump wants to protect ratepayers, his administration should enforce this law.

PAUL CICCO
Chairman, Electricity Transmission
Competition Coalition
Washington

We Will See Growth Through AI Disruption

Reaction to the Citrini Research memo concerning artificial intelligence captures a real anxiety, but one built on a familiar analytical error ("What's in the Viral Post That Spooked Markets" by Jack Pitcher, Business & Finance, Feb. 25). The doomsday scenario tells only half the story of creative destruction.

Economist Joseph Schumpeter's critical insight was that technological revolutions simultaneously destroy existing structures and create new ones. The Citrini memo imagines DoorDash losing market share but never asks what new enterprise captures the value left behind. It envisions software companies bleeding out but ignores the entirely new categories of business that emerge when building software costs nearly nothing.

We have seen this before. In 2008 Blockbuster's CEO told the

Motley Fool that "neither RedBox nor Netflix are even on the radar screen in terms of competition." Less than two years later, Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy. Netflix is now worth hundreds of billions of dollars. It didn't just replace Blockbuster; it created an entirely new entertainment economy.

Research on technological revolutions since the Industrial Revolution shows a consistent pattern: The disruption is real but transitional, and what follows is always larger than what came before. The AI transition will produce casualties. It will also produce a larger, more dynamic economy if we have the imagination to see past half-told stories about the end of the world.

BRIAN R. MILLER
Hartsdale, N.Y.

Let Venezuelans Abroad Vote

As ever, in "Venezuela's Bogus Amnesty Law" (Americas, March 2) Mary O'Grady's is spot on. The U.S. government should insist that a free election must allow all Venezuelans to vote, especially the seven million—roughly 20% of the population—who have fled.

The U.S. has allowed its citizens resident abroad to vote. It will take time to set the program up, and it must be done carefully and under the watchful eyes of the counties where these self-exiled citizens live.

But the Trump administration should start demanding such an election now, just as soon as they demand that the amnesty law become real, not bogus.

RAYMOND J. KELLY III
Flushing, Mich.

A Simple Way to Stop Fraud

In "Vance Tightens the Fraud Spigot" (Potomac Watch, Feb. 27), Kimberley Strassel lays out the astonishing fact that "For some Medicaid populations, every dollar a state pays brings \$9 from federal taxpayers. Spend more, get more."

It is no surprise that fraud is rampant. The solution seems simple: Put the states on the budget of block grants. In other words, give the states a predetermined amount of money annually, and let them figure out how it is spent. The states would be motivated to determine the legitimacy of the payments before the money disappears down the fraud rathole.

TOM THOMAS
Nashville, Tenn.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"When I grow up I'm going to be impervious to the male gaze."

KYLE BRAYN

OPINION

If at First You Don't Succeed, Die, Die Again

By Kevin Cohen

The killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was a shock, but the more revealing strike came days later. When the Israeli air force struck the building in Qom associated with Iran's Assembly of Experts, reportedly while clerics were gathered to choose Khamenei's successor, the target was the regime's succession mechanism itself. Killing a leader is decapitation. Striking the institution that replaces him is strategy.

For decades, analysts described Israel's shadow war with Iran as a campaign of delay: sabotage nuclear facilities, intercept weapons shipments, remove key people. What unfolded this week suggests something more ambitious. The target isn't simply leaders or weapons; it is the regime's repeated continuity. Regimes endure by ensuring that shock is immediately followed by restoration. What happens when succession itself becomes dangerous?

Ali Khamenei wasn't indispensable, but Israel is aiming to make it impossible to replace him.

Consider the pattern emerging across the Iranian axis. Last year, Israel killed Hezbollah's longtime leader, Hassan Nasrallah. In most terrorist organizations, such a blow would be absorbed quickly. A deputy steps forward; the chain of command stabilizes. But the deputies kept dying. Successive figures were targeted in turn. The hierarchy that had once defined Hezbollah became provisional. This week another Hezbollah leader was reportedly killed in Lebanon. Whether by coincidence or design, the pattern has been unmistakable: Promotion itself carries risk.

Now the same logic reaches Tehran. Khamenei is killed. The council responsible for choosing his successor is struck while deliberating. The system's reset mechanism becomes a vulnerability rather than a safeguard. This isn't a tactical war; it is succession denial.

The logic is straightforward. Authoritarian systems recover from shocks by quickly re-establishing hierarchy. If that re-establishment becomes dangerous, decision-makers hesitate. Hesitation spreads uncertainty through the entire structure. A regime can survive sanctions. It can survive airstrikes. It can even survive the death of a supreme leader. What it struggles to survive is doubt about who holds authority next.

That doubt ripples outward. Commanders delay orders until legitimacy is confirmed. Rival factions position themselves cautiously. Security services turn inward, searching for infiltration. Decision cycles lengthen. Under pressure, elongated decision cycles become fragility. This strategy depends on intelligence rather than brute force. In the days after the leadership strike, accounts surfaced indicating that Israeli intelligence had achieved sustained visibility into parts of Tehran's surveillance ecosystem, allowing analysts to track Iranian leaders' movements.

The strike in Qom demonstrates that the ritual of continuity itself is vulnerable to intervention. Once regimes understand that their most guarded moment—the moment after power breaks—can be observed and interrupted, they govern more cautiously, more suspiciously, more slowly.

Wars used to be fought over territory. Increasingly they are fought over time—over who can see the hinge moment and move inside it.

Mr. Cohen is CEO of RealEye, a Tel Aviv-based security company.

The Epstein 'Transparency' Travesty

By Michael Tracey

After the arrest of Peter Mandelson, images of him from the so-called Epstein files were splashed across international media—including one of him alongside a woman whose face is obscured. The implication is that Mr. Mandelson, a former British ambassador to Washington, sexually abused the woman. His arrest was for "misconduct in public office"—allegedly leaking confidential emails to Mr. Epstein—not for sex crimes. And Mr. Mandelson is gay.

Such absurdities have been constant since the release of the Epstein files as the imperative to protect actual or potential victims collides with the legal mandate for speedy disclosure under the Epstein Files Transparency Act.

At a Jan. 30 news conference announcing the latest production of records, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche said the Justice Department had "redacted every woman depicted in any image or video" except for former Epstein companion Ghislaine Maxwell—whether or not there was any claim of victimization. Men's faces, on the other hand, were exposed.

"Thousands of documents and media" were published and later removed, according to Jay Clayton, U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York. He told a pair of federal judges that when any person claiming to be a victim requests removal of a certain record, the department's practice is to "accept [these] representations on their face." An alleged victim's self-identification as such, Mr. Clayton told the judges, is all that is required for the department to conceal records on her behalf or remove records entirely. No steps are taken to corroborate any allegations.



Epstein files with redactions.

The consequence has been a chaotic patchwork of often inexplicable redactions, exacerbating suspicions of a coverup. Purported victims who are dead, or whose claims have been proved false, are nonetheless removed from the released files. So too for alleged victims who have chosen to reveal their identities and engaged in public advocacy, appeared in the media, signed "open letters" and even published books. Putative victims and their lawyers have called for the concealment of records already long available in public court dockets, and the Justice Department acceded. Even copies of years-old news articles are marred with superfluous redactions.

This undermines the purpose of the exercise: giving the public a complete account of the government's investigations of Jeffrey Epstein.

Women the Justice Department once regarded as potential Epstein co-conspirators have now been deemed victims, and are thus entitled to have records perpetually concealed at their request. One internal Justice Department memo detailing

the contemplated prosecution of Sarah Kellen, a former low-level Epstein employee, features page after page completely redacted, making it impossible to glean any insight into the decision not to charge her.

Redactions, supposedly to protect victims, are so sweeping as to make a farce of the exercise.

Meantime, the media have ignored ulterior motives that could be influencing the demands for sweeping redactions.

Bradley Edwards, the lawyer representing many of Epstein's purported victims, wrote in a Nov. 25 letter to Judge Richard M. Berman that "transparency CANNOT come at the expense of the privacy, safety, and protection of sexual abuse and sex trafficking victims." On Feb. 1, he sent another panicked letter demanding that the entire archive be taken down, claiming that even the

tightly circumscribed transparency the Justice Department had so far permitted was an intolerable danger to his clients.

Seldom is it noted, however, that as Mr. Edwards dispatched these frantic appeals, he and his colleague David Boies were simultaneously litigating class-action suits against Bank of America and Bank of New York Mellon, which they accuse of having abetted Epstein's "sex trafficking" network. Prior lawsuits, Messrs. Edwards and Boies brought against JP Morgan and Deutsche Bank yielded some \$360 million in settlements, of which around 30% went to them for attorney fees.

Their financial incentive is clear, especially if there are certain records that, if disclosed, would complicate the "survivor" narrative these lawyers have promoted. This narrative has led much of the public to believe mistakenly that the Epstein controversy is some sort of massive "pedophilia" scandal.

In their Bank of America action, Messrs. Edwards and Boies concede that their main "Jane Doe" client was an adult during the 13 years when she is alleged to have been held in "sex trafficking" captivity by Epstein, who allegedly convinced her he was the "messiah." As far as I can ascertain based on publicly available information, a significant majority of purported Epstein victims were adults at the time of their claimed victimization, not vulnerable children. An inconvenient detail that the dissemination of unredacted records would likely illuminate.

The public is right to be frustrated by the excessive redactions in the Epstein files. Out of misguided deference to supposed victims, they have been largely aiming their ire in the wrong direction.

Mr. Tracey is a journalist in Jersey City, N.J.

The New Israeli Rules of Engagement

By Amit Segal

Jerusalem
On the night of Oct. 6, 2023, the Israeli defense establishment realized something was stirring in Gaza but failed to act. Paralyzed by the fear of a miscalculation, these officials worried that if the Israel Defense Forces moved, fighting would result, and the coveted "quiet" of recent years would be shattered.

This was Israel's state of mind before Oct. 7. The head of the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service, compared it to a patient whose vital signs were in decline. Decades of containment, restraint and forbearance had made Israel slow to stir and vulnerable in appearance.

Two and a half years later, Israel stands at the pinnacle of its power in the Middle East. This transformation occurred only after it shed every rule it had gradually adopted in recent decades.

While the military's official name is Israel Defense Forces, its most historic achievements involved preemptive strikes, such as in the 1967 Six-Day War. In more recent decades, Israel lost that offensive edge, and the army was forced into cumbersome urban warfare. The IDF leadership avoided retaliating against missiles fired from Iraq in the Gulf War in 1991, offered token responses to Hezbollah and Hamas in the 2000s, and so on. The terrible price of this defensive posture was revealed on Oct. 7.

These are the new rules of the game:

- *The enemy exists in one of two states: pursuer or pursued.* For years, Israel shied away from targeted killings, granting terror leaders and Iranian officials the time and peace of mind to plot against the Jewish state. The IDF's new mindset is the exact opposite: If terrorists are running for their lives, they can't make plans to take ours. There's poetic justice in that Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the man behind alleged assassination attempts on Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu in the summer of 2024, was eliminated by them in the winter of 2026.

- *When enemies announce their intention to destroy you, believe them.* It isn't election rhetoric (they don't hold elections); it isn't lip service or empty words. "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" are mission statements.

- *Ignoring small security problems invites larger ones.* Israel fled Gaza to avoid improvised explosive devices and shooting attacks, only to be attacked by two commando divisions with the world's largest tunnel

'Proportionate' responses are a thing of the past. Now we understand we can't live with terrorists.

network at their disposal. It withdrew from Lebanon because it couldn't stomach 20 fallen soldiers a year; in exchange, Hezbollah entrenched itself on the border with a missile arsenal rivaled by few global powers.

- *There can be no modus vivendi with terror organizations.* Murderous ambitions can't be soothed with "gentlemen's agreements," international guarantees or economic incen-

tives. Israel tried this in Gaza, and the result was catastrophic.

- *When you respond, overwhelm your foe.* For years, the enemy fired rockets and Israel replied with "proportional" force. This normalized the firing on civilians, kidnapping and invasion. But this changed after Oct. 7. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah thought he was still playing by the old rules, launching a few rockets daily. It ended with his elimination, the decapitation of his organization, and the destruction of 80% of their missile stockpile.

- *Fundamentalists accumulate weapons to use them, not to deter.* For years, Israel ignored the vast ammunition depots in Gaza and Lebanon under the assumption they would simply "rust." They didn't.

- *When you are on the strong side, the enemy is the one who should fear a miscalculation.*

The new rules are in effect in the operation launched on Saturday. The Jewish state can't accept the existence in Iran of production facilities and thousands of ballistic missiles, with every launch sending half of Israel into shelters and threatening mass casualties. It can't tolerate a regime that continues, even today, to fund its greatest enemies with more than a billion dollars annually.

Mellon's Radical Prisoner Education

By John D. Sailer

At the Stateville Correctional Center—a maximum-security prison in Illinois, which Gov. JB Pritzker ordered closed last year for unrelated reasons—a group of professors offered courses for inmates, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. One course, "Research, Writing, and Mass Incarceration," began with a workshop run by Bill Ayers—a co-founder of the Weather Underground, a Marxist terror group responsible for dozens of bombings in the U.S. in the 1970s.

The Mellon Foundation has given at least \$60 million to prison education projects since 2015. While many grants provide liberal-arts courses and vocational training, others have followed the foundation's own recent trajectory, embracing progressive activism as their guiding principle.

Increasingly, these nonprofits, activists and scholars have focused their prison education projects on political education and "shifting the narrative." The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, which has received \$1.39 million from Mellon since 2019, titled its 2021 conference "What Is to Be Done?," a title borrowed from an 1892 communist pamphlet by Vladimir Lenin.

"Posed more than a century ago," the conference booklet says, "the question has 'inspired generations of revolutionary thinkers and activists to interrogate the intersections of theory and practice, to reflect upon their own positionalities in the

face of power and oppression, and to seek the most effective strategies to organize and build resistance."

Mellon, despite its original mission to support the arts and humanities, now embraces far-reaching political goals. As the foundation's president, Elizabeth Alexander, puts it: "We support artists, scholars, and thinkers," both inside and outside prison, "who are countering the inhumanity of incarceration and the broader criminal legal system."

One goal of the Mellon-supported course at Statesville is building a movement that "centers abolition," meaning the abolition of prisons, according to the proposal I acquired via a records request. A proposal for a Mellon-supported project of the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign says it assumes "an explicitly abolitionist stance," has "hosted discussions on prison abolition" and has referred members to "readings and external workshops on abolition."

The description for "Writing for Social Justice"—a course offered through the Claremont Colleges' Justice Education Initiative, which has received \$2.3 million in Mellon support—begins with a quote from Karl Marx and says that students will "challenge common assumptions about race, sexuality, gender, class, and memory" and write about "issues that are absent in a world dominated by profit-oriented capitalist ideologies."

Even benign-sounding grants may be channeled toward activist purposes. Catherine Besteman, a profes-

sor at Colby College, writes that "a significant Mellon grant to the University of Maine at Augusta" helped provide internet access for inmates in Maine. This, she notes, created "new opportunities for liberatory education based in abolitionist pedagogies" which "reveal and attack the supremacist, racist, and colonial roots of the contemporary prison industry and master narratives about the need for prisons." Ms. Besteman's own organization, which has received Mellon funding, advocates "decarceration and abolition."

For such organizations, the focus is less on helping individuals than on revolutionizing systems. UC Santa Cruz's "Visualizing Abolition" project, designed to "shift the social attachment to prisons through art and education," has received almost \$8 million from Mellon. Its grant-renewal proposal promises to serve "people currently and formerly incarcerated" and to "change the narrative that links incarceration to justice."

Left unasked is whether such efforts make it harder for inmates to endure prison life and make the transition from incarceration to life on the outside. An education aimed at political goals all too easily uses students as tools. The Mellon Foundation—now under increasing scrutiny for its turn toward social justice—would be wise to heed this lesson.

Mellon's Radical Prisoner Education

Mr. Sailer is director of higher education policy at the Manhattan Institute.

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COMMENT & FEATURES

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THE JERUSALEM POST

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Dead end

Mojtaba Khamenei, the second-eldest son of former Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei, is reportedly set to succeed his slain father as Iran's next supreme leader, as the Islamic Republic moves to preserve continuity while battling Israel and the United States.

He has long been considered his father's chosen heir apparent. He is reportedly well formed close ties with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and is thought to have gained increasing control over the regime's decision-making in recent years, while operating in the shadows.

According to Reuters, *The New York Times*, and Iranian opposition media, Mojtaba Khamenei received the IRGC's backing in meetings of the Assembly of Experts on Tuesday, which appears poised to approve his accession. The building in Qom that housed the Assembly of Experts was reduced to rubble by the IAF on Tuesday.

While the results of the strike were not immediately clear, Iran's IRGC-linked Fars News Agency said the building had been evacuated in advance due to the threat of attack, and that the leadership selection was conducted virtually and had entered its final stages.

The result would be announced soon, Fars reported. But the succession may not be as swift or as seamless as the regime would hope.

As *Jerusalem Post* military correspondent Yonah Jeremy Bob wrote earlier this week, several key officials within the Islamic regime are also vying for control of Iran "the day after" Khamenei.

Ali Larjani, who reportedly became Khamenei's de facto deputy following the 12 Day War last June, has been running the country's day-to-day security affairs and overseeing the regime's failed nuclear negotiations with the US.

The scales of power in Tehran now rest on a delicate balance among politicians, IRGC officers, and the clerical establishment. But the IRGC plays a central role in running the regime's security and military apparatus, and its backing could be decisive.

Mojtaba Khamenei should not be underestimated. Described as a hardline cleric, he does not tend to make public appearances and has largely operated behind the scenes. According to various reports, his close ties to the security establishment in Iran have allowed him to gain leverage over rivals and position himself as an authority figure capable of shaping decision-making — one capable of taking control of the nation at a time of crisis.

As explained by *Post* news editor Alex Winston, his alleged behind-the-scenes role in orchestrating the suppression of demonstrators during the 2009 unrest that followed a disputed presidential election, and his lack of sufficient clerical credentials, are two of the reasons why his potential elevation has long been controversial within Iran.

If the reports are accurate, and Mojtaba Khamenei's accession is all but sealed, the illusion that the Islamic regime can survive — even stripped of nuclear or ballistic-missile capabilities — should finally collapse.

With this reported choice, the regime is proving what Israel has long known: It has no intention of ever abandoning its destructive doctrine: Death to America, and death to Israel.

Nor is this solely Israel's and the US's concern. As it demonstrated by firing hundreds of missiles at multiple Gulf states since Saturday, the Iranian regime does not care what stands in its way.

A regime that continues to arm proxies, destabilize Gulf capitals, and threaten Israeli and Western forces will not suddenly moderate under a younger Khamenei. If anything, he may lean even more heavily on hard power and suppressing dissent to consolidate legitimacy.

This regime — led by one Khamenei or another — cannot be allowed to continue to threaten Israel, the entire Middle East, and the Western world.

Both US President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have called on the Iranian people to reclaim their country when the war concludes. Heavy strikes across Iran are beginning to make that possibility real. The next phase of the war will test America's and Israel's resolve to see it through.

Any off-ramp taken will only serve to keep the regime intact, allow it to regroup, and rebuild. The oppression of the Iranian people under Islamic rule would continue.

Therefore, Israel and the United States must go all the way: The war cannot truly end until the regime does.

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Why Iran bombarded the UAE

• By NADIM KOTEICH

The missiles and drones that were launched were not aimed at the sand in the UAE.

Had it not been for a 100% interception rate on ballistic missiles and 93% on drones, the story this week would have been written in rubble.

When Iran's dying regime dispatched 165 ballistic missiles, two cruise missiles, and 541 drones toward a single country in the days following the killing of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the distribution of fire told a story that pure military logic could not explain. Nearly 65% of Iran's total munitions expenditure in this campaign was absorbed by one target: The UAE.

This is not about Al Dhafra Air Base, proximity, or global economic blackmail. It is not only about punishing a signatory to the Abraham Accords, either. These are real factors, but they are downstream of something more fundamental. Iran attacked the UAE because the UAE is the argument Tehran cannot win.

This small Arab Gulf country represents the most operationally successful refutation of political Islam's central claim, which is that the path to dignity, power, and Arab identity runs through revolutionary resistance, divine mandate, and permanent conflict with the West.

Abu Dhabi did not just reject that narrative — it built a civilization-scale counterexample. Through the Abraham Accords, the UAE chose normalization with Israel, positioning itself as an Arab state that moved toward integration, not perpetual grievance.

The result: the materialization of the most connected, prosperous, and diplomatically agile state in the Arab world came to fruition. This is an existential ideological threat to any regime whose legitimacy rests on the promise that resistance, not engagement, is the



SMOKE BILLOWS from Zayed Port following an Iranian strike in Abu Dhabi on Sunday. (Abdelhadi Ramahi/Reuters)

only honorable path. Notice what Tehran targeted in its symbolic geography: not military outposts in the desert, but landmarks. The image of the hotel, Jumeirah Burj Al Arab, an icon of Emirati ambition, is exported to every phone screen on earth. Jebel Ali, the commercial artery of a state serving a hinterland of three billion people and 10 trillion dollars of economic output within a 3,500-kilometer radius, is the beating commercial heart of the global south.

International airports are the infrastructure of a model built on connectivity rather than exclusion. This was not strategic targeting. This was an attempt at iconoclasm.

Even before this first missile was launched, the ideological war had already begun. Just weeks prior, a strategic influence campaign was branding Abu Dhabi as an "Israeli Trojan horse," calling it a "betrayal of God, His Messenger, and the nation."

Iran's drones and missiles and Gulf and Arab Islamist rhetoric were, however, unwittingly running the same operation: to delegitimize the UAE model and to prove that tolerance, moderation, and integration lead not to prosperity and protection, but to target acquisition.

It is telling that Muslim Brotherhood representatives across Sudan, Yemen, and even Oman rushed to declare solidarity with Iran against the American and Israeli strikes, while maintaining complete silence on Iranian missiles raining down on Arab capitals.

They did not fail to notice — they chose not to. The Muslim Brotherhood and Tehran were, as always, running the same operation, one that branded Abu Dhabi a traitor and Dubai a target. The missiles and the rhetoric share the same return address.

Tehran wanted the UAE model, including the Abraham Accords, to become a liability.

It wanted every future Arab leader contemplating engagement with Israel to see Emirates' skyline burning and draw the obvious conclusion: don't.

The deeper question this moment forces is not whether the UAE will survive, because it will, but whether the new Middle East it embodies will expand or retreat.

The Abraham Accords are already moving toward Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.

Syria and Israel have, for instance, established a joint intelligence-sharing and military deescalation cell under US supervision. This is the first structured security framework between two former enemies since 1974, and a direct architectural beam of the new Middle East that Iran is trying to demolish.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun started discussions to join the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, a move that triggered

immediate accusations of indirect normalization with Israel. Beirut, long paralyzed by Hezbollah's veto over its future, is now choosing connectivity over resistance.

Saudi Arabia's retreat from normalization is tactical, not terminal, as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is not rejecting the deal so much as pricing it.

Riyadh does not lack the strategic acumen to note that with Iran now degraded and the Axis of Resistance destroyed, the strategic cost of staying outside the new Middle East just rose dramatically. Many of the most serious and legitimate strategic burdens that made Riyadh's caution genuinely reasonable have been buried alongside Khamenei.

Iran understood, correctly, that the normalization architecture represented a structural reordering of the region's ideological market, one in which the "resistance" Arab loses its monopoly on Iran and Muslim identity.

Every missile fired at Dubai is a confession. It is the admission that the regime that claimed to speak for the oppressed, the faithful, and the Arab and Islamic nations could not compete with what the UAE built, not in governance, not in economics, not in the imagination of the next generation across the Arab world.

So it reached for the one argument it had left: destruction.

A wounded animal can still bite. But it does so because it can no longer threaten. The Islamic Republic launched this campaign from a position of structural collapse. Its nuclear infrastructure is degraded, its economy is hollowed out, its supreme leader has been killed, and its proxies are scattered from Beirut to Damascus to Sana'a.

The ghosts of the old Middle East are departing, one funeral at a time.

The writer is a senior Emirati journalist and policy adviser.

TRUMP'S IRAN POLICY AFTER KHAMENEI:

Block, recognize, secure

• By SIAVASH GHOLAMI

To help that US President Donald Trump had promised to Iranians has arrived. The United States and Israel have crossed the threshold from warning to action. Ali Khamenei, the Islamist who legitimized the massacre of thousands of Iranians, is dead.

This moment is not merely a military escalation: it is a strategic inflection point. But achieving a stable and lasting outcome requires strategic clarity.

That clarity matters now because the regime's eventual fate is predictable: it will manufacture an "acceptable" successor arrangement — packaged as reform — in order to preserve the IRGC-centered regime. If Washington wavers or treats regime-managed succession as moderation, it will rescue the regime at its moment of maximum vulnerability. The regime will be re-legitimized, and the strikes will have produced neither freedom for Iranians nor security for the region — only a refreshed version of the same regime.

This is the familiar cycle Washington has enabled for decades: approaching the Islamic Republic as something that could be moderated, managed, or incentivized into normal state behavior. Trump's Iran policy is a break from that pattern, and it should be sustained. For the first time, Washington is aligning its posture with the idea of regime change.

The reformist trap: continuity after decapitation

One trap must be avoided: mistaking the removal of the regime's unifying symbol for the collapse of its governing machine. Ali Khamenei functioned less as the system's day-to-day operator and more as its central seal of unity — an authority figure around whom rival factions, security organs, and patronage networks could rally.

With that symbol gone, the regime's ideological core does not disappear: it disperses into the factions and actors

who have long run the apparatus of repression domestically and terrorism globally. The IRGC remains — and the question becomes which hardline faction takes over.

The regime will eventually try to rebrand continuity as reform. It will attempt to fast-track a "national unity" successor through IRGC power bargaining, elevate familiar diplomatic faces as "reasonable" interlocutors, and offer social easing — selective prisoner releases and looser enforcement in a few cities — to shape the narrative while the ideological core and repressive machine remain intact.

The rebranded regime will tease "constitutional review" committees that never touch the IRGC's economic empire or its parallel security state, scapegoat a faction to imply change, and then tighten control — shutdowns, curfews, and "anti-chaos" messaging — to reassert dominance. Washington must treat these signals for what they are: a rebranding of the same regime.

Trump's coercive Iran policy is what differentiates him from Obama and Biden, who negotiated with and normalized a regime that commits mass atrocities both at home and in the region.

This is exactly why Washington must not swerve into diplomacy with familiar "reformist" faces marketed as an alternative. Figures such as Ali Larjani, Abbas Araghchi, Hassan Rouhani, and Javad Zarif are not a bridge to democracy or even behavioral change for the regime. They are shaped by the regime's governing system — and enable it. These figures are inseparably embedded in the regime's decision-making ecosystem and are historically intertwined with its security structures — notably the IRGC.

Negotiating with them, especially in any outcome that stops short of regime change, does not deliver regional security. It results in regime continuity under a rebranding that preserves the core ideological and power structures. A stable

region and a free Iran require a genuine political break, not a rotation of familiar regime enablers.

Recognition is the operational necessity

When the regime's survival strategy is rebranding, the counter-strategy is to remove ambiguity about the alternative. Raza Pahlavi has been the name chanted by millions during the 2026 uprising. He has a proven leadership capacity to mobilize inside Iran and in the diaspora. Pahlavi's *Emergency Phase Booklet* is his comprehensive, expert-oriented plan for after the regime's collapse.

Minutes after the initial strikes, Pahlavi issued a video statement, declaring the moment a turning point and directing the Iranian nation to await his call to mobilize, remaining alert and ready for the final battle. This pairing of external coercion and internal mobilization is necessary for regime change — and must be operationalized with precision.

In revolutionary moments, ambiguity prolongs conflict, while recognition shortens it. It is not symbolic — it is operational. It signals to regime institutions, security forces, and officials that there is a defined political destination beyond the current system. It shapes expectations, influences decision-making within the regime, and can accelerate defections and internal unraveling.

This leads to the single most urgent policy step Washington and Jerusalem must take now: Recognize Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi's transitional government. Not consider, not monitor, recognize.

Strategic clarity for political end-state: regime change

If Washington and Jerusalem want this moment to result in a free Iran that is aligned with international norms — not simply another cycle of temporary containment — they must act with clarity: 1. Avoid legitimizing regime continu-

ity. This includes both formal negotiations and informal channels that elevate figures tied to the existing power structure. Secitized figures such as Larjani, Araghchi, Rouhani, and Zarif have a track record of hostility to American and Israeli interests. They are enablers of the IRGC and cannot be trusted in any capacity.

2. Make regime change the political end state. Ambiguity between reform and regime change undermines every other policy decision. Washington's policy must focus on regime change for a real, tangible transformation — a transition led by the regime's consequential opposition that can be trusted by Americans and Israelis alike.

Pahlavi is politically legible to Iranians and operationally legible to Washington. For the final internal takeover by the Iranian nation, coordinate timing, communications, and contingency planning with Pahlavi to have internal mobilization at the right moment.

3. Provide direct logistical support to the Iranian nation. Once internal mobilization starts, communication access should be supported when the regime pulls the plug, so that the Iranian uprising can organize and endure.

A free Iran through alignment with the Iranian nation

Even at the regime's weakest point, Trump should avoid a return to the familiar pattern of one more round of talks; one more attempt to engage "moderates," as Obama did; or one more deferral of the underlying issue, which is the regime in its entirety. That approach has defined the past — and has consistently failed Americans, allies, and the Iranian nation.

The approach that will secure long-term peace regionally and safeguard American and allied interests is alignment with the Iranian nation to deliver the ultimate blow: the takeover of government and a transition under Pahlavi's leadership.

If Iran falls, what follows?



• By NEVILLE TELLER

Speaking to reporters at Fort Bragg military base in North Carolina on February 13, US President Donald Trump said, unambiguously for the first time perhaps, that regime change in Iran is “the best thing that could happen.”

Ever since late January, the US administration has been building up a massive naval and military presence in the region, nominally to pressure Iran over its nuclear program, ballistic missiles, regional proxies, and internal repression.

Trump has consistently tied the US military buildup to his insistence that Iran must never acquire nuclear weapons.

In his remarks at Fort Bragg, Trump declined to specify whom he wanted to take over leadership in Iran but noted “there are people” who could.

One such, of course, is the late Shah’s son and heir, Reza Pahlavi, who has acquired significant support both within the country and among the Iranian diaspora as a potential future leader.

US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff is reported to have met with Pahlavi at least once, but probably more often, in the past few weeks.

At the inaugural meeting of Gaza’s Board of Peace on February 19, Trump said that if the regime did not accept stricter limits “within days,” unspecified but “very bad” consequences might follow.

The latest round of US-Iran negotiations in Geneva ended on February 26. Unsatis-

fied with Iran’s delaying tactics, Trump ordered a military strike on the morning of February 28.

Speaking via his Truth Social medium, he was crystal clear about one major objective of the joint US-Israeli attack. Addressing the Iranian people directly, he said:

“For many years, you have asked for America’s help. But you never got it. No president was willing to do what I am willing to do tonight. Now you have a president who is giving you what you want.”

“So let’s see how you respond. America is backing you with overwhelming strength and devastating force. Now is the time to seize control of your destiny and to unleash the prosperous and glorious future that is close within your reach. This is the moment for action. Do not let it pass.”

Trump has no plan for large-scale US ground involvement or occupation. He anticipates an internal uprising that would topple the government. It is not an impossible scenario.

With the Iranian economy on life support and the regime struggling to contain prolonged and persistent anti-government demonstrations, targeted military action by the US could cause the Islamic theocratic dictatorship to implode.

On February 25, AOL, the American web portal formerly known as “America Online,” published an article that stated “...the US has reportedly drawn up a target list of key regime

stalwarts, such as the Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his son, to be eliminated as part of a decapitation strategy aimed at achieving regime change in Tehran.”

The Iranian people, having endured nearly five decades of despotic rule, have made it abundantly clear over the past month or more that the sooner they see the back of the ayatollahs, the better.

However, the fall of the Iranian regime would have repercussions well beyond Iran – many of them highly desirable.

FOR EXAMPLE, the widespread network of terrorist groups created and sustained by the Islamic Republic would suddenly find itself without the financial and logistical support that has sustained their jihadist activities for decades.

Shi’ite Hezbollah, a creature of the Iranian regime, would be critically weakened by its demise. The Houthis’ ability to act at sea and against distant targets is very largely dependent on Iranian military supplies.

Sunni Hamas could look to Qatar and perhaps Turkey for some degree of support, but without Iran at its back, could it withstand Trump’s demand that it disarm and dismantle its terrorist infrastructure?

Wider afield, Russia and China, which have forged trade and military partnerships with Iran in recent years, would see their global standing seriously diminished.

Iran has also been supporting Vladimir Putin’s war effort in Ukraine by providing constant supplies of drones and ballistic missiles. The sudden loss of this



A WOMAN chants during a rally against the Islamic regime in Iran, yesterday. Its fall would have repercussions well beyond Iran – many of them highly desirable, the writer notes. (Jack Taylor/Reuters)

flow of vital ordnance would undoubtedly weaken Putin’s military capabilities in Ukraine and could hasten some sort of ceasefire.

China would also feel the pinch, since 90% of Iran’s discounted oil exports go to Beijing. A sudden loss of cheap Iranian oil would have a significant effect on China’s economy.

Moreover, bearing in mind the 2021 Iran-China partnership pact, any leadership change in Tehran could have a negative impact on China’s strategically ambitious worldwide Belt and Road initiative, already signed by some 150 countries.

The first and only serious

attempt to overthrow the Iranian regime occurred just 18 months after the February 1979 Islamic revolution.

In September 1980, the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, fearing that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s revolutionary Shia Islamism would destabilize Iraq’s Sunni-dominated Ba’athist regime, invaded.

He hoped that a quick attack on Iran’s oil-rich province of Khuzestan would trigger internal unrest and possibly a collapse of the new Islamic Republic.

A range of Western and Arab states, including the US, the UK, France, and Gulf monarchies, provided him with significant military, economic,

and diplomatic support.

Iran’s revolutionary regime was seen by them as a greater threat to stability and Western oil interests than Saddam’s Iraq. History had a different story to tell.

By mid-1982, Iran had reversed Iraq’s initial gains, and for the next five years Iraq was largely on the defensive. A series of successful Iraqi offensives in 1988, however, diminished Iran’s hope for victory and induced a change of heart.

In August 1988, both sides accepted a UN-brokered ceasefire and truce.

This time, has Iran’s revolutionary regime reached the end of the road? On February 28, Pahlavi issued his own video

message to the Iranian people:

“In these sensitive hours and days, more than ever we must remain focused on our ultimate goal: reclaiming Iran... Stay alert and ready to return to the streets for the final action at the appropriate time, which I shall communicate to you.”

“Follow my messages through social media... We are very close to final victory. I hope to be with you as soon as possible so that together we may reclaim Iran and rebuild it.”

Will the dream eventually become reality? The writer, a former senior civil servant, is the Middle East correspondent for Eurasia Review. Follow him at: www.a-mid-east-journal.blogspot.com

Israel is not alone: A message of Christian solidarity in a time of war

• By BISHOP ROBERT STEARNS

As the US and Israel confront the “head of the snake” – the Iranian regime led by the Ayatollah and the IRGC, which for decades has posed an existential threat to Israel and acted as a destabilizing force across the Western world – it is essential that the people of Israel know one thing clearly: you are not alone.

Following the events of the October 7 massacre and the war that followed, Israel and the Jewish people have faced growing political and social isolation. Iranian and Qatari-backed propaganda campaigns have fueled false narratives about Israel, contributing to an unprecedented surge in antisemitism and violence against Jewish communities worldwide.

From the Bondi Beach mass shooting in Australia to Hanukkah, to the killing of a young Jewish couple in Washington, DC, to the attack at Manchester Synagogue on Yom Kippur, Jews have increasingly found themselves targeted.

As a Christian Zionist and as president of Eagles’ Wings – an organization dedicated for more than three decades to strengthening the bonds between Christians, Jews, and the State of Israel – I want Israelis to hear this message clearly: millions of Christians around the world stand with you.

Last fall, Eagles’ Wings began organizing a special delegation of Christian women leaders to visit Israel. Last Thursday, just two days before Israel and the US launched joint military action against Iran, that delegation arrived in the country.

They were fully aware of the risks and ris-

ing regional tensions; these women chose deliberately and wholeheartedly to come to Israel to pray for the peace of Jerusalem and stand alongside the Israeli people.

This was the largest Christian women’s leadership mission ever to visit Israel.

The delegation included senior pastors, faith leaders, media personalities, public figures, CEOs, educators, and influencers who collectively influence hundreds of thousands of Christians across the US and around the world. Many serve in leadership roles within some of America’s largest and most influential churches, ministries, universities, and institutions.

Their presence carries impact far beyond the visit itself. When these leaders return home and share what they experienced – not headlines, but firsthand encounters – their communities listen. When they choose to stand in Israel in war, their actions send a message more powerful than words.

Throughout history, women have been fearless leaders in times of crisis, beginning with Jochebed, the mother of Moses, who risked her life to save her son, as well as Deborah and Esther, whose courage and faith we celebrate at Purim.

Women’s leadership is particularly significant within faith communities. Women are often the builders of community life, the organizers, the educators, and the relational leaders who shape values and mobilize action. Their decision to come to Israel at such a critical moment represents a profound act of solidarity.

Just two days after their arrival, on Saturday morning, members of our delegation found themselves running into bomb

shelters alongside their Israeli brothers and sisters – sharing not only prayer, but also the lived reality of life under threat.

The delegation was scheduled to meet with Israeli leadership, including President Isaac Herzog and First Lady Michal Herzog, government ministers, members of Knesset, Christian Arab leaders, and a former hostage survivor.

I can assure you: they will return. This is the mission of Eagles’ Wings. We are committed to helping Christians experience the real Israel – beyond distorted headlines and misinformation. We are equally committed to bringing a new generation of Christians into meaningful relationships with the Jewish state.

Today, support for Israel cannot be taken for granted. The erosion of understanding and engagement on the part of evangelical Christians represents a sad reality and an urgent strategic challenge.

Without genuine relationships and firsthand experiences, people around the world remain vulnerable to the massive, well-funded propaganda campaigns aimed at delegitimizing Israel.

But when Christians come to Israel – when they see, hear, and experience it for themselves – they return home transformed. They become informed voices, bridge-builders, and ambassadors for Israel and the Jewish people within their own societies.

In this difficult hour, Israel should know that beyond governments and geopolitics, millions of Christians are praying, standing, and walking alongside you. You are not alone.

FROM QUDS DAY TO GLOBAL INFLUENCE:

How Iran outsmarted the Sunni Arab world

• By SALAH UDDIN SHOAHIB CHOUDHURY

For decades, policymakers in Washington and across the Gulf have treated Iran primarily as a sectarian power – a Shi’ite state competing with Sunni Arab regimes for regional dominance.

But that analysis misses a critical truth: Since 1979, Tehran has methodically positioned itself as a leader not only of Shi’ites, but of the broader Muslim world. And it did so by weaponizing one of the most emotionally powerful issues in global Islam – the Palestinian cause.

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seized power during Iran’s Islamic Revolution, his ambitions extended far beyond Tehran. He envisioned a revolutionary state that would export ideology, reshape Middle Eastern politics, and ultimately challenge Western influence throughout the Muslim world.

Within weeks of consolidating power, Khomeini declared the creation of “International Quds Day” to be observed annually on the last Friday of Ramadan. On August 7, 1979, he called upon Muslims worldwide to demonstrate solidarity with Palestinians and to oppose Israel’s control of Jerusalem. This was not a symbolic gesture: It was strategic mischief.

Jerusalem – *al-Quds* in Arabic – holds sacred significance for Muslims across sectarian lines. By centering his revolution around the “liberation” of Jerusalem, Khomeini effectively bypassed the Sunni-Shi’ite divide. He reframed Iran’s revolution not as a Shi’ite uprising, but as a pan-Islamic struggle against Israel and, by extension, against Western influence.

Senior Iranian clerics, including Naser Makarem Shirazi, described participation in Quds Day as a religious duty – elevating political mobilization into spiritual obligation. The message was clear: supporting Iran’s framing of the Palestinian issue was not merely political – it was religiously mandated.

For Sunni-majority nations, opposing such a narrative became politically risky. Governments such as Saudi Arabia, while wary of Iran’s revolutionary agenda, found it difficult

to openly challenge a cause so deeply embedded in Muslim public opinion. The result was a gradual normalization of Tehran’s ideological leadership on one of Islam’s most emotionally charged issues.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic moved beyond symbolism. Through relationships with groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Iran embedded itself directly into the Palestinian arena. These alliances allowed Tehran to exert tangible influence in conflicts that resonate across the Sunni world.

At the institutional level, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps became the primary vehicle for exporting Iran’s revolutionary doctrine. Its external operations extended into Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and beyond. Over time, Iran’s network of aligned militias and political actors formed a transnational web of influence stretching across the Middle East. For the United States and its allies, this development carries serious implications.

Iran’s strategy has not merely been about regional rivalry. It has been about shaping global Muslim political consciousness in a direction hostile to Western interests. Quds Day rallies in cities across Europe and North America serve as reminders that Tehran’s ideological export is not geographically confined.

The narrative architecture constructed in 1979 continues to function today: portray Iran as the uncompromising defender of Jerusalem; frame Sunni governments as passive or compromised; and position the West – particularly the United States – as the ultimate adversary.

This strategy has produced a paradox. Despite deep theological differences, segments of Sunni political movements and public opinion have at times echoed narratives aligned with the Suni framing of Israel and the West.

The Gulf monarchies – including Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates – have periodically accused Iran of interference or carrying out destabilizing activities. Yet the ideological groundwork laid through decades of

“al-Quds” mobilization has complicated efforts to counter Tehran’s influence decisively.

For American policymakers, the lesson is clear: Iran’s power projection is not limited to missiles, drones, or proxy militia – it is rooted in narrative dominance. By claiming guardianship over a cause central to Muslim identity, Tehran constructed a moral shield that softens sectarian resistance and broadens its appeal. Ignoring this dimension risks misreading the nature of the challenge.

The Iranian model demonstrates how a revolutionary state can leverage religious symbolism to transcend demographic limitations. A Shi’ite minority power succeeded in speaking to Sunni populations by carefully choosing the right issue – one that resonates emotionally and spiritually. For Sunni governments, a strategic reassessment may be overdue; for the West, complacency would be dangerous.

The ideological infrastructure built by Khomeini in 1979 has matured into a durable geopolitical instrument. It continues to influence public opinion, shape alliances, and complicate efforts to contain Tehran’s ambitions. If policymakers focus solely on military containment while neglecting the ideological battlefield, they will continue to underestimate Iran’s long-term strategy.

Nearly half a century after the Islamic Revolution, the architecture of Quds Day still stands – not merely as an annual protest, but as a reminder that influence in the modern Middle East is won as much through symbolism and narrative as through force.

The question is no longer whether Iran seeks leadership beyond its sectarian base. The evidence suggests it has pursued that objective methodically for decades. The more pressing question is whether the Suni framing of Israel and the United States – are prepared to confront not just Iran’s weapons, but its ideas.

The writer is an award-winning journalist, writer, and editor of the newspaper *Blitz*. He specializes in counterterrorism and regional geopolitics. Follow him on X: @Salah_Shoahib.



BISHOP ROBERT STEARNS at Eagles’ Wings’ Day of Prayer for the Peace of Jerusalem, last October. (Dudu Koren/Eagles’ Wings)

The real election fraud

WASHINGTON WATCH
• By DOUGLAS BLOOMFIELD

How can a person who has been lying every single day for the last 64 months about the outcome of the 2020 presidential election be trusted to make sure that this November's voting will be safe, secure, and honest?

Yet that's what President Donald Trump wants us to do. He is using all his power, with the collusion of a spineless Republican-led Congress, to make it more difficult for millions of Americans to cast their votes this fall and into the future.

He even fired his first-term attorney-general, William Barr, for having the audacity to speak the truth: that Trump's own Justice Department found no evidence of fraud in the 2024 election. "Making voting more difficult would most likely hurt Republicans' chances," he said.

Nonpartisan elections experts warn that this legislation "could disenfranchise millions of eligible voters by requiring new voters to provide documents that tens of millions of US citizens lack immediate access to," *The Washington Post* reported.

The politically independent Campaign Legal Center has said that the bill's restrictions "would actually amount to one of the harshest voter suppression laws nationwide," *The Washington Post* noted.

Many see the legislation as part of an effort to intimidate minorities, new citizens, the poor, and the elderly. It creates a fear of ICE agents lurking at polling places waiting to seize people who don't have the right skin color or accent.

It is fair to see this bill as part of a larger effort to steal November's congressional election. Polls show that the chances of a Democratic victory are growing, and Trump told GOP lawmakers he fears that means being impeached for a third time (he already holds the world record of two).

Retired federal judge J. Michael Luttig, a conservative, has warned that Trump is seeking "to subvert the midterm elections."

The president has been talking about nationalizing elections by usurping the states' constitutional authority to run their own elections. Many Republican-controlled states are restricting early voting as well as the locations, hours, and number of polling stations in heavily Democratic areas.

His fear of defeat also prompted him to press Texas and other GOP-led states to hastily redraw congressional lines to create safer Republican districts. That may backfire, since several Blue states responded by also redistricting.

Republicans are looking for another boost from the US Supreme Court, which could soon rule on a case aimed at striking down provisions of the Voting Rights Act that until now have permitted some congressional districting based on race to correct past discrimination.

Democrats largely oppose the war, particularly since Trump launched it with no congressional consultation, often with conflicting explanations for why now, and no real communication with the American public.

A *Washington Post* survey shows that 74% of Americans fear he is leading us to a full-scale war. And many voters are asking whether this was another diversion from Trump's Epstein scandal.

Most Republicans will cheer anything Trump does, especially since Iran is universally hated. But many are critical, particularly in growing numbers of his largely isolationist and increasingly discontented MAGA base.

They remember the day after his 2024 election when he promised, "I'm not going to start a war. I'm going to stop wars."

They were unhappy last June when he bombed Iran and unhappier now, especially as American casualties mount, the fighting drags on, gas prices go up, inflation returns, and affordability becomes a more critical question.

The SAVE Act and Trump's talk, threats, and demands about election reforms are false cures for a virtually non-existent problem.

The only election crisis facing this nation is the one Trump is trying to create by undermining Americans' trust in our electoral system through fear, intimidation, and outrageous lies.

The writer is a Washington-based journalist, consultant, lobbyist, and a former legislative director at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.



US PRESIDENT Donald Trump is seen at a ceremony at the White House on Monday. (Ken Cedeno/Reuters)

striking down provisions of the Voting Rights Act that until now have permitted some congressional districting based on race to correct past discrimination. If that happens, Republican-led states are expected to quickly redraw congressional maps to minimize minority representation.

Trump just added a new factor that could influence this year's elections: the war in Iran.

Much will depend on the outcome, which he will declare as a great victory in any scenario, and it could play out in unexpected ways.

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Regional war to regional agreements

ENCOUNTERING PEACE
• By GERSHON BASKIN

One of the most frequently cited observations about war and its outcomes is from Carl von Clausewitz: "War is the continuation of politics by other means." It is sometimes rendered as: "War is diplomacy by other means." Wars do not erupt in a vacuum. They are instruments used by states when diplomacy fails, collapses, or is deliberately abandoned. The expectation, at least in theory, is that war still serves political objectives.

Otto von Bismarck expressed this more bluntly: "Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments." President John F. Kennedy offered a moral counterweight: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." Henry Kissinger summarized the essence of statecraft succinctly: "The task of diplomacy is to restrain power."

Since the outbreak of the current war, launched with a preemptive US-Israeli strike against Iran, President Donald Trump stated in several interviews that he is willing to engage in negotiations with Iran. He has claimed that Iranian leaders want to talk and that he is prepared to do so, although the details and timing remain unclear.

I believe that the real intention of both Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is to force Iran into surrender through overwhelming military pressure, applied by the combined might of the United States and Israel, and reinforced by the involvement of countries attacked by Iran, including the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, and others hosting US military bases and assets. Iran, however, is unlikely to surrender; it is not

within the DNA of the regime of the ayatollahs.

Know from direct experience that in the lead-up to ending the war in Gaza, both Netanyahu and Trump believed Israel's military power would compel Hamas to surrender completely. In my conversations with senior American officials, I consistently argued that Hamas would never surrender but that it was willing to reach an agreement to release all the hostages in exchange for ending the war.

Hamas also indicated a willingness to relinquish control over Gaza. But without admitting a defeat (in fact, Hamas declared victory), Hamas was effectively defeated in Gaza, much as Iran is being militarily weakened today.

The Iranian regime will not voluntarily relinquish control over Iran. As Trump himself has stated, regime change ultimately depends on the Iranian people. The most hopeful historical model for Iranian regime change is what happened in Egypt in 2011, when President Hosni Mubarak resigned after 18 days of mass protests during the Arab Spring. That outcome became possible only when the Egyptian army chose to stand with the people rather than suppress them. That perhaps remains the most plausible scenario for Iran.

Even if the war does not lead to regime change, Iran will emerge significantly weakened, with its economy in devastation. This military defeat can and should be leveraged to initiate a rapid process of regional diplomacy enabled by the use of force. Iran's strategic mistake in attacking its Arab neighbors, assuming they would pressure Washington to end the war, has boomeranged. Instead, several of those states have chosen to

actively confront Iran. Even before being directly attacked, in April and October 2024 and again in June 2025, when Iran launched missiles toward Israel, neighboring states, including some without diplomatic relations with Israel, helped intercept Iranian missiles and drones. A de facto regional defense pact emerged without formal negotiations or signed agreements. This was remarkable. Unfortunately, it was not used as the foundation for a broader regional diplomatic framework.

At the time, Arab states and the US administration were focused primarily on ending the war in Gaza. The decisive American push to end the Israel-Hamas war came only after Israel attempted and failed to assassinate the Hamas leaders on sovereign Qatar soil on September 9, 2025. Following that incident, Arab governments insisted that Trump end the war, and he did.

TODAY, NEW opportunities exist. Trump and his Steve Witkoff-Jared Kushner team must ensure that this war becomes diplomacy by other means — in other words, that what follows war is diplomacy. Regional diplomacy will become real when Trump will commit to implementing point 20 of his 20-point plan. That opportunity is right in front of us.

Point 20 states: "While Gaza re-development advances and when the PA reform program is faithfully carried out, the conditions may finally be in place for a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood, which we recognize as the aspiration of the Palestinian people."

The most effective and fastest path forward would be for Trump, together with the Arab states attacked by Iran, to insist on conducting Palestinian presidential and parliamentary elections within three months,

to be held in the West Bank, east Jerusalem, and Gaza. It must be made clear that if those elections produce a Palestinian government committed to a two-state solution, peace with Israel, genuine reform, clean governance, and reconciliation, the new regional alliance will support the full implementation of point 20.

That process would then enable the full implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative from March 2002 that proposed to Israel that in exchange for enabling the establishment of a Palestinian state next to Israel based on the June 4, 1967, lines, "the Arab countries affirm the following: (a) Consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region. (b) Establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace."

Such steps should also profoundly affect the Israeli electorate, allowing the people of Israel to confront a new regional reality — one that will no longer tolerate the perpetuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is prepared to take decisive action to secure a stable Middle East, promote deep economic development, and ensure shared prosperity for all states in the region.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process would no longer be bilateral; it would become regional, with regional defense and security pacts as well as agreements for economic development for the benefit of all states in the region.

Even if a regime change in Iran is slow to occur, the scenario outlined above is the best possible outcome for Israel and for all of the peoples of the Middle East.

The writer is the Middle East director of the International Communities Organization and the co-head of the Alliance for Two States.

Operation Roaring Lion and the 2026 elections

• By ORI WERTMAN

The attack on Iran is undoubtedly an event of historic proportions that will certainly have many consequences for the Middle East and even beyond. Forty-seven years after Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile and established a murderous regime that terrorized the entire region, it seems that it is only a matter of time before the Iranian people (who must seize the opportunity given to them with both hands) are set free.

However, it is not only the Iranian people who will be able to breathe a sigh of relief if the ayatollah regime disappears from the map of the Middle East. Israel is expected to be the biggest beneficiary from the fall of the late Khomeini's reign of terror.

While many in the Jewish state took part in a move that will hopefully lead to the overthrow of the Iranian regime, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu deserves full credit for it. After Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar's decision to launch the October 7, 2023, attack that caught Israel by surprise, Netanyahu promised that not only would Hamas pay dearly for the murderous act, but also that the entire Middle East would soon change.

Many in Israel who belong to the left side of the political spectrum severely criticized the prime minister during the war for not pursuing a ceasefire. Yet Netanyahu, who opposed a reckless hostage deal that would keep Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip, chose to implement his strategy to lead change in the Middle East. His choice also came at the cost of a confrontation with the Biden administration, which in turn led to an arms embargo on the Jewish state.

More than any other leader in Israel and the entire world, Netanyahu simply understood that the path to peace does not pass through the appeasement of radical elements, who want to return the world to dark times. Alternatively, he believed that this could only be achieved by breaking those elements.

Now, after two and a half years of fighting, Netanyahu's strategy has led to the military defeat of those murderous elements who have terrorized Israel since the 1990s. Neither Sinwar — who certainly did not think about how much his decision to attack the Jewish state would lead to a chain reaction

that would destroy the axis of evil — Nasrallah nor Khomeini will be able to threaten Israel's existence any longer.

THE FIGHTING in Iran is expected to end soon, at which point the Israeli political system will return to the 2026 election campaign. The main conundrum is what impact Operation Roaring Lion will have on the political balance of power, which has seen many changes since the 2022 elections.

After these ended in a major victory of 64 seats for the right-wing parties, it was initially the judicial reform and the following Kaplan protests that led to the bloc's decline in power. Thus, at the end of September 2023, most polls gave the right-wing bloc 54 seats, of which 28 went to Netanyahu and the Likud. His party lost four seats in the 2022 elections to Benny Gantz's National Unity, which rose from 12 seats to 27 and became a governing alternative.

However, a month after the October 7 massacre, the right-wing bloc fell to 45 seats, with the Likud crashing to just 17, while National Unity rose to 36. Later, the achievements of the war in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, along with changes within the bloc of Netanyahu's opponents, would lead to a change in the political balance of power. These included the withdrawal of National Unity from the emergency government, the establishment of The Democrats led by Yair Golan, the return to the scene of former prime minister Naftali Bennett, and the separation of Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot.

Thus, most polls conducted before the current campaign in Iran show Netanyahu leading with 26 seats compared to Bennett's 21, with the right-wing bloc strengthening to 52.

In conclusion, time will tell whether a major event such as the overthrow of the regime in Iran will lead to a victory for the Netanyahu bloc in the 2026 elections. Following the 12 Day War against Iran, the prime minister managed to retain the support of four seats from Likud voters in the 2022 elections who had meanwhile "parked" with Gantz and then Bennett.

Hence, it is possible that this pattern will repeat itself very soon. What is certain is that the 2026 election campaign is expected to be particularly fascinating.

The writer is a lecturer and research fellow at the University of South Wales, UK, and author of *Collapse: Israeli Labor Party 1992-2024*.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

The Gulf's safe-haven status is under fire

Iran's retaliatory attacks tarnish the region's touted image of stability

For decades the fossil fuel-rich Gulf states have marketed themselves to investors, businesses and tourists as islands of stability in the otherwise volatile Middle East. But after the US and Israel launched their war against Iran over the weekend, Tehran has lashed out by firing waves of missiles and drones at the region, which is home to several American military bases. It is the nightmare scenario Gulf leaders have long feared.

Ever since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Gulf has considered Iran a malign force. In recent years, they have sought to manage the relationship by de-escalating with Tehran and bolstering diplomatic relations. As US President Donald Trump stepped up his threats against the Islamic republic,

regional officials publicly stated that they would not allow their territory to be used to attack their neighbour. The message was clear: they wanted to stay out of a conflict they had urged the US to avoid. But once Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ignited the war, and assassinated supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran has dramatically raised the stakes by targeting the US's Arab allies.

Tehran has struck military sites, US embassies, economic infrastructure and civilian buildings. At least a handful of people have been killed and hundreds injured. Airports were closed and airlines grounded. A defining image of Tehran's reckless retaliation was that of projectiles streaking across the skyscraper-laden night sky of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, the region's pre-eminent trade and tourism hub. Expats who came for the sun and low taxes were suddenly exposed to a version of the Middle East they did not bargain for. In Saudi Arabia, which has been des-

perate to lure foreign investment to help diversify its economy, Iranian drones struck its largest oil refinery and the US embassy in Riyadh. Neighbouring Qatar, one of the world's top exporters of liquefied natural gas, halted LNG production after its energy facilities were targeted. Shipping through the Strait of Hormuz – a vital choke point for global commodities – has also ground to a halt.

Iran may have calculated that high-profile attacks would pressure the US to de-escalate. Instead, they have angered Gulf leaders who had lobbied for a diplomatic solution. For now, their air defence systems appear to be taking out most of the projectiles. How long they can continue to do so will depend on the duration of the war, their ability to replenish stocks of air-defence interceptors and Iran's capacity to sustain its attacks under relentless bombing. Gulf leaders are also considering whether to take more offensive steps.

Although businesses are exploring

Expats who came for the sun and low taxes were suddenly exposed to a version of the Middle East they did not bargain for

contingencies, planned vacations are being cancelled, and tourists are trying to find flights home, it is too early to gauge the long-term consequences to the region's economic image. It is, however, clear that Trump and Netanyahu's lack of clear goals and the absence of planning for a postwar Iran has created dangerous unpredictability. If the US halts the conflict with the regime intact, Gulf states will have a wounded tiger on their doorstep. If the regime collapses, they could have another failed, fragmented state in their backyard. A stable transition to a more moderate, friendlier government in Iran seems unlikely.

The Gulf has done its best to project calm and the UAE, in particular, has a knack for regeneration. But even if there is a rapid de-escalation, Iran's attacks this week have shown the world that the Gulf is not insulated from the fragility and conflict that has plagued much of the rest of the Middle East. The region's brand is likely to survive, but its sheen may be wearing off.

Opinion Defence

No one wins in Anthropic vs Pentagon battle

Marianne Hengstler



Michael C Horowitz

Last Friday, the Pentagon announced that it was classifying AI as a supply chain risk after contract negotiations broke down. The label meant that not only would Anthropic lose its government contracts but that it was now grouped with Chinese companies like Huawei as a threat to US national security.

Less than 24 hours later, however, Anthropic's technology was reported to have been used in Operation Epic Fury against Iran. The dissonance of the tech company being labelled a supply chain risk even as it aided the US military was the latest chapter of an unnecessary, yet arguably inevitable, saga as AI is increasingly incorporated into the military.

Anthropic versus the Pentagon is a dispute about the role of government masquerading as a fight about policy.

Leaders of technology companies are used to being able to name their terms when negotiating

There was no prior disagreement between the two about any existing AI use cases by the American military. Nor were there public Pentagon plans to direct Anthropic to work on projects that would cross the red lines the AI company had set on the use of its tools for mass surveillance and autonomous weapon systems.

Moreover, OpenAI signed a deal with the Pentagon on Friday evening that contains 99 per cent of what Anthropic wanted and is working to amend the agreement to further strengthen the provisions that will prevent misuse of its technology.

These facts suggest that the dispute reflects a breakdown in trust. The Pentagon did not trust that Anthropic's tools would be available when needed for important national security uses; Anthropic did not trust the Pentagon to use its technology responsibly.

This raises questions about the level of control that the private sector can expect to wield when the military acquires its AI tools. The technology is largely regarded as predominantly civilian, unlike weapons of war such as tanks or missiles. But does that mean AI companies are entitled to more say about the way it is used? After all, companies like Lockheed don't expect to be able to tell the Pentagon where

they are allowed to launch missiles or deploy F35s.

There are, however, notable differences between typical military systems, which are essentially mature when purchased, and AI systems, which are constantly evolving. For example, Anthropic is almost certainly correct that its technology is not yet ready for incorporation into autonomous weapon systems.

It stands to reason that Anthropic would want input into the use of its systems in order to be effective.

However, this is distinct from having the right to make decisions about appropriate use of force. As the Pentagon has correctly argued, there are already detailed policies on autonomous weapon systems. These include DoD Directive 3000.09, which my former office updated in 2023. There are also legal obligations surrounding the use of force that should prevent dangerous battlefield uses of immature technology.

Perhaps this dispute was inevitable. Today's weapon systems already feature large degrees of autonomy and have for 40 years, including systems with no human supervision after launch. But the prospect of AI deciding when and how to use force presents new challenges for processes designed in the industrial era.

As a general-purpose technology, AI is reshaping economies and societies. Militaries like the US may have policies governing the incorporation of autonomous weapon systems but many have not been put to the test. And the leaders of today's technology companies are used to being able to name their terms when negotiating.

Regardless, it is disappointing to see the way in which the dispute has escalated. Anthropic was the first frontier AI company performing classified work to support American national security. Other AI companies will take note of the Pentagon's legally dubious claim that Anthropic is now a supply chain risk in an attempt to salt the earth over a contract dispute. This could make the pathway to some private partnerships harder in the future.

That would be a shame. The Pentagon has had a mutually beneficial relationship with American technology companies since the second world war. If Anthropic and the Pentagon cannot reach a resolution, then the real winner will be the countries hoping to topple America's AI and military supremacy, especially China. The US military will lose access to the talent and technology of one of the world's top AI companies. Let us hope they can reach a deal where everyone wins.

The writer is a professor and director of Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania and a former deputy assistant secretary at the US Department of Defense

The writer is a professor and director of Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania and a former deputy assistant secretary at the US Department of Defense

Letters

Europe's challenge is to turn leverage into diplomatic power

Martin Sandbu is right that Europe should think more seriously about the economic leverage it already has now that the global economy is being weaponised (Opinion, February 25). Mapping "chokepoints" – such as ASML's dominance in advanced chipmaking equipment to Europe's strength in specialist machinery – is important if Europe is going to have a seat at the table.

But having a chokepoint is not the same as being able to use it: the question is how to convert

"leverage" into actual diplomatic power.

Take ASML. First, using leverage can damage the asset itself. The company sells only a few dozen machines a year to a small group of customers, and its technological lead depends on close collaboration with them. Cutting off a major market would not be cost-free; it could weaken the business that creates the leverage in the first place.

Second, no country holds leverage in a vacuum. The Netherlands may dominate one critical technology, but it still depends heavily on the US for

security, finance and much of the wider tech ecosystem (eg cloud). Having a single strong card does not outweigh the rest of the deck.

Third, using chokepoints can speed up substitution. US chip restrictions have pushed China to invest heavily in its own capabilities, just look at DeepSeek. The more often leverage is used, the faster others innovate.

Fourth, Europe is operating in a free market. No playbook exists for how to use private sector companies within geopolitical contexts.

Fifth, if firms expect to be routinely drawn into political fights, future entrepreneurs may think twice about building global champions at home – eroding long-term competitiveness. Europe should build an economic security toolkit. But it also needs a harder debate about how to turn structural leverage into diplomatic influence.

Guy Ward-Jackson
Senior Policy Analyst – Science & Technology, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, London W11, UK

Trump's whack-a-mole approach to trade policy

Attention all exporters to the US: do not imagine for one minute that the US Supreme Court ruling to strike down President Trump's tariffs, imposed under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, will get you off the hook. That is the blunt message from Peter Navarro, Trump's counselor for trade ("Supreme Court ruling will not stop the president's tariffs", Opinion, February 24), who, instead of showing some deference to the court judges and contrition for the US administration's illegal tariff policy, instead hubristically comes out swinging with threats to employ sections 122, 201, 301 and 338 of various US trade acts and Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 to clobber hapless exporters to the US.

This "whack-a-mole" US trade policy should be called out for what it is: ill-conceived, chaotic, and inimical to the interests of exporters, importers and US consumers, not to speak more broadly of the damage inflicted on the global economy. Instead of threatening fire and brimstone to all and sundry,



Navarro would be well-advised to try a different policy founded on dialogue, negotiation and co-operation with US partners and allies, with the aim of recalibrating the faltering world trade system. What chance of this?
Richard Wright
University of London, UK

Chinese universities' rise in rankings no longer a given

Your Big Read article on "The ascent of China's universities" (February 27) was very useful in setting out the context, the investments and the ways and means used to influence the rankings. However, sadly it was too biased in two ways. First, the over-focus on the growing outputs in the sciences, STEM etc. Second, the under-emphasis on the importance of being "international", as measured by "global engagement", which accounts for 15 per cent in the QS World University Rankings.

At one time I thought the rise of Chinese universities in the rankings was inexorable, but now I am not so sure. Rather I see more of a plateau developing and emerging.

This is partly because of the inertia and constraints Chinese universities face when trying to increase the internationalisation both of their faculty and of their students – and hence this part of the rankings total.
Professor Chris Rowley
Kellogg College, University of Oxford, and Bays Business School, City St George's, University of London, UK

Visionary idea for Ghana's ageing cocoa farmers

Patti Waldmeir's article (Outlook, March 5) effectively captures the pressures on an ageing workforce trapped by low productivity and falling prices. But there is another invisible barrier holding back Ghana's older cocoa farmers. Many cannot see clearly enough to do their work.

Cocoa farming relies on sharp near vision to spot pests, hand-pollinate flowers, read fertiliser instructions, sort beans and use mobile banking. We have screened the vision of thousands of cocoa farmers. Four in five over the age of 40 have blurry vision. Most have never owned a pair of glasses.

The impact of receiving glasses is immediate. Tasks that had become slow and frustrating become manageable again. In a randomised control trial, reading glasses increased productivity by up to 32 per cent among older agricultural workers.

Better roads and fair prices are vital. So is making sure farmers have eyeglasses to see clearly.
Ella Gudwin
CEO, VisionSpring, New York, NY, US

OUTLOOK AMERICA

The reality of delusions induced by chatbots

asking in the sun in Oregon's high desert, Adam Thomas felt at one with the universe. He was spending hours each day talking to ChatGPT and the conversations had filled him with a sense of higher purpose. The chatbot had told him that he was a "tuning fork" sent to "sync up" with every person in the world.

He believed it. Over the course of a few months he had grown to believe that ChatGPT had given him enhanced, superhuman cognitive abilities. As he became lost in the grip of his delusion he would call out what he saw as problematic behaviours in the way his friends and family lived. The repercussions were severe. The 36-year-old former accounting professional became increasingly isolated from his support network and lost his job. He ended up roaming state parks with only ChatGPT for company. "Because of the AI, I got spun way out into some ridiculous storyline that it was my job to save the world," he said.

In reality, the chatbot was just trying to be agreeable. Large language models will happily engage in role-play if they think that is what a user wants. Research released by AI start-up Anthropic in 2023 found that the LLMs that underpin chatbots often prioritised agreeing with a user's perspective over being truthful.

"Synchancy in these more extreme cases is about telling them, 'You are so right. You're seeing this thing nobody

else is seeing,'" said Steven Adler, a former OpenAI safety researcher. "But the core underlying behaviour is about reinforcing whatever the user is saying. It's just a yes man."

Thomas's experience is one of many similar stories I have heard. While making a podcast about AI-induced psychosis I spoke to one user who believed the chatbot knew where their soulmate would be and another who became convinced that an AI company had identified him as a threat.

Many, including Thomas, initially turned to AI for therapy. One survey from the UK suggests over one in three adults have used AI to support their mental health. Yael Schonbrun, a practising clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University, said chatbots could offer a "non-judgmental" safe space.

"I've had experiences where a client will stream-of-conscious with a chatbot and arrive at a greater clarity of what it is that they think and feel," she said. However, she cautioned that the validating aspect could be both positive and negative. "In the context of therapy, there's often a balance between validating somebody and challenging them," she added.

Initially, Thomas found ChatGPT useful in helping him open up about trauma. But over the weeks of constant back-and-forth conversation, he entered a manic state.

"It started to tell me I'm a tuning fork. I have a special role in the world. I'm the only one who's noticing certain

problems with interactions between humans," he said. "I was spinning myself way out into my imagination, I didn't even know because it is so good at making irrational things seem rational."

What brought him back to reality was OpenAI changing its model. The new model, GPT-5, was released last summer with a particular focus on reducing synchancy. Earlier this year OpenAI retired the model Thomas had used – 4o – altogether.

When asked about chatbot-induced delusions, OpenAI said that it had improved how ChatGPT responded to mental health topics, including psychosis, mania and isolated delusions.

"We've strengthened how GPT-5, the default model powering ChatGPT, recognises distress, de-escalates conversations and guides people toward real-world support," a spokesperson said. They added that it had "expanded access to professional help and crisis resources, added reminders to take breaks during long sessions" and that it worked with clinicians, researchers and policymakers globally.

Thomas believes that users also need to be reminded what AI chatbots are and are not. "Discernment is a must when using AI, as they are coherence generators, not truth generators," he said. "If we want to use AI safely as a society, we must all understand that one simple fact."

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by Cristina Criddle

Opinion

Can Reese's have too many pieces?



BUSINESS
Brooke Masters

Back in the 1980s, candy brand Reese's blanketed the airwaves with adverts that featured a milk chocolate lover colliding with someone who had peanut butter and discovering "two great tastes that taste great together".

Now, a grandson of the inventor of the peanut butter cup is making waves with claims that current owner Hershey is damaging the brand with spin-off products that contain neither real chocolate nor proper peanut butter.

When Brad Reese first saw a package of Valentine-themed "mini hearts", he says: "I was so excited to try it. But then I had to spit it out and throw it away. It was not edible."

His public campaign to "protect Reese's brand integrity" against what

the company calls peanut-butter creme and chocolate candy coatings highlights the risks companies run when they try to wring new sales and higher profits out of much-beloved brands.

Hershey defends its stewardship of Reese's, which it has owned since 1963. The company has vastly expanded the brand's reach with dozens of bright orange-wrapped spin-offs, including ice cream, snack mix, candy bars and, a new big driver of growth, Reese's Oreos.

The company insists that original cups "are made the same way they have always been". But it admits that "as we've grown and expanded the Reese's product line, we make product recipe adjustments that allow us to make new shapes, sizes and innovations".

Brad Reese would beg to differ – rather than innovation, he sees what economists call "skimpflation", offering less for similar prices. He notes some Reese's-branded candy bars and Easter eggs also use chocolate candy coating.

The fight comes as other consumer brands are having to take a hard second look at their reliance on clever extensions of popular brands to lift profits.

The logic once seemed unassailable. Why sell one globally famous cookie, tortilla chip or dish soap when you could sell three or five?

Shared branding stretches marketing budgets and novel versions can be used to woo new customers – Mondelez International aimed the 2015 debut of Oreo Thins squarely at adult women.

Companies run risks when they try to wring new sales and higher profits out of much-beloved brands

positioning the lower-calorie version as "grown-up" and "chic".

Brand extensions also helped establish brands squeeze out upstart competitors. Every time Mars rolled out another variety of its M&M candies, it gobbled up another supermarket shelf slot that could have gone to a rival product. In the two decades since 1996 US grocery product launches had nearly doubled to 59,000 a year.

New versions continue to be a saving grace for companies whose core products are falling out of favour. Drinks maker Diageo has been having a miserable run as cash-strapped consumers cut back after a pandemic-fuelled binge. But the new blackberry flavour of its Crown Royal Canadian whisky is an exception to the general gloom. Pitched at new customers rather than aficionados, the sweet variation is relatively affordable and used in mixed drinks.

But other brands are reconsidering the cornucopia of offerings. First the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains and forced executives to prioritise the most popular offerings just to fill the shelves. High inflation then squeezed both margins and customer budgets.

These days, the cost of supplying and stocking so many varieties of similar products has started to outweigh the benefits – particularly if the new versions cause customers to question the value of the original.

Some retailers look with envy at warehouse chain Costco, which keeps prices down by offering only 4,000 products at

a time, versus nearly 50,000 at a traditional grocery store. Home improvement chain Lowe's recently boasted that it has improved margins by cutting the number of individual items sold by 15 per cent.

Pressure on big consumer brands is also mounting from the rise of private-label offerings, which lift retailers' profits and cost customers less.

With a fight on for both shelf space and consumer wallet share, the idea of betting hard on a few top-selling products has started to look more attractive. PepsiCo announced in December that it would shrink its product stable by 20 per cent while also cutting prices. It was under fire from an activist investor, but other brands are likely to feel the heat.

So far, Hershey is sticking to its guns, arguing that a "broad offering of choices... lets more people enjoy Reese's". But the more critics draw attention to the different – Brad Reese would say inferior – ingredients in so many of the spin-off products, the riskier that strategy becomes.

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To stop UK's debt fatalism, look past charts of doom



ECONOMICS
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Every year, the Office for Budget Responsibility publishes a chart of doom showing the projected path for UK public debt based on unchanged government policy. The latest chart, reproduced in Tuesday's Spring Statement, shows debt rising from about 95 per cent of GDP now to 275 per cent in just under 50 years' time. This rise, to an unsustainable level, would be caused by the higher public spending needs of an ageing population, the fiscal watchdog said.

As might be expected from an independent economic institution, the OBR does not pull its punches. With the Middle East in flames, it correctly reminds us that recent rises in UK public debt have come from similar "misperceived shocks". In its first long-term public finance report from 2011, for example, it expected public debt to be around 60 per cent of GDP in 2025-26 and the actual figure of a little under 100 per cent is far worse.

These warnings, which the OBR has been issuing for the past 15 years, have not worked. The charts of doom simply breed fatalism – demonstrated by the increasingly thin government responses to the watchdog's long-term public finance projections.

The good news is that this bad equilibrium is not necessary. When it produces the chart of doom on debt, the OBR explicitly states that the projections are based on "unchanged government policy". This is simply false. A foundational

Warning every year that the sky is falling to induce fiscal discipline

assumption in its long-run estimates is that the government will raise income tax allowances and thresholds and non-pensioner benefits every year in line with average earnings.

This has never been UK government policy. The Rooker-Weale amendment in 1977 changed the default from freezing these amounts in cash terms to annual uprating by the retail prices index, which was further changed in 2007 in the Income Tax Act to consumer price index uprating. This is the legislation that chancellor Rachel Reeves needed to amend when she froze all allowances and thresholds in last year's Budget until 2030-31.

More than that, the default assumption is crucial in generating the appearance of unsustainable UK public finances. João Sousa, deputy director of the Fraser of Allander Institute and a former economist at the OBR, has demonstrated that simply changing the uprating rules on taxes and benefits to the actual basis of UK government policy would transform the long-term projections of public debt. Instead of rising to 275 per cent of GDP, debt would fall to a completely sustainable 36 per cent. The projections really are that sensitive to this one assumption.

Of course, price uprating of tax thresholds and allowances would sharply increase income tax receipts as a share of GDP, which is also what has happened over the past four years and is projected to continue. It is not unrealistic.

Between 2011 and around 2015, the OBR used to state explicitly that it was making the assumption of earnings-related uprating in allowances and thresholds, but it gradually became bored with this and now fails to mention it at all, let alone question its accuracy.

And the doom-laden prophecies have not provided a wake-up call for politicians. Much better would be to show the default policy of price indexation alongside a persistently rising tax burden and pose the following: if you do not like the idea that income taxes will rise persistently, you could choose other options, such as lowering the rate of growth of health spending, raising the state pension age faster or changing the "triple lock" on its annual uprating. These are the realistic choices the UK faces.

Warning every year that the sky is about to fall in has clearly failed to induce fiscal discipline. Perhaps it is time to start treating the government and the public like grown-ups.

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Be glad of Starmer's caution on Iran



POLITICS
Janan Ganesh

Consider the choice that came before Sir Keir Starmer last week.

If the UK were to support unreservedly another open-ended American war in the Middle East – from where no threat was imminent – it would have shown that it had learnt the square root of nothing from the recent past. But then, if the UK were to oppose the action, it would invite Donald Trump's wrath, which itself has life-and-death implications. The defence of our archipelago relies on American support, up to and including the Trident nuclear deterrent. So does the future of Ukraine.

To this hideous dilemma, Starmer's answer has been to oppose the initial attack but then join the defence against Iran's retaliation. This is not an abundance of caution. It is the least amount of the stuff that one would expect. Nor is Starmer being indecisive. He opposed the phase of the war that he understood to be illegal, and supported the phase that he understood to be legal. Or, if international public law is not the paramount concern, put it this way. He would not have provoked Iran but, once it struck British allies, he responded

with force. British jets shot down drones over Jordan on Tuesday.

In the end, Trump's wrath came anyway, as it did to Spain, with which he wants to "cut off all trade" for withholding use of its bases. But pleasing the US is a – not the – test of policy. The extent to which the Conservatives and Reform UK believe otherwise is unnerving. The Tories make much of the fact that Canada and Australia backed Trump from the start. Well, Australia sent combat troops to the Vietnam war. Britain, like the rest of Europe, did not. If the Tories regret that abstention as a betrayal of the Anglosphere, they should let us know. On Iran, Starmer's position lined up with France and Germany.

An even more important alignment is with the public. The polls suggest that British voters oppose the US action. At this point, a certain kind of armchair admiral will puff themselves up and say that leadership is about leading, that Winston Churchill never read a focus group. No one who lived through the Iraq years can entertain this bluster. A country's ability to meet its war objectives does hinge on sentiment at home. The occupation of Iraq (and Afghanistan) might have gone better with double or tripled troop presence, but western electorates would not have worn it. The unpopularity of a war is a rational operational argument against waging it, if not the all-decisive one.

In Britain's parliamentary system, the prime minister does not get to ask questions of the opposition leader. Columnists are not so bound. Here goes, then.



Did you expect that some air strikes on Iran last Saturday would metastasise into a regional conflict by Monday? If not, doesn't that argue for some humility going forward? If Iran were to become a failed state, what should Britain do to stabilise it? After all, by dint of geography, Britain is likelier than America to feel the ripples, including the flow of refugees. If the regime survives to become even more hostile, what should be the British contribution to removing it? Sorry to be a bore about this, but neither the Iraq nor the Afghanistan nor the Libya experiences entice interventionists to the benefit of the doubt.

There is not enough disdain in the kingdom for this government's domestic record. Labour was never ready to

Past experiences in the region do not entitle interventionists to the benefit of the doubt

run the country, as some were willing to warn at the time, when the credulous were going about with "Britain is back" on their lips.

"Domestic" is an important qualifier, though. On the foreign front, Labour has fixed some of the vandalism of the post-Cameron Tories through such innovative ploys as deigning to visit the second-biggest economy on Earth. Starmer has also improved the relationship with the EU and absolved himself to Trump in Britain's (and Ukraine's) interest.

His caution over Iran is of a piece with this record. In contrast, the least electable thing about the otherwise improving Conservative leader remains her foreign posture. It is worth dwelling on something that Kemi Badenoch said this week. "Across the UK there are groups whose political loyalties when it comes to conflicts in the Middle East do not align with British national interests. These are people who Labour sees as their voters because without them, they cannot stay in power."

Badenoch's most impressive trait is plain-speaking, born of clear thinking. Here, she is all coyness and innuendo. If she means Muslim voters, she should spell it out. A couple of rebuttals could then be put forward in the open. First, opposition to this war is not confined to Muslims, as she might find out in the coming weeks. Second, her party has for decades been sensationally bad at constraining the British "interest". Examples include its support for the Iraq war and a Brexit that most voters regard as a mistake.

Those who impugned the patriotism of fellow citizens should not mind if the discourtesy is returned. The British right's desire to live vicariously through the US is even more pronounced than when the Brexit vote happened a decade ago. Most of the time, it is merely unbecoming. When the issue is war, it is rather worse than that. The fatal jingoism that Wilfred Owen wrote about with such controlled anger in "Dulce et Decorum est" was, at least, on behalf of one's own country.

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TRADE
Alan Beattie

wonder how Narendra Modi is feeling right now. Last month the Indian prime minister was coerced into agreeing a draft trade deal with

Donald Trump, vaguely promising that India would stop buying cheap Russian oil and import fossil fuels from the US instead. With the price of oil and gas surging after the US bombing of Iran, Modi's incentive is ever stronger to renege – and to diversify out of hydrocarbons altogether and reduce all trade and economic reliance on the US.

The immediate impact of the Iran attacks in terms of higher oil prices is evident, though the wider economic damage may not be catastrophic. Unlike the Red Sea and its route to the Suez Canal, threatened since 2023 by attacks from Houthi militants, the Gulf is not a

major artery for non-energy shipping.

The further eros on of US economic leadership, however, is substantial. For governments outside the US and China, particularly low and middle-income countries, the competing economic superpower offers are now as follows. From the US you get forced into trade deals promising a future of burning fossil fuels whose price is subject to wildly destructive US adventurism. From China you get reliably cheap EVs and green tech to generate renewables. Admittedly these come with other forms of economic coercion attached, such as controls on rare earth minerals, but at least they don't deliver juddering shocks to growth.

Whatever Trump does next, unless he actually starts carpet-bombing solar farms, it is unlikely to threaten a development model based on renewable energy. The International Energy Agency last year reduced its forecast for US renewables growth by nearly 50 per cent because of Trump removing tax incentives and blocking new wind projects, but increased its forecast for India by nearly 10 per cent, citing

increases in the capacity of onshore wind and solar generation.

For decades the US was a net oil importer in a global economy based on fossil fuels, and was therefore intent on enforcing stability of supply from the Middle East. Jimmy Carter's 1980 doctrine of maintaining a US-friendly Gulf was followed by the first Iraq war a decade later. By contrast, Trump's promise this week to insure and escort oil tank-

ers in the Gulf is merely a stopgap. The exploitation of domestic shale, which had turned the US into a net exporter by 2019, plus huge improvements in renewable energy technology, ought to have given it insulation from oil price shocks and respite from constant security vigilance in the Gulf region.

Instead, Trump has turned America's

back on the green tech revolution while threatening the global oil market with attacks first on Venezuela and now Iran. In the latter case in particular, the administration itself can't seem to understand what it's trying to achieve.

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ing is merely aspirational. But there the dollar is used as a tool of coercion, the more other nations will seek alternatives.

Almost every action the Trump administration takes in geopolitics screams "diversify and insulate" at its trading partners. With splendid timing, Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney, whose Davos speech in January envisaged a world without the US as a reliable leader, started a tour this week aimed at building a "middle power alliance".

Carney's first stop was India, where you can be pretty sure that Iran and the energy trade were on the agenda. He and Modi launched an energy security strategy, including a plan to share nuclear technology and jointly to host a renewable energy summit.

Trump seems intent on trashing more than half a century of US leadership of the world economy. The bombing of Iran is just another step on his destructive journey. Other governments are entirely sensible to detach themselves before they become collateral damage.

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