WEB EXCLUSIVE
BJP's sweep in Bengal cannot be reduced to one factor. Here are five
— Ayan Guha
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The more the state 'plans' the more difficult planning becomes for the individual. *— Friedrich A Hayek*

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Weakening rupee points to challenges ahead

THE INDIAN rupee continues to weaken. On Tuesday, it hovered around 95.36 against the dollar during early trading. Since the beginning of this year, the currency has fallen by around 5.64 per cent. Sentiment continues to be weighed down by the conflict in West Asia, with fresh attacks rattling investors. But the pressure on the Indian currency predates the Iran war. Last year, the rupee fell by roughly 5 per cent against the dollar. The problem is on both the current and capital accounts.

Global crude oil prices remain elevated due to energy market dislocations, exerting pressure on the current account. Brent crude is currently around $113 per barrel. In April, the price of the Indian crude oil basket averaged $114.48 per barrel, according to data from the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell. There is the possibility of the current account deficit widening to around 2 per cent in 2026-27. While this is considerably lower than that around the period of the taper tantrum — the deficit had widened to 4.8 per cent of GDP in 2012-13 — financing it will be challenging in the current environment. Capital flows are under pressure. So far in the calendar year, foreign portfolio investors have taken out around $21.2 billion from the stock markets. This comes after outflows of $18.9 billion last year. While the central bank has been taking steps to ease the stress on the rupee, its short dollar book has swelled, the pressure on the currency continues. In previous episodes of such stress, the RBI attempted to facilitate capital inflows through various instruments. For instance, during the taper tantrum, funds were mobilised through the FCNR-B deposits.

So far, retail fuel prices have not been adjusted to reflect the higher global prices. But there are limits to the burden that can be borne by the oil companies and the government — the war has been going on for more than two months. Higher prices at the pump will push up retail inflation across the country — retail inflation edged up to 3.4 per cent in March. A few days ago, the price of the commercial LPG cylinder was raised by Rs 993, which will translate to higher input costs for restaurants, hotels, commercial kitchens etc, feeding price pressures. A prolonged conflict will impact economic momentum, worsening the growth-inflation dynamics. The macroeconomic situation calls for deft and delicate management.

On being left out and left behind

IN 2015, the late Sitaram Yechury wrote in *The Marxist*: "We [communists] have, for many decades, been repeating the Leninist dictum that the 'concrete analysis of concrete conditions is the living essence of dialectics'... An incorrect estimation of the concrete conditions, naturally, will lead to an erroneous political line and consequent tactical line." The CPI(M)'s current political nadir — in fact, the seemingly interminable decline of all of India's communist parties — is evidence, among other things, of a prolonged "incorrect estimation". With the defeat of the Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF in Kerala, the communist parties are not part of a single government in the country for the first time in nearly 50 years. This decline was not one foretold by "historical forces". It is, rather, a function of a series of interconnected failures and complicities.

Vijayan's return to power in the last election bucked the trend of anti-incumbency verdicts in Kerala, and it is conceivable that the LDF may return in 2031. Even if that is the case, however, a party that, at its height, was the third-largest in Parliament with a government in three states, is now a contender in one. The decline is not merely electoral; it is also reflected in the depletion of ideas and organisation. Take the changing nature of work and the ways in which workers' rights can be undermined in the "gig economy". Parties and movements that claim to stand for those left behind by the system should be at the forefront of articulating their concerns. Yet, an absence of "concrete analysis of concrete conditions" has meant that the CPI, CPI(M) and others are merely playing catch-up. There is also a fundamental organisational question. For a long time, the tension between the popular leader and the party — as with Jyoti Basu in Bengal and VS Achuthanandan in Kerala — has deepened factional faultlines. If the left is to recover, it must decide who is best placed to lead that recovery: Those with their ears to the ground or those who fear "revisionism" more than political extinction.

Over the last four decades — beginning with the fall of the Soviet Union — the obituary of the Indian left has been written many times. The difference in the last decade is the rise of a political force that, like the communists, is cadre-based and ideologically driven. The left, unless it comes up with fresh ideas, is bound to be left behind.

In the name of country, away from home

WAR-SCARRED women footballers from Afghanistan living in exile across the world, can finally play in FIFA tournaments. After eight long years, they can proudly bear their country's name, and not compete under the Afghan Women United banner. Although FIFA has not officially recognised the Afghan Football Federation, as the ruling Taliban has banished all women's sports, the world football governing body's council voted on Tuesday to circumvent the rule. It's a resonant moment.

This moment offers hope and fires the imagination of athletes who fled the country when the Taliban returned to power in 2021. When it started restricting women's sports, 70-odd women fled their country just so that they could continue playing football, with the help of expats around the world. Their captain, Shabnam Mobarez, who was raised in Denmark, reached out to the community across the world and soon they found refuge in Australia, England, where the women's youth team trains, in partnership with the Premier League side Leeds United, Portugal and Italy.

The team will have success stories like Mobarez, Nadia Nadeem and Khalida Popal to emulate. They have rising talents like Fatima Foladi, who sneaked into the airport, showed her football credentials to the US military retreating from the country and managed to board the flight to the US. Manoozh Noori buried her medals in her backyard and escaped to Australia, where she plays for a club in the top division. Nilab Mohammadi, the women's team captain, left her post in the Afghanistan Army and fled to Australia. Some of their tales are stranger than fiction. They might never be as famous as Brazil's Marta or Spain's Alexia Putellas, but no law or custom could stop them from turning up for their country and fulfilling their dream.

Left needs to find a new vocabulary for the economy of aspiration

THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

FOR NEARLY a century, the image of the hammer and sickle has been more than just a relic of the Cold War in India; it has been a governing reality. While the Soviet Union collapsed and China pivoted to state-sponsored capitalism, India remained a peculiar outlier — a vibrant democracy where card-carrying Communists didn't just protest in the streets, but sat in the halls of power, winning elections and running states — West Bengal, Tripura, and most enduringly, Kerala.

But today, as the news of the decimation of the Communists in the Kerala Assembly elections sinks in, that historical anomaly faces a Francis Fukuyama moment: Is this "the end of history" for Indian Communism? With the rout of the incumbent Left Democratic Front (LDF), India will, for the first time in nearly 50 years, be without a single Communist-led state government. For a movement that once positioned itself as the inevitable future of the Global South, this isn't just an electoral dip; it seems the sun has set on Indian Communism.

To understand the gravity of this moment, one must examine the Left's rapid collapse. As late as the middle of the first decade of the century, the Communists were the kingmaker of Indian politics, holding over 60 seats in the Lok Sabha and providing the crucial outside support that kept the central UPA government stable. They were the ideological guardians of the welfare state, taking a share of the credit for MNREGA, vetoing aggressive privatisation and pulling support to the government over India's nuclear deal with the United States.

The decline was swift and brutal. First came the fall of West Bengal in 2011, ending a record-breaking 34-year reign. Then, in 2018, their second stronghold of Tripura collapsed to the BJP. In both cases, it wasn't just a defeat but a decimation: The party was reduced to a cipher in states it had ruled with such authority. This left Kerala — the first state in the country to elect a Communist government in 1957 —as the last redoubt, bolstered by the fact that despite a half-century practice of Kerala voters turfing out incumbent governments every five years, the Left won a historic re-election in the midst of Covid, in 2021. So what happened to reduce them to 35 seats out of 140 today?

Today's crisis isn't merely one of arithmetic; it's one of language. The Indian Left has struggled to find a new vocabulary for a "New India". They have never quite come to terms with the economy of aspiration. Historically, the Left drew its strength from organised labour and agrarian reform. But since the 1990s, India's growth has been driven by services, gig work, and a soaring middle-class aspiration. To a young coder in Gurgaon or a delivery driver in Kolkata, rhetoric opposing liberalisation or capitalism can sound less like protection from exploitation and more like a barrier to opportunity.

> Even if the hammer and sickle disappear from the map this month, the questions the Left raised — about inequality, the unstable indignity of labour, and the need for a social safety net — will continue to haunt 'New India' for years to come

At the same time, the Communists have long ceased to hold the trademark on social welfare. Every other party is matching or beating the Left at its own game. The Congress had its "Indira Guarantees" in Kerala; even New Delhi has repackaged welfare as targeted delivery. By providing gas cylinders, toilets, and digital cash transfers directly to the poor, other parties and the central government have overtaken the traditional class-based mobilisation of the Left.

Nationally, the Communists also became victims of the far-reaching change in the patterns of political mobilisation from class solidarity (in the era of strong unions and the allure of global Communism) to other forms of identity politics — the latter both caste-based and religious, as well as, in some states, regional and cultural. While the Left spoke of universal class-consolidation, regional and caste-based parties spoke a more intimate language of social dignity. Indian Communism, dominated largely by an ageing and mostly upper-caste leadership, failed to reorganise its internal hierarchy to reflect the rising power of subordinated castes nationwide.

Despite the national trend, Kerala has always been different. Its Communists had a strong lower-caste and OBC base and were not above stigmatising the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Congress, as a party of minorities. But that kind of appeal to the Hindu majority waned with the rise of the BJP in the last decade.

Finally, governance failures took centre stage. The "Kerala Model" — prioritising healthcare and education over industrial output — earned the state international praise, helping win re-election during the pandemic for its robust public health response. However, by 2026, the Communists carried a heavy burden of anti-incumbency. The UDF attacked the government on rising state debt, corruption and the exodus of youth seeking opportunities elsewhere. With the LDF's rout, the arc that began in 1957 has finally begun to close.

Is this the final chapter for Marxism in the world's most populous democracy? Not necessarily. Unlike the stagnant administrations of the past in Bengal, the Communists in Kerala have proven to be more adaptive and competent. And we can't forget the state's political pendulum: Kerala has habitually swapped its government every five years. The LDF's loss now after a second successive term might not be a rejection of Marxism so much as a return to the state's democratic rhythm. Unless a game-changing UDF government ensures otherwise, the "Red Sunset" could just prove to be a scheduled eclipse before the next cycle.

In the end, the "Communist" label in India is less about Cold War ideology and more about a unique brand of social-democratic welfare. Even if the hammer and sickle disappear from the map this month, the questions the Left raised — about inequality, the unstable indignity of labour, and the need for a social safety net — will continue to haunt "New India" for years to come. The red flag may be lowered, but the grievances it raised will have to be addressed by others.

Meanwhile, the issue for the Indian Left is no longer whether history has ended, but whether it still has a compelling story to tell.

The author is a fourth-term Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram and co-chaired the party's campaign in 2026

A student's grit, a Lucknow school's lesson in inclusion

KAUSHIK DAS GUPTA

THE DECLARATION of school passing-out results often brings to light accounts of remarkable grit and fortitude — of young people taking important steps in their aspirational journey despite formidable odds. Among this year's exceptional graduates is Sarah Moin, who scored more than 98 per cent — the highest among 258 students at Lucknow's Christ Church College. But her achievement is much more than academic excellence in conventional terms. It is a testament to the 19-year-old's resolve in the face of layered challenges, one that was nurtured by an ecosystem that responded with empathy and imagination.

Sarah's life took a difficult turn early. Diagnosed at the age of four with a rare condition that gradually dimmed her vision, she would, within a few years, lose her hearing as well, followed by the onset of speech difficulties. The youngster's parents formed the first circle of resilience around her. They chose a school that gave wings to her dreams. Christ Church College arranged individualised classes, ensured that textbooks were scanned and converted into accessible digital formats, and enabled her to engage with them through a Braille-based device. Question papers were adapted so she could read them through touch, and her responses were transcribed into standard text for evaluation.

In recent years, students' enrolment has increased appreciably. Yet, survey after survey has shown that this achievement remains incomplete in the face of rigid pedagogies that are not sensitive to varied learning experiences. Sarah's journey shows that inclusion is not just about bringing the child to the classroom but also a result of creative efforts to transform institutional culture to respond to diverse needs.

Therein also lies an irony. Sarah's story is compelling because it directs attention to a larger, more uncomfortable question. Is India's educational ecosystem, as a whole, equipped — or even willing — to become an enabler in the way her school did?

Flagship programmes and legislative frameworks, such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act, have sought to institutionalise the idea that education is a right, not a privilege. At the level of policy, the government acknowledges that education must respond to diversity — of ability, gender, caste, language, and socio-economic background. The National Education Policy 2020 has foregrounded inclusion, flexibility, and multidisciplinary learning; it has spoken of teachers' autonomy. Yet, teachers like Salman Ali Qazi, who stood by Sarah, enabling her to use the assistive technologies and build bridges between curriculum and cognition, are rare.

The scattered, but significant, instances of schools and educators rising to the challenge of diverse learners also underline the flip side — overworked, disempowered and undertrained teachers and curricula that often privilege rote learning. For every student who gets adaptive support, a large number of children at intersections of disadvantage — from marginalised castes, minorities, girls, to those with disabilities — struggle to navigate structures which do not recognise their needs. India stands at a demographic crossroads, with one of the youngest populations in the world. This dividend can only be earned if the education system equips young people — not a privileged subset, but all of them — with the confidence and capabilities required to participate meaningfully in the economy.

There is, of course, no template to address diversity and inequality. And, it may not be correct to replicate Christ Church College's programmes in another context. However, Sarah's story is illustrative of what an inclusive system can achieve. The question, then, is whether the choices she had can be scaled — whether the sensitivity and creativity demonstrated by the Lucknow school can become the norm rather than a rarity. Can classrooms across the country be reoriented to accommodate diverse learning needs? Can teacher training programmes equip educators to engage with difference not as a challenge to be managed, but as an opportunity to enrich the learning environment?

These are not easy questions, and they do not admit quick answers. Today, as Sarah stands at the threshold of a major transition, let's all wish her the best. And, hope her story becomes the catalyst for expanding the horizons of many others.

> Sarah Moin's achievement is a testament to her resolve in the face of layered challenges, one that was nurtured by an ecosystem that responded with empathy and imagination

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At Met Gala, a refusal to edit the artisan out

NIRBHAY RANA

LUXURY FASHION has perfected a paradox: It celebrates craftsmanship while depending on the invisibility of the craftspeople. At the 2026 Met Gala — where the theme invited fashion to be seen as art — this contradiction was staged, illuminated, and, in one rare moment, disrupted. An Indian designer did something the global fashion system rarely allows: He made labour visible.

When filmmaker Karan Johar appeared in a Raja Ravi Varma-inspired ensemble, he translated Indian visual culture into the language of global couture. The garment functioned as a canvas, layering history, mythology, and identity into a form legible to the West. But if Johar's appearance expanded what could be seen as fashion, designer Manish Malhotra used his appearance to question who gets to be seen within it.

His now widely discussed "Mumbai" cape did something the global fashion system rarely permits: It named its makers. The artisans behind the garment were credited directly on the piece.

For decades, fashion has relied on an illusion. Craft is elevated as heritage, skill, even artistry. But the artisan is kept at a distance. The value of luxury depends not just on labour, but on its invisibility. This is systemic. In global fashion, visibility is curated — and labour is what gets edited out. Events like the Met Gala do not produce fashion, but they define how fashion is understood. They are stages of symbolic power, where garments are detached from their conditions of production and reintroduced as art, fantasy, or cultural capital. In this translation, labour disappears.

In recent years, the industry has adopted the language of sustainability, craft revival, and ethical fashion. Yet much of it remains aesthetic. The language has evolved faster than the system itself. Craft becomes a signifier of authenticity; sustainability becomes a visual cue. The deeper structures — wages, attribution, and working conditions — rarely enter the frame. This is not always outright deception. It is something more insidious: A system in which ethics can be performed without being redistributed.

Seen this way, Malhotra's gesture acquires a significance. By naming artisans, he collapses the distance between creation and creator. He challenges the idea that design belongs to a single author. It also showed that Indian designers and celebrities are no longer peripheral participants; they are shaping the narrative itself, bringing textile histories and artistic vocabularies into the centre of global fashion discourse. At the same time, it revealed the limits of this visibility. India may export craft at scale, but it has yet to export the right to authorship that should accompany it.

If the future of fashion is to be sustainable — not just environmentally, but socially — it will require more than the celebration of craft. It will require a redistribution of credit, visibility, and value. Until then, fashion will continue to display craft, without ever truly acknowledging the hands that make it possible.

> Manish Malhotra's gesture acquires a significance: By naming artisans, he collapses the distance between creation and creator

The writer is associate professor and programme coordinator for fashion design at IILM University, Gurugram

40 YEARS AGO
May 6, 1986

INDIAN EXPRESS
Lok Sabha passes Muslim Women Bill
Walk-out by Opposition
Efforts on to solve Akali crisis
Tokyo summit for East-West dialogue

Muslim Women Bill passed

THE CONTROVERSIAL Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha along with the six official amendments. A major section of the opposition pressed for a division on the amendment moved by many of them. But all the amendments were overwhelmingly voted out (370 to 61) with just one abstention, whereupon most opposition members staged a walk-out.

Efforts on to solve Akali crisis

AS THE Akali Dal dissidents lay low, the Punjab CM, Surjit Singh Barnala, gained some more ground with Kulwant Singh Quadian, the Akali MLA who had signed the dissidents' statement denouncing the police action, pledging support to Barnala.

Amendment to Muslim Bill

THE MUSLIM Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill, passed by the Lok Sabha through an official amendment, gives the choice of seeking protection under sections 125 to 128 of the CrPC to the husband and wife. Accordingly, the amendment introduced by the Law Minister, Asoke Kumar Sen, seeks to insert the following sentence: "4A. If, on the date of the first hearing of the application under sub-section (2) of Section 3, a divorced woman and her former husband declare by affidavit or any other declaration in writing in such form as may be prescribed, either jointly or separately, that they would prefer to be governed by the provisions of Sections 125 to 128 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and file such affidavit or declaration, the magistrate shall dispose of such application accordingly."

Tokyo summit for East-West

LEADERS OF the seven main industrialised democracies called for a "high level dialogue" to settle East-West differences while vowing to maintain "strong and credible" military capability in the Western alliance.

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• GOVERNANCE

Rs 50 crore and counting: Inside Jharkhand's 'treasury scam'

Shubham Tigga
Ranchi, May 5

A DIGITAL system meant to bring transparency in government spending has come under the scanner in Jharkhand, with investigators suspecting a treasury-linked fraud that runs into tens of crores. Officials say the figure may rise as more transactions are scrutinised. What has raised concerns is not just the scale but the manner in which alleged fraudulent withdrawals were routed through a computerised financial management system meant to prevent exactly such manipulation, prompting comparisons to the infamous Fodder Scam of the 1990s.

The alleged scam

The alleged fraud involves government officials and staff handling accounts and treasury-related work across departments in Jharkhand, who are suspected to have siphoned crores of rupees by misusing the state's Integrated Financial Management System (IFMS). IFMS is a computerised platform implemented by the state government for budgeting, bill processing, treasury operations, e-disbursement of public funds, including salaries through the Kuber portal (treasury payment) module.

The alleged treasury scam, however, did not involve external hacking or system breach. It involved internal manipulation wherein the authorised employee "illegally withdrew" the amounts in the name of salaries, taxes, arrears, etc., of those employees who had either retired or died. For many years, in some cases for around a decade, the diversion of funds went undetected into various associates' accounts of the accused, also called "ghost" accounts.

Last month, during the state Finance Department's routine analysis and audit of the treasury accounts, attention was drawn to the financial irregularities. The first case emerged from Bokaro SP's office, with the alleged initial fraud of around Rs 3.15 crore. This gradually increased to other districts after the probe began.

Owing to the ongoing investigation, investigators from the Crime Investigation Department (CID) and the Finance Department's Principal Accountant General refused to share any details. Despite no official statement, the amount stands at nearly Rs 50 crore. After the Bokaro case, Chief Minister Hemant Soren and Finance Minister Radha Krishna Kishore initiated a probe across 24 districts.

Sources indicated that suspected irregularities may span 14 district treasuries, with over a dozen arrests reported so far. While officials have pegged the detected amount at about Rs 50 crore across five districts, some senior officials and political leaders have suggested that it could rise to Rs 100-150 crore or more.

Why it went undetected

While investigators have not yet publicly detailed how the alleged fraud continued undetected for years, an officer posted in one of the 14 affected treasuries, requesting anonymity, outlined the system and its vulnerabilities.

According to the officer, bills — particularly salary bills — originate at the department level, where a billing clerk prepares them, an accountant or head clerk checks them, and the drawing and disbursing officer (DDO) certifies details such as employees' names, bank accounts, and IFS codes. Once signed, the bills move to the treasury, where they pass through clerical staff and a head assistant before reaching the Treasury Officer for final approval and payment through the Kuber portal.

The officer, however, admitted that in practice, scrutiny is largely limited to the summary sheet like gross and net amounts, deductions, bill number, month, and the DDO's certification — especially in bulk submissions that can run into hundreds of bills a day. "No one checks each individual account or amount in such volumes; we rely on the DDO's certification," the officer said.

This reliance, coupled with high volumes and multiple DDOs across departments, creates a systemic blind spot where manipulated entries can pass through layered approvals without detailed verification.

Interestingly, a 2025 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General detailed information technology control failures in the IFMS that have facilitated financial irregularities and unauthorised payments.

While the report covered the period from 2007 to November 2022, it noted that its findings remain relevant for subsequent periods.

• HISTORY

Bengal to J&K: The life & politics of S P Mookerjee

After the West Bengal victory, PM Modi invoked the Bengali leader who founded the BJP's predecessor in 1951. A look at what he stood for

VIKAS PATHAK

IN HIS victory speech at the BJP headquarters on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said "the soul" of Syama Prasad Mookerjee "must be at peace today". As the party won West Bengal for the first time ever, the PM recalled Mookerjee, the Bengali leader who founded the BJP's predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, in 1951.

A year after its formation, the Jana Sangh made a modest electoral debut, winning just three Lok Sabha seats (two of them from Bengal). The party merged with the Janata Party in the 1977 election to defeat Indira Gandhi, but the Janata experiment soon collapsed. It was in 1980 that the Jana Sangh's successor, the BJP, was founded, with Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who had once been associated with Mookerjee, as its first president.

Early life and career

Born on July 6, 1901, Mookerjee — son of Ashutosh Mookerjee, Calcutta High Court judge and vice-chancellor of Calcutta University — studied at Presidency College, Calcutta, and Lincoln's Inn. He became the youngest vice-chancellor of Calcutta University at just 33.

He was elected to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1929 and 1930, first as a Congressman and then as an independent. From 1941 to 1942, he joined the Progressive Coalition government of Fazlul Haque as Finance Minister. The government was formed in opposition to the Muslim League. Mookerjee justified his decision by saying that the need of the hour was to organise Hindus and cooperate with Muslims who believed in working together.

A controversial letter decrying the Quit India Movement, purportedly written by Mookerjee to the British, has often been a topic of discussion.

From 1943 to 1946, Mookerjee was the Hindu Mahasabha president. He took up the cause of Bengal's Hindus in the run-up to Partition, opposing Muslim League leader and Bengal Prime Minister H S Suhrawardy's "United Bengal" plan — which called for an independent state separate from India and Pakistan. Mookerjee saw this as an attempt to ensure domination of Hindus by a Muslim majority. He called for the partition of Bengal, with Hindu-majority West Bengal staying with India.

Mookerjee backed partition of Bengal and 'complete integration' of Jammu & Kashmir with India. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

His brand of Hindutva

After the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, Mookerjee made the Hindu Mahasabha's Working Committee adopt resolutions that "expressed shame that Gandhi's assassin had been connected with the organisation, and declared support for the government in its efforts to suppress terrorism or subversive activities in any shape or form", writes BD Graham in *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics* (2007).

In November 1948, Mookerjee resigned from the Hindu Mahasabha after it rejected his suggestion to broaden its membership if it wanted to be a modern political party.

Bengal's Hindus

When riots broke out in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, in 1949-50, large numbers of Hindu refugees came to India. Mookerjee, the minister of industry and supply in the Jawaharlal Nehru government at this time, spoke out for them.

In April 1950, Nehru and Pakistan Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan signed a pact calling upon both countries to provide equality, freedom and justice to their minorities.

Mookerjee resigned from the cabinet as the pact did not include a clause sought by him — sanctions against any side that failed to honour the agreement. It was after this that Mookerjee formed the Bharatiya Jana Sangh with the help of RSS volunteers.

Jana Sangh to BJP

In its electoral debut in 1952, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh won three Lok Sabha seats (two of them in Bengal).

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It merged with the Janata Party in the 1977 election. But this experiment soon collapsed.

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In 1980, the Jana Sangh's successor, the BJP, was founded.

The Kashmir issue

The princely state of Kashmir acceded to India in 1947. Article 370 of the Constitution gave Parliament powers in the fields of defence, foreign affairs and communication in the case of Kashmir. People from outside required a permit to visit the state and were barred from buying land there.

The state's Prime Minister, Sheikh Abdullah, abolished big land holdings in Jammu and Kashmir in 1951 under the Big Landed Estates Abolition Act without compensation. He also adopted Urdu as the official language. Dogra Hindu landlords resented these steps. Prem Nath Dogra, a former Swayamsevak and civil servant from Jammu, launched an agitation against the Sheikh Abdullah government through his Praja Parishad, seeking the complete integration of Jammu and Kashmir with India.

Mookerjee joined the movement in 1952.

Mookerjee and Kashmir

The Jana Sangh took up in Parliament the arrest of Dogra and his followers after a clash with the police in the state.

Both parties also opposed its adoption of a state flag, adopting a slogan: "*Ek desh mein do vidhan, do pradhan aur do nishan nahin ho sakte* (one nation cannot have two constitutions, two Prime Ministers and two flags)."

In July 1952, the Nehru government and the Jammu and Kashmir government signed the Delhi Agreement, under which the state accepted the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court. It also accepted the supremacy of the Indian flag, though the state's flag would also remain in use. It accepted the President of India's power to declare a state of Emergency, subject to its concurrence, in the event of internal disturbances.

The Praja Parishad, however, rejected the Delhi Agreement. In November 1952, Dogra and other leaders were again arrested amid protests.

Mookerjee calls for agitation

At its first annual session at Kanpur in December 1952, Mookerjee's Jana Sangh passed a formal resolution supporting the Praja Parishad's Jammu Satyagraha for the complete integration of the state with India.

Nehru saw the Jana Sangh's orientation as 'communal' on this question. His condition for talks was that the Praja Parishad should stop its agitation.

The Jana Sangh then decided to launch its agitation. Vajpayee, who became private secretary to Mookerjee in early 1953, was sent across Hindi-speaking states, including Uttar Pradesh, to popularise the movement. Of the 1,200-odd agitators who came to the capital, 500 were from UP. Mookerjee then travelled to Madhya Bharat — the Gwalior-Indore region of erstwhile princely states — and Rajasthan, along with Vajpayee.

Mookerjee's Jammu visit

In May 1953, Mookerjee decided to go to Jammu without a permit — a symbolic rejection of the state's special status — with Vajpayee. They went by train to Pathankot in Punjab, and addressed multiple public meetings across the state for three days. Mookerjee was informed at Pathankot that he would be allowed to enter Jammu and Kashmir without a permit.

On May 11, 1953, Mookerjee crossed into Jammu and Kashmir over the Ravi. However, the state police had put up barricades for his arrest. Mentally prepared for this, Mookerjee did not turn back and was arrested. He told Vajpayee to return to Delhi and tell everyone that he had entered Jammu and Kashmir without a permit, if only as a prisoner, writes Abhishek Choudhary in his biography of Vajpayee.

Mookerjee was kept in a cottage about 12 km from Srinagar. However, the heart patient who had a blood pressure problem could not cope well in the conditions of his detention. On June 23, he suddenly fell ill and died. The RSS family of organisations views his death as "*balidaan*" or sacrifice for the cause of Kashmir's integration.

• POLICY

Why UP stepped back from mandatory prepaid smart meters

Maulshree Seth
Lucknow, May 5

FACING protests, the Uttar Pradesh government on Monday stepped back from its push for mandatory prepaid smart electricity meters. The decision is seen as the result of several factors: protests, regulatory pushback, shifting policy signals from the Centre, and political calculations ahead of next year's Assembly elections.

Why the policy was brought

The policy was initially aimed at improving billing efficiency and reducing losses. Sources said that the state's aggressive rollout of prepaid smart meters over the past year-and-a-half was rooted in its interpretation of the Central Electricity Authority's (CEA) 2022 regulation notification.

According to Avadhesh Verma, Chairman of Uttar Pradesh Electricity Consumers Forum and a member of the Central Electricity Advisory Committee, the move can be traced to clause 3(b) of the notification. It said consumers in areas with communication networks "shall" be supplied electricity through smart meters operating in prepayment mode.

Verma said the government interpreted this as a mandate, and began rolling out prepaid smart meters as the default for new connections and converting existing consumers. About 85 lakh smart meters have been installed so far, but implementation quickly ran into friction.

Why it ran into trouble

The rollout triggered protests across districts. Consumer complaints ranged from higher or inconsistent billing to automatic disconnections and a lack of transparency in prepaid deductions. The state initially dismissed the concerns as being fuelled by misinformation and political motives.

As protests continued, the government held review meetings and issued directions to resolve issues. The Uttar Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission (UPERC) also took suo motu cognizance. In some instances, consumers removed or damaged the installed meters.

"At the heart of the controversy was the issue of consumer choice. Under the Electricity Act framework, consumers are generally entitled to opt between prepaid and postpaid systems. The state's attempt to enforce prepaid meters — especially for new connections — without explicit consent became a central point of contention, strengthening both protests and regulatory objections," said Verma.

Shock to consumers

- The policy was initially aimed at improving billing efficiency and reducing losses.
- But the rollout led to complaints ranging from higher billing to automatic disconnections.
- Prepaid smart meters also led to protests in Gujarat and Rajasthan in 2024 and 2025, respectively. The issues were similar: implementation, consent and fears of power cuts once the balance ran out.

The government first announced a temporary halt to the conversion of existing postpaid meters into prepaid smart meters, but protests continued. Meanwhile, Union Power Minister Manohar Lal Khattar clarified in Parliament last month that prepaid smart meters are not mandatory, undercutting the interpretation that had driven Uttar Pradesh's policy.

Subsequently, the CEA issued a fresh amendment in its 2026 gazette notification, revising the earlier provision. The amended clause removed the explicit requirement of "prepayment mode", while allowing flexibility in implementation.

Adding to the pressure, the UPERC also intervened by flagging concerns and seeking explanations from the state power utility. In a separate notice, UPERC pointed out noncompliance with standards related to the timely reconnection of supply in prepaid systems, even raising the possibility of penalties.

In its April 23 order, it noted that reconnections within the mandated two-hour window were achieved in only 77% of cases, far below the 95% benchmark, and questioned why a Rs 1 lakh per day penalty should not be imposed on the Uttar Pradesh Power Corporation Ltd.

According to government sources, these developments prompted a course correction before any adverse direction from regulatory authorities or courts could come. The government began recalibrating its approach in two phases, on April 19 and 24. It first introduced immediate relief measures, including a limited pause in disconnections. SMS alerts were made mandatory, giving consumers time to respond.

Politics in an election year

The timing of the rollback is also significant. With state elections due next year, the issue had begun to gain political traction.

Ultimately, the decision does not end the smart metering programme, but removes the mandatory prepaid billing aspect. The broader challenge for the government now lies in ensuring accurate billing, reliable systems and responsive grievance redressal.

• LAW

'Ecocide': Where international law stands in tackling war toll on environment

Bhaskar Sarma
New Delhi, May 5

A RECENT report by Lebanon accused Israel's military of committing "ecocide" during its 2023-24 invasion of southern Lebanon and reshaping both its "physical and ecological landscape".

Earlier, Iran's foreign minister said Israel's bombings of fuel depots in Tehran, which led to "black rain", violated international law and constituted "ecocide".

Researchers and environmental organisations have invoked the same term to describe the effects of Israel's war on Gaza.

Environmental groups have called for the inclusion of 'ecocide' as an international crime under the Rome Statute that governs the International Criminal Court (ICC).

What is ecocide?

Ecocide refers to the worst harms caused to the environment by human actions, usually on a major scale or affecting a huge area.The term was coined in 1970 by Prof Arthur W Galston, a Yale plant biologist whose early research contributed to the development of the herbicide Agent Orange, which the US Army used to devastating effect in the Vietnam War. Galston used 'ecoside' to describe the massive, long-term environmental devastation particularly caused by the herbicide's use.

Two years later, at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme used the term in context of the Vietnam War.

Indeed, Vietnam became the world's first country to codify ecocide in its domestic law in 1990. Since then, the use of the term has become more widespread, with many countries — such as Russia, Ukraine, Chile, France and Belgium — incorporating ecocide (or its equivalent) into their laws.

How does 'ecocide' differ from provisions in international law?

Many international conventions and statutes deal with widespread environmental damage, even if they don't explicitly mention 'ecocide'.

For instance, under the Rome Statute, it is a war crime to intentionally launch a disproportionate attack knowing that it will cause "widespread, long-term and severe" damage to the natural environment that directly impacts humans, such as causing displacement, inflicting great suffering or injury on victims, or causing death.

The Geneva Conventions, which establish standards for treatment of non-combatants, require that warring parties not use methods of warfare that cause "widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment".

The widely adopted Environmental Modification Convention (ENMOD), in force since 1978, prohibits the deliberate manipulation of natural processes when it causes "widespread, long-lasting or severe effects".

So how does 'ecocide' differ from the present international law framework? Delhi-based senior advocate Avi Singh, who has extensive experience in international criminal law, told *The Indian Express* that the difference is in the focus. "The laws we have are anthropocentric. They put human beings at the centre of harm, while ecocide puts the environment as a separate entity that is being damaged."

Where do current laws stand?

The Rome Statute recognises four serious crimes — the crime of genocide; crimes against humanity; war crimes; and the crime of aggression. It classifies serious damage to the environment under 'war crimes' — meaning it would be considered only during war.

Another hurdle is jurisdiction. Iran and Lebanon, for instance, are not State Parties to the ICC, which could complicate the prosecution pathway, pointed out Mrinalini Shinde, Visiting Lecturer of International Environmental Law at the University of Cologne, Germany. ICC jurisdiction, however, could still arise through a UN Security Council referral or ad hoc acceptance.

One more issue is criminalisation. Most existing international instruments do not establish enforceable international criminal liability for environmental destruction.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a global body on environmental policy, limited itself to "recognising the crime of ecocide" in October 2025. "It will hopefully encourage more States Parties to push for inclusion of the crime domestically and within international law," said Shinde.

This is what is behind the advocacy to include 'ecocide' as an international crime in the Rome Statute.

Inclusion, however, is easier said than done. "For inclusion into the Rome Statute, a State Party to the Rome Statute would introduce the amendment of the Statute at the Assembly of States Parties, and would require 2/3rds majority of States Parties to be successful. There will be further conditions for such an amendment to come into effect," said Shinde.

What's the enforcement challenge?

The Council of Europe adopted the Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law in 2025. This is the first legally binding international treaty to criminalise severe and large-scale environmental destruction — "conduct that many term ecocide", it says.

Under this convention, even acts committed abroad can be prosecuted in European domestic courts.

"There is universal criminal jurisdiction for crimes against humanity. With this, there is a potential to bring actions in domestic criminal law irrespective of where the event happens," said Singh. "For instance, if whoever is committing an environmental crime travels to Europe, then somebody can bring a criminal action against them, saying that they have committed ecocide, and they should now be criminally charged and tried."

According to both Singh and Shinde, however, no direct prosecution has ever been launched over environmental destruction caused by war.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

The announcement of the withdrawal of US troops from Germany underlines the urgency of a pan-European defence strategy.— *The Guardian*

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Our AI question: How to become producer of intelligence rather than its tenant?

ROHIT LAMBA
AND RAGHURAM RAJAN

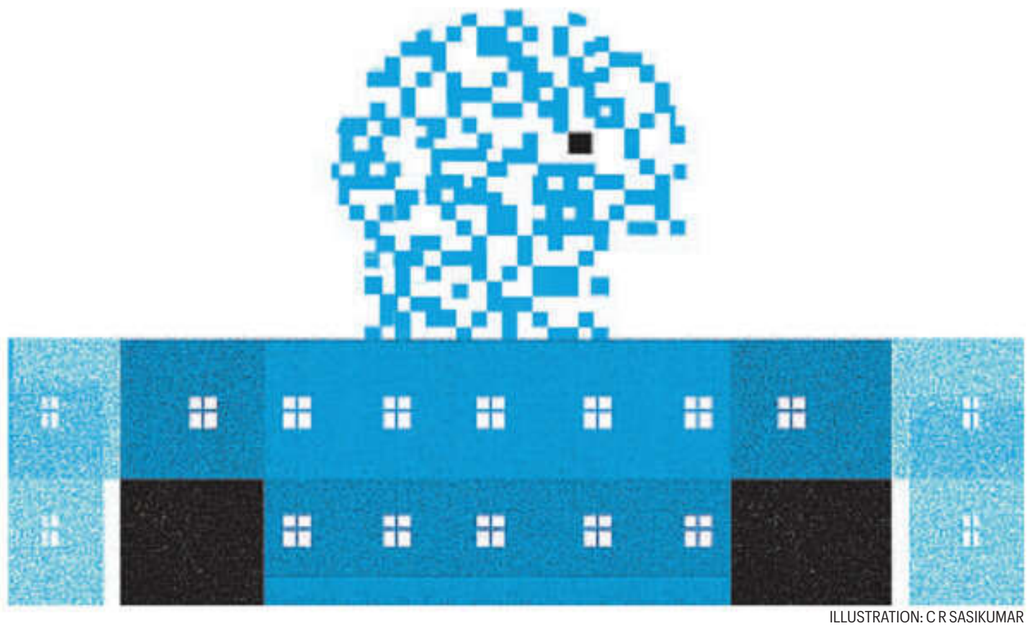

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

LAST WEEK, on a 600-acre site near Visakhapatnam, Google broke ground on what is being dubbed as India's largest AI hub. The infrastructure partners are AdaniConneX and Airtel's Nxtra. The silicon will be designed in California and fabricated in Taiwan. The model weights, when the data centre lights up, will be Google's. India's contribution is the land, the power, the construction, and the operations. It is a triumph of sorts. Alas, we have done something like this before.

Thirty years ago, the IT-services boom began with a related bargain. India offered low-cost engineering labour, fluent in English, to American firms that needed someone to write and maintain the systems they had designed. The arrangement worked. Infosys, Wipro and TCS came of age. A middle class emerged. A reputation was earned. Indian services climbed the value chain, and the global capability centres in Bengaluru and Hyderabad now do genuine research and product work for the world's largest firms. We were not wrong to celebrate this. But the task was incomplete.

What we did not do was use the proceeds to build the next layer. We did not fund research universities of global rank. We did not raise national R&D intensity from below 1 per cent of GDP, where it has remained for decades. We did not develop deep-tech venture capital, manufacturing depth, or patient state-aligned industrial finance. Korea built Samsung. Taiwan, smaller than Karnataka, built TSMC, which now sits at the chokepoint of the global AI economy. India built outsourcing. We learned magnificently to deploy systems that other people had designed. We postponed the work of designing them.

The bill on that postponement is now arriving, in the form of artificial intelligence. The leading edge of AI demands capital, research depth, and concentrated talent at a scale India has not built. A frontier model costs hundreds of millions of dollars to train, draws on decades of accumulated research, and depends on a talent pipeline that runs through a few dozen universities in the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and Canada. India has none of this.

In the past fortnight, two voices have read this moment differently. Ruchir Sharma, at the Express Adda, warned that global investors now see India as the "anti-AI play". Nandan Nilekani, in a recent essay with Ravi Venkatesan, argued that India's edge lies in diffusing AI across its small firms and informal economy. Sharma is reading the high-rent layers and seeing India's absence. Nilekani is reading the diffusion layer and treating it as India's destination. Both stop short of the harder question. Neither asks how a country with talent and ambition becomes a producer of intelligence rather than a tenant of it.

> The deeper danger is that India's public conversation is too quick to convert constraint into strategy. Because we cannot yet win at the frontier, we tell ourselves the frontier does not matter

What we are doing in Vizag, and in Hyderabad and Mumbai and Pune, risks making the same trade we made in the nineties, with stronger lock-in this time. The data centres are real and useful. They will be optimised, for the next decade, to serve foreign models efficiently rather than to train Indian ones at scale. Every Indian-language inference running on a foreign model from a server in Vizag is a small recurring rent paid to Mountain View, on infrastructure built by Adani. The arrangement is not new. The technology is.

The stakes go beyond productivity. As AI diffuses into military systems and strategic decision-making, this gap will bear on India's strategic autonomy in a world where security partnerships cannot be assumed. India does not need to beat OpenAI at frontier reasoning today, but it needs to learn to compete: Alternative model architectures and approaches at meaningful scale, sovereign compute, and foreign deals structured around expanding Indian capability rather than only power and land. The Indian state knows how to create a gigawatt of power for a foreign data centre. It needs to learn how to create a research department, a laboratory, a generation of scientists. Concrete it understands. Cognition it does not.

The Economic Survey of 2025-26 noted that only 2 per cent of the world's AI training-data startups are based in India, against 40 per cent in the United States and 21 per cent in the European Union. The state knows the gap. The announcements still say far more about infrastructure than about capability.

The deeper danger is that India's public conversation is too quick to convert constraint into strategy. Because we cannot yet win at the frontier, we tell ourselves the frontier does not matter. Because we are good at diffusion, we tell ourselves diffusion is enough. Some of this is an honest assessment of what India can do. Some of it is an alibi for what we will not do.

We must not forget, however, that even diffusion rests on uneven foundations. UPI worked because Indian banking had spent 30 years digitising, Aadhaar because the state had been identifying citizens for 60. Where those rails were missing, in health, in school education, in agricultural extension, the same stack thinking has produced architecture without adoption. AI diffusion may run into the same problem.

This past week in Visakhapatnam, we poured the foundations of buildings that will host someone else's intelligence. The buildings will be ours. The intelligence will not. Whether that is enough this time is the question we should ask before the concrete sets.

Lamba is assistant professor, Cornell University and Rajan is professor, University of Chicago and former governor, Reserve Bank of India

In Tamil Nadu, mandate against party that lost touch with people

A KALAIYARASAN

THE SURPRISE victory of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) under the leadership of Joseph Vijay in the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections has, for the first time since the DMK's rise to power in 1967 and the launch of the AIADMK in 1977, broken the duopoly of Dravidian parties. It also appears to have upended electoral arithmetic, moving beyond tactical alliances, money, and caste. In that sense, the verdict is a break from the past.

It signals an anti-incumbency sentiment against the DMK-led government. The scale of the upset is reminiscent of the historic 1967 election, when K Kamaraj — once hailed by Periyar as a "trueborn Tamilian" — was defeated by a relatively unknown student leader in Virudhunagar. TVK may not have a long history of grassroots mobilisation that characterised the DMK's rise. But, M K Stalin's defeat is no less significant than that of Kamaraj.

The DMK often highlighted Tamil Nadu's relative success compared to BJP-ruled states, but did not do enough to address concerns such as job creation, wage stagnation, and governance deficits. Disillusionment with the DMK also stemmed from what many, particularly the youth, perceived as an alienating style of governance.

Historically, the DMK rose by mobilising ordinary people. In the 1960s, amid allegations of vote-buying by Congress, C N Annadurai urged voters to accept whatever was offered but vote for DMK. Something similar seems to have happened this time.

Vijay's rise is often compared to that of M G Ramachandran (MGR). This comparison has its limits. MGR's stardom in politics and cinema was organic. His association with the Dravidian movement gave MGR a strong ideological foundation. Vijay's political journey is relatively shorter. His appeal seems to derive less from ideology and more from the dissatisfaction of a younger electorate frustrated by unfulfilled promises.

Vijay operates within the broad contours of Dravidian sensibilities — Tamil identity, secularism, state autonomy, and social justice. He talks of drawing inspiration from Kamaraj, Periyar, Ambedkar, and Anjalai Ammaiyar. However, unlike the DMK, which built a sustained political movement over nearly two decades before coming to power, TVK lacks a comparable foundation. In that sense, it is wrong to think of the TVK as an ideological alternative to the Dravidian parties. The verdict still calls for serious introspection. It appears the DMK has used ideological tropes at the expense of probity in political life.

Irrespective of its political regime, Tamil Nadu's industrial policy has been consistent since the 1990s. The state's recent double-digit (11.2 per cent) economic growth was celebrated by the government. However, the earlier phase of industrialisation was more closely linked to small-scale industries, generating broader employment opportunities. In contrast, new investments have created fewer jobs. The shift is reflected in labour market trends. Contract-based employment, which once accounted for around 10 per cent of formal jobs, has risen to approximately 25 per cent, approaching levels seen in states like Gujarat.

The DMK's emphasis on national politics, secularism and federalism might be important in itself, but it's irrelevant when it does not resonate with people's lives. The party's narratives and carefully curated (some say controlled) rhetoric didn't resonate with the people, especially the youth, Dalits and women.

The verdict should, however, not be seen as a rejection of the DMK's social schemes or the Dravidian model of development. Vijay is yet to articulate a new vision. The mandate reflects dissatisfaction with the way DMK exercised power. By focusing heavily on intellectual and ideological narratives, it appears to have neglected the everyday concerns of people. The party seems to have fallen into the trap of intellectualism. In some cases, supporters of the ruling party dismissed Vijay's voters as "ignorant," further deepening the disconnect and alienating younger voters. The party also seemed to have ignored the anxieties of Dalit communities, who have been victims of violence of late.

Every achievement contains the seeds of its destruction. The Dravidian model is no exception. Despite notable success, it must be sensitive to the concerns of those who have been excluded from its benefits. State autonomy, secularism and Tamil identity are important ideals. But they must be grounded in the lived experiences of people and their needs.

The writer is associate professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What the verdicts say

THE EDITORIAL rightly notes that voters in states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Assam are signalling a demand for better governance rather than simple revenge against ruling parties ('Verdicts frame people's push for change – BJP seized that impulse, rivals paid for their standstill', *IE*, May 5). Yet the gap between electoral verdicts and delivery remains wide. Parties on all sides would do well to invest in steady local work instead of constant national posturing. Clear accountability mechanisms, regular public reporting on promises, and greater space for state-level innovation could turn these mandates into real progress. Indian democracy has shown maturity; it now needs adequate political will.

Abbharna Barathi

THE ASSEMBLY outcomes across four states and one UT underscore how decisively voters can reshape political narratives ('Verdicts frame people's push for change – BJP seized that impulse, rivals paid for their standstill', *IE*, May 5). Actor Vijay's victory signals that many voters were seeking a change and responded to a new option. Mamata Banerjee's defeat reflects public fatigue with corruption and violence. The lesson is evident: Sustained credibility, grassroots connection and responsiveness matter more than broad slogans.

S S Paul, Nadia

Maintain unity

THE INCREASING use of regional identity, polarisation, and aggressive political strategies may strengthen electoral gains for parties, but it also risks weakening democratic harmony and national unity ('Assam-Bengal template will go national. It fuels support for BJP, not resistance, *IE,* May 5'). While political success is important, governance should prioritise inclusive development over divisive tactics. India's diversity is its greatest strength, and political parties must ensure that electoral ambitions do not overshadow constitutional values and social cohesion. Constructive leadership, rather than confrontation, is essential for a healthy democracy.

Krish Bareja, Haryana

Didi has paid the price of staying in the game

AVANI BANSAL

"KHELA HOBE" — the game will be played — once rang out as a slogan of defiance. In the quiet after an electoral defeat, it begins to sound like something else: A reminder that for women, the game has never been played on equal terms.

In this election cycle, across four major states, leadership contests were largely defined by men. In Assam, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the faces of power remained overwhelmingly male. West Bengal stood apart because it placed a woman, Mamata Banerjee, at the centre. That difference matters because when a woman is central to power, the terms of evaluation shift.

A day after a political loss, the instinct is to reduce a leader to numbers. Seats won, seats lost, margins that shifted. The harder task is to ask what a political life reveals about the system it inhabits — not the individual alone, but the conditions under which women are allowed to lead.

Across the world, the relationship between women and power remains uneasy. In Iran, women have risked imprisonment and violence to assert control over their bodies and identities. In democracies elsewhere, women in politics navigate a narrower band of acceptable behaviour, where strength is recast as excess and ambition as overreach. The question persists: How much space is a woman allowed to occupy before she is seen as too much?

> When a woman insists on occupying space, she is not merely participating in politics; she is altering its terms. The test is not how women win or lose elections, but how we choose to read them when they do

India reflects this tension in its own way. From Indira Gandhi to President Droupadi Murmu, women have exercised power in different registers. Sonia Gandhi shaped a national party through restraint and institutional endurance. Sushma Swaraj commanded admiration through a style that made authority feel accessible and humane.

Within this spectrum, Banerjee's political life is a case study in what it takes for a woman to enter and survive a space that does not easily accommodate her. Her confrontational, highly visible methods reflect a structural reality: Entry without inherited networks demands a different political language. She has often been described as volatile, shrill, and difficult — traits that are more readily read as conviction or strength in male readers. That difference shapes how authority is perceived.

Banerjee's party, the Trinamool Congress, has been accused of political violence and misgovernance in West Bengal. The electorate has spoken. In the aftermath of defeat, however, it is worth noticing whether the critique remains focused on systems and accountability, on performance and failure or whether it collapses into a personalised reading of her flaws. The distinction matters because for many women watching, especially young girls, such moments carry an unspoken lesson. They are not only watching a result, but how quickly authority becomes failure, confidence excess, and persistence defiance.

In that sense, "khela hobe" offers a metaphor beyond politics. It asks: Who gets to play at the centre? What leaders like Banerjee signal is that entry is possible, but it comes at a cost — part of a broader moment in which women are renegotiating their relationship with power.

It is also a moment to reflect on how easily women are positioned against other women. Competing claims are inevitable in a democracy. But when one woman's legitimacy rests on diminishing another's, something more limiting is at work. Women in politics will differ in ideology, temperament and method. They need not be reduced to opposites.

Elections will come and go. Parties will win and lose. That churn is essential to democracy. But something else must endure: When a woman insists on occupying space fully, she is not merely participating in politics; she is altering its terms.

Banerjee's defeat belongs to electoral arithmetic, and there will be analyses on that. But the questions her career raises belong to a wider landscape. The real test is not how women win or lose elections, but how we choose to read them when they do.

Bansal is a Supreme Court advocate and national spokesperson, Congress

Bengal has spoken with remarkable clarity: Enough

GURU PRAKASH

THERE ARE election results, and then there are verdicts of history. What the people of West Bengal have delivered in this assembly election belongs to the second category. The trends leave little room for ambiguity: Bengal has not merely changed its government, it has altered the direction of its political destiny.

This is not an ordinary electoral victory for the BJP. It is a landslide and a historic mandate that signals the complete rejection of a political order built on fear, patronage, appeasement, and institutional intimidation. The TMC once appeared electorally invincible. It now finds itself humbled by the democratic will of a people determined to reclaim their future. "*Andhera chatega, suraj niklega, kamal khilega*." The promise made at the BJP's founding has found one of its most symbolic fulfilments in Bengal. A land that gave India Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, and Sri Aurobindo had, for decades, remained trapped in a political culture where violence too often overshadowed vision, and power was preserved through division rather than delivery.

The Left institutionalised a long culture of cadre-based coercion. What followed was not renewal, but its mutation, a politics packaged as welfare but sustained through intimidation, selective inclusion, and systematic erosion of democratic confidence. The Marichjhaapi massacre, where Dalits became victims of state-sponsored violence, is an example of Left violence against the socially marginalised.

Syama Prasad Mookerjee, founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and one of Bengal's most distinguished sons, dedicated his life to the cause of national unity and constitutional integrity. A BJP government in Bengal carries with it the symbolism of ideological homecoming, an overdue tribute. Bengal is the land of renaissance, reform, and resistance. From the Brahmo Samaj to the Swadeshi movement, from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to Tagore, Bengal has shaped India's intellectual and national consciousness.

What made this victory possible is the BJP *karyakarta*. No political organisation in India matches the scale, discipline, and year-round commitment of the BJP's cadre. Much of the organisational credit belongs to Amit Shah, whose political clarity, booth-level precision, and ability to energise the cadre transformed aspiration into execution. This victory also strengthens the expanding arc of governance and development under the BJP-NDA framework.

> The TMC once appeared electorally invincible. It now finds itself humbled by the democratic will of a people determined to reclaim their future

The transformation of Assam and the wider Northeast under PM Narendra Modi has already demonstrated what political stability, infrastructure expansion, connectivity, and developmental focus can achieve in regions long neglected by Delhi's political establishment. This momentum is no longer geographically confined. In Tamil Nadu too, the politics of cynical division, cultural hostility, and selective antagonism towards Hindu identity has begun facing serious democratic resistance. Simultaneously, the BJP's steady organisational rise in Kerala reflects an unmistakable truth: Politics rooted in development, governance, and national integration is finding resonance even in states once considered electorally impermeable. At the centre of this expanding mandate remains PM Modi, whose politics has fundamentally reoriented governance toward direct delivery, welfare inclusion, and aspirational citizenship.

For Bengal's women, youth, Scheduled Castes, backward communities, and economically marginalised populations, this mandate reflects a desire to be seen not as fragmented vote banks but as equal stakeholders in India's growth story. The people of Bengal have endured decades of political violence, broken promises, and stalled aspirations. This election was not merely a transfer of power; it was a democratic correction. Bengal has spoken with remarkable clarity: Enough.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP

Building bridges

Battery storage capacity must keep pace with solar energy generation

India scaled a record peak demand of 256.1 GW on April 25 with solar plants supplying 21.5% of the afternoon load – an all-time high, and the clearest signal yet that the country's installed solar fleet can do real work when the sun is overhead. But the same day's full 24-hour ledger told a more sobering story. When there was accounting for the whole day of April 25, solar contributed only about 10.8% of daily generation, and just 0.1% of the evening's needs after sunset. Solar's share of India's installed electric capacity has nearly doubled from about 15% in 2022 to nearly 28% in early 2026. However, solar accounted for roughly 5.6% of generation on India's peak-demand day in 2022 and only increased to the 10.8% of April – a clear indication of the yawning gap that remains between the realities of the present and what is possible. The bottleneck is not panels, land or ambition but the inability to use the vast stores of generated electrons through batteries. In fact, such is the paucity of battery storage that States which are prolific producers of solar power are being asked to halt their supply, lest it compromise the stability of India's electric grid. In 2025, India had to curtail 2.3 terawatt hours of solar generation between late May and December, equivalent to 18% of average monthly solar output, with 0.9 TWh (terra-watt hours) wasted in October alone. Given that producers of such electricity must be compensated, this ends up being a cost to the public exchequer which pays for power that was never delivered. The India Meteorological Department's forecast of a below-normal monsoon at 92% of the Long Period Average – the first such warning in 11 years – only sharpens the argument: a hotter, drier summer means greater daytime demand, which is precisely when solar should be doing the heavy lifting.

The encouraging news is battery economics. Standalone two-hour battery storage tariffs fell from around ₹2.21 lakh per MW per month in early 2025 to ₹1.48 lakh by year-end. The challenge is execution. Only 0.7 GWh of battery storage was operational in India by end-2025, with another 2 GWh expected by December 2026. The Centre and States must now focus less on tendering and more on commissioning – pairing every fresh solar auction with mandatory co-located storage and resolving the financing wall facing aggressively bid low-tariff projects. Solar capacity without storage is a half-built bridge.

At sea

The expansion of high-end frigate fleet must be in step with perceived threats

The Indian Navy's Project 17A is a ₹45,000-crore programme to build seven 'Nilgiri'-class frigates, with anti-air, anti-surface, and anti-submarine capabilities, as an advanced complement to the 'Shivalik' frigates and a precursor to Project 17B. The Project delivered the *INS Mahendragiri* on April 30, completing six deliveries in 17 months, but had previously faced multiple delays. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has flagged hundreds of design changes in previous warship classes during construction. Deliveries had been delayed even though ships were nominally complete because they lacked critical components such as engines and sensors, allowing the projects to meet commissioning dates on paper while leaving the hull unprepared for combat. A 2025 CAG report found that the Navy was inducting platforms without building the supporting infrastructure. While Project 17A used 75% indigenous components by value, many critical parts were sourced from abroad, and without them the vessels' final integration was withheld. Currently, India can build most of each ship but exercises limited control over timelines.

The Indian Ocean carries most of India's energy imports as well as Chinese naval deployments, but the nature of these challenges alone does not resolve the kind and scale of response they merit. India built the Chain of Static Sensors after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, with radar hardware involving imported parts. The Chain has been extended to Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and the Seychelles, and together with naval platforms forms a detect-decide-respond system. But while naval satellites and underwater sensor networks provide the 'detect' aspect, the frigates' radars and sonars remain the most imported –and thus most delayed – components, limiting the vessels' ability to function as mobile sensors. Adding more surface combatants is like adding receivers to a network still transmitting a fuzzy picture. Granted, securing sea lanes and addressing non-traditional threats such as Houthi drone and missile activity justify some number of multi-role frigates. However, these platforms are also overkill for countering piracy and smuggling. Heightened surveillance and the Indian Coast Guard also address the 26/11 scenario. And while the People's Liberation Army Navy has been increasing its submarine presence in the region, an Indian hull lacking the premium sensors required to find these vessels is effectively not responding to China's presence. What then is the purpose of expanding the high-end frigate fleet? One possibility is to sustain domestic shipyards and absorb new technologies, but this risks allowing industry interests to supersede the demands of the threat environment. In sum, India has a response fleet facing delays, a sensor grid with incomplete coverage and overdue upgrades, a domestic industrial ecosystem that still depends on imports, and, ultimately, investments that are out of step with the threats they are meant to address.

Silencing academia, weakening democratic space

C.P. Rajendran

Geoscientist and a communicator on science, politics, environment, and education

According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2026 report, India is still classified as an "electoral autocracy", ranking in the lower half globally. The report notes a steady decline in democratic freedoms, especially in free expression, media independence, and civil society, placing India among the "worst autocratizers". This signals a growing dismantling of institutions and norms that support accountability and pluralism, drawing increasing international scrutiny.

The Scholars at Risk Free to Think 2024 report classifies India as having "completely restricted" academic freedom. It cites declining university autonomy linked to rising political interference, and pressure on institutions. Notably, it emphasises the systematic enforcement of a Hindu nationalist agenda within higher education, with changes to curricula, limited scholarly exploration and reduced space for intellectual dissent.

This classification is not an isolated judgment. It aligns with a broader pattern of democratic erosion documented by global indices, from V-Dem to Freedom House. For Indian universities – once celebrated as arenas of critical thought and pluralistic debate – the message is unequivocal: the freedom to teach, to learn, and to question is no longer guaranteed.

What is less discussed is how shrinking academic freedom weakens democracy itself. Beyond elections, voting rights and laws, a healthy and functioning democracy depends on a strong civil society, open access to evidence-based information, and space for genuine public debate – areas now under growing pressure, especially in academia.

These freedoms are under direct strain, most visibly in academia. Universities –meant to foster inquiry and debate – face funding cuts, regulatory pressure, and growing self-censorship, eroding their autonomy. The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill proposes to further centralise control, prioritising conformity over academic freedom. As these spaces shrink, so does society's ability to think critically and sustain a pluralistic democracy.

A disturbing pattern

According to *The Wire*, 62 academics faced punitive action (2014-26) for their opinions or political stances. Freedom of expression is penalised on campuses using service rules that define faculty as "government servants". In *Nature* (April 2024), Yamini Aiyar cites an India Academic Freedom Network report that documents a series of disrupted events, arrests of faculty and students, and visa hurdles for foreign researchers.

The contrast with British scientist J.B.S. Haldane who became a citizen of India in the early 1960s and who openly criticised the government while working in India is striking. It highlights how space for dissent in academia has sharply narrowed. Data from 2024-26 show a broad assault on academic freedom, targeting students, researchers, and faculty. Driven by political pressure, institutional failures, and social biases, these trends signal that certain topics are off-limits, certain voices are dangerous, and the pursuit of knowledge must bow to political convenience.

Academic suppression and shrinking dissent signal a deep democratic decline in India

A consistent and disturbing pattern emerges: institutions are accused of failing to act against perpetrators. Internal complaints committees, mandated to provide oversight and justice, are described by critics as "ornamental", existing more for formal compliance than for substantive accountability. When the very bodies designed to protect students and faculty become complicit through silence or inaction, the chilling effect deepens. Trust erodes, fear takes root, and the message is unmistakable: power will be protected, and voices that challenge it will find no refuge within the walls meant to nurture free inquiry.

A worrying erosion

These actions undermine the ability of civil society and academic institutions to hold leaders accountable, eroding the very basis of a knowledge sector essential to Indian democracy. When violence goes unpunished, when caste and religious prejudice are replicated rather than challenged, when sexual predators are protected, and when dissent is criminalised, the message is unmistakable: the pursuit of knowledge must not disturb power.

India's stance on political rights is reflected in its refusal to sign the First Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Although a party to the ICCPR treaty since 1979, it does not accept the UN complaint mechanism, meaning citizens cannot seek international redress for rights violations after exhausting domestic remedies.

The contrast is striking. India's Constitution, through Articles 14, 19, and 21, guarantees many of the same rights enshrined in the ICCPR. The Supreme Court of India has often drawn upon international human rights norms to interpret and expand fundamental rights. Yet, the government remains unwilling to subject itself to the international complaint mechanism that would allow its own citizens – particularly those from marginalised communities who face disproportionate human rights violations – to seek justice beyond domestic courts when those courts fail them.

This issue is highlighted in an insightful article by Ravi Nair, "The Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam case: An international campaign within the realm of possibility" (*The Leaflet*, January 7, 2026). The young academic scholars, Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, have been in jail as undertrials for the last five years. On January 6, the Supreme Court rejected their bail application and barred them from applying for bail for a year, stunning many legal experts.

When journalists such as Irfan Mehraj and humanists such as Sonam Wangchuk (now released) struggle through prolonged legal battles, even for bail, some high-profile godmen accused of serious crimes have repeatedly secured parole or furlough. The contrast could not be more telling. On one side, a voice for justice, dignity, and democratic rights is treated as a threat. On the other hand, figures accused of serious crimes are granted leniency. In this asymmetry lies a disturbing truth about whose freedoms are protected and whose are quietly abandoned.

The cost of homogenisation

Why does a self-proclaimed "Mother of Democracy" prefer homogenisation of thought rather than freedom of thought? Higher education institutions have always been refuges for those who challenge orthodox thinking and work toward generating new ideas.

This is not a bug but a feature of university life. Democracies are revitalised by such encounters, even when they mean questioning majority opinion.

History offers sobering evidence: authoritarianism does not always arrive with a crash. More often, it emerges from within democracies – slowly, quietly, and with the acquiescence of those it will eventually silence. It springs not from sudden rupture, but from the gradual conditioning of publics through manufactured victimhood, cultivated fear, and the steady erosion of norms that once seemed unshakeable. In this process, citizens and institutions can become complicit in the dismantling of their own freedoms, unaware that the protections being stripped away were the very foundations of the democracy they took for granted.

The decline documented in the Academic Freedom Index is not an abstract metric. It is a measure of the health of Indian democracy itself. When scholars, activists and students are silenced, when dissent is criminalised, and when political interests capture academic institutions, the foundation upon which democratic accountability rests is systematically dismantled–brick by brick, case by case, silence by silence.

The numbers tell a story. However, the true story is developing on our campuses, where voices once raised in inquiry now whisper; in our courtrooms, where justice is increasingly influenced by power; and in the silence of those who once dared to speak, a silence that grows louder each day, while the state itself becomes more bureaucratic, punitive, and regulatory.

The key question is whether institutions will continue down this path or reclaim their original purpose. For society, it is whether we choose to protect the spaces that allow critical thinking, challenge power, and help young people engage meaningfully with issues of justice and governance.

The Iran conflict and the future of Shia identity

Mohammed Ayoob

University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University, and author of 'The Many Faces of Political Islam' (2020)

The Iran war is not merely a geopolitical conflict; it is a crucible for the future of Shia identity. For nearly half a century, Shiism has been shaped by the Iranian revolutionary model – an assertive fusion of clerical authority, state power, and transnational political ambition. This conflict could disrupt, reinforce, or redesign that synthesis. The war may fragment Shia identity, pulling it back toward national forms. But it may equally consolidate and radicalise it, deepening a shared narrative of oppression and reviving its most powerful theological motifs – martyrdom, sacrifice, and resistance.

Simultaneous trajectories

These two trajectories are unfolding simultaneously, in tension with one another, across different Shia societies. The first points toward fragmentation. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Shia identity has been closely tied to the idea of "political Shiism" – a model in which religious authority is ensconced as the supreme decision maker within a state and projected outward through networks of religious and political influence. Iran positioned itself as the guardian and leader of Shia communities worldwide, building alliances with groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and various militias and political factions in Iraq.

The current war places this model under severe strain. With Iran immeasurably weakened – militarily and economically – its ability to sustain this transnational network is considerably diminished. This could lead to what might be called the "nationalization" of Shia identity. Shiism will not be seen as a vehicle for geopolitical struggle but a religious tradition that coexists with multiple political arrangements.

Yet, this is only one side of the story. Wars do not merely fragment identities; they also forge them. The same conflict that has weakened institutional structures can intensify emotional and symbolic bonds. The alternative trajectory is one of consolidation and radicalisation. If the war is framed – and experienced – by Shia communities as an assault not just on Iran but on Shia identity itself, it could reinforce a shared sense of collective victimhood.

Shia identity faces the possibility of fragmentation or radical consolidation

For centuries, Shia consciousness has been shaped by the memory of oppression under Sunni-dominated empires. The Islamic Republic successfully tapped into this historical narrative, recasting contemporary conflicts as continuations of a long struggle against injustice. The current war adds a further dimension: the perception of being targeted not only by regional Sunni oppressors such as the House of Saud but also by powerful external actors, particularly Israel and the United States. In such a context, differences of nationality or political orientation may recede in importance, overshadowed by a shared narrative of existential threat.

What Karbala represents

At the heart of this consolidating and radicalising narrative lies the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, in which Imam Hussain and his small band of followers were martyred by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid. This is the foundational event of Shia identity. It is not merely a historical episode but a living symbol, reenacted annually in rituals of mourning and remembrance. Karbala represents the triumph of moral truth over brute power, the willingness to make the supreme sacrifice in the face of injustice. If Shia communities perceive themselves as under siege, Karbala provides a ready-made narrative through which to interpret their experience.

This consolidation and radicalisation would also reinvigorate the concept of "resistance". This war and especially the near total devastation of South Lebanon, which is predominantly Shia, and the uprooting of its population by Israeli invaders could deepen this orientation. Resistance would no longer be simply a strategic choice; it would be an expression of identity itself. The juxtaposition of these two trajectories captures the uncertainty of the present moment. These dynamics are not evenly distributed. In countries such as Iraq, where the Shia are a demographic majority and deeply invested in state institutions, the pull toward nationalisation may be stronger especially if Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the Najaf religious establishment throw their weight behind it. In Lebanon and Bahrain, where identity is more closely tied to perceptions of oppression, consolidation may prove more compelling. In Iran the suffering inflicted by the United States-Israeli attacks, seen by Iranians of all political hues as unprovoked and unjustified, is likely to reinforce the Karbala syndrome and, therefore, aid consolidation as well as radicalisation.

Looking ahead

The outcome will depend not only on the course of the war but on how it is interpreted. For in Shiism, as in all living traditions, identity is not merely inherited; it is continually reconstructed through the interplay of history, memory, and experience.

While on the surface it appears like a toss up between the two trajectories, given the transnational nature of Shia suffering, it is more than likely that consolidation as well as radicalisation may prevail over fragmentation or at the very least inspire a significant section of the Shia population into action across national boundaries.

If the latter prediction holds true, the war against Iran may end up spawning a Shia variant of al-Qaeda that, like the original version, could make the U.S. its primary target. Lebanon, a failing state, could provide the breeding ground and sanctuary for such an organisation as the failed Afghan state did for the original al-Qaeda.

The law of unintended consequences works in unpredictable ways.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A new chapter

Actor-turned-politician C. Joseph Vijay has secured an astounding electoral victory in Tamil Nadu. Analysts view it as a significant achievement, noting his self-belief and also the strong support from youth and women voters under the age of 30. Despite intense political criticism and the impact of the Karur tragedy, his campaign drew large crowds. His on-screen image as a "virtuous hero" is seen to have helped him connect with voters. But as the saying goes, winning is one thing; governing is another. Mr. Vijay's real test begins now, as expectations are high for a transparent, inclusive and corruption-free administration. As he often said during his campaign, the public will now watch whether "Vijay" truly translates into "*Vijayam*" for the State of Tamil Nadu.

'Kalaimamani' Appa Ramesh,
Chennai

An undemocratic stance

The West Bengal election has delivered a historic verdict, yet Trinamool Congress Mamata Banerjee's refusal to resign is a disgraceful defiance of democracy. Despite her party's decimation and her defeat, she remains obstinate. Blaming the Election Commission of India for this loss is a hollow and desperate excuse. A mandate is the ultimate expression of the people's will; to reject it as a "conspiracy" is to insult the electorate. True leaders must learn the basic tenets of democracy.

N. Sadhasiva Reddy,
Bengaluru

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

How 'bulldozer justice' undermines the law

Sandeep Phukan

The sight of a five-year-old gifting a toy to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on March 27 at Gorakhpur made for a tender photo moment. The Chief Minister returned the gift and asked the child to focus on her studies.

A child showing her admiration for a political leader is nothing out of the ordinary, as leaders are meant to be role models for the younger generation. But the five-year-old's choice of toy – a replica of a bulldozer – raises uncomfortable questions. The episode not only shows public approval for "bulldozer justice", it also reflects the normalisation of extrajudicial action by the state. What is arguably a problematic political symbol is now part of our everyday consciousness and holds the potential to influence impressionable minds.

The much-hailed "bulldozer justice" model isn't just a negation of the concept of due process but a direct challenge to it.

Not the first time

Though "bulldozer justice" is now part of India's political lexicon, the concept of bulldozers being used as an instrument of state policy is not new. Instances of bulldozers being used to clear encroachments and demolish unauthorised houses in Old Delhi's Turkman Gate area in 1976 – when the country was under the Emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi– have been well chronicled.

However, there is a key difference in how such actions have been perceived over time. From being examined as part of the excesses of the Emergency by a judicial commission, bulldozer action is now being amplified as a symbol of the state's firmness in dealing with those who break the law. It is premised on the fact that judicial processes are cumbersome and come in the way of delivering instant retributive justice. In an era of 10-minute deliveries, government authorities are not immune to the same pressure. And since the judicial process does not follow a fixed timeline, some argue that this pressure is multiplied.

The image of swift destruction creates an impression of decisive leadership, but it also normalises the idea that executive authority can override legal safeguards

The drive for 'instant' justice

The backlog of cases across all courts in India has crossed 5.5 crore, with the figure in the Supreme Court alone accounting for over 90,000 cases. The India Justice Report 2025 noted that there are only 15 judges for every million Indians, as against a 1987 Law Commission of India recommendation of 50 judges per one million. In 22 of the 25 States, the same report noted, cases pending for over three years in subordinate courts amount to 25% of all pending cases. And across 25 High Courts, the number of cases which are pending for over five years account for 51%.

The burden of proof and the long road to litigation often act as a deterrent and, therefore, common citizens prefer quick justice. And when government authorities are under constant scrutiny and quick feedback, the pressure of "instant delivery of justice" is quite high.

But what an individual prefers, even a majority of them, cannot be the state's choice. In a state governed by the rule of law, there is no place for majoritarian populism. The tenets of criminal jurisprudence consider any crime against an individual as one against society. And the state can dispense justice only in accordance with the law.

The problem with bulldozer justice lies precisely in the fact that it substitutes spectacle for procedure. Demolitions carried out immediately after an alleged offence, often before investigations are completed, blur the distinction between punishment and an extrajudicial action carried out by the state. In such cases, the state assumes the role of investigator, judge and executioner at once. This dissolution of power between the organs of the state undermines the very principles that underpin a constitutional democracy.

There is another aspect that is often overlooked. If the demolitions of the homes of the accused are for purported violations of land or municipal laws, it begs the question: why did the government allow such a structure in the first place? Is it an admission that a corrupt system allowed such a home to be built right before the gaze of law enforcers? But if the demolitions are meant to convey a message of zero tolerance towards crime, then it runs foul of the law. The state cannot reduce itself to the level of vigilante groups, whose main purpose of existence is to hand out "instant justice".

The image of swift destruction creates an impression of decisive leadership, but it also normalises the idea that executive authority can override legal safeguards whenever public anger demands immediate retribution. Over time, this risks weakening institutional credibility and erodes citizens' trust in lawful processes.

Strengthen institutions

The real solution to public frustration with the justice system lies not in bypassing it, but in strengthening it. Expanding judicial capacity, filling vacancies, modernising court infrastructure and improving investigative processes would address the underlying causes of delay far more effectively than theatrical displays of coercive powers. Cases involving heinous crimes must be mandatorily assigned to fast-track courts that are focused on speedy disposals with frequent hearings.

However, a constitutional state derives its legitimacy not from the speed of punishment but from its unimpeachable principles and the fairness of its processes. "Bulldozer justice" may satisfy a demand for instant retribution, but it erodes the foundations of the rule of law and risks reducing the state to a vigilante group.

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A shifting political arithmetic in Punjab

The BJP intends to ride solo in the State polls next year

STATE OF PLAY

Vikas Vasudeva
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Buoyed by electoral victories in West Bengal, Assam, and Puducherry, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seems eager to carry that momentum into Punjab, treating it as the next domino in a long line waiting to fall. In a bold move, it is readying itself to go solo for the Assembly polls in Punjab, due in 2027.

The BJP has been present in Punjab since the country's independence. People know what it stands for, what it has done and what it has not done. Before 1992, when the BJP (earlier known as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh) was fighting alone, it secured, on average, 6%-7% of the vote share during the Assembly elections. Later, when the BJP entered into an alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in 1997, its vote share went up a tad to around 8%, according to the book *Electoral Politics in Punjab*. In 2022, the BJP contested the Assembly elections in alliance with the Punjab Lok Congress and got 6.6% of the vote.

In Punjab, the BJP and the SAD have been alliance partners since 1996, and have long contested Assembly elections together, with the SAD fielding candidates in 94 seats and the BJP in 23. The BJP contested these electoral battles as a 'junior partner' in the alliance, which many in the party's State unit believed restricted the BJP's growth. However, after the SAD chose to sever ties with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) over the contentious farm laws in 2020, the BJP has been pushing for its expansion across the State. To achieve its solo ambitions, in March this year, Union Minister Amit Shah sounded the party's poll bugle at the 'Badlav rally' in Moga, declaring that the party would be contesting the Assembly elections alone in Punjab.

A changing political pulse

Nevertheless, the political arithmetic keeps changing. The century-old party, the SAD, has weakened, even though it saw a modest resurgence in last year's rural body polls. The ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which swept into power on a wave of anti-establishment energy, now appears to be running well below its earlier strength after the exit of seven AAP Rajya Sabha MPs, six of them from Punjab, on April 24.

The timing of the AAP MPs leaving the party is seen to be as damaging as the defection itself. With Assembly elections due early next year, the party has been going to the public, and presenting its accomplishments and projecting confidence about forming the next government. Against this backdrop, the exit of sitting MPs sends out a contradictory message, implying that those who knew the party best chose to walk away. The defections could also crack open factional feuds and internal power struggles. The allegation that Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann appeared in a "drunk state" during the State Assembly proceedings on May 1, has handed the Opposition ready ammunition. The BJP has been quick to capitalise off it.

Meanwhile, the Congress, which is the State's principal Opposition and has been positioning itself as the primary challenger to the ruling AAP, appears to be struggling with internal discord. In January this year, Congress leader and former Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi called for "greater Dalit representation" in the party, pointing out that Dalits were not getting due representation, bringing the discord within the party into public view. In February, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, during his visit to Punjab, gave a stern message to the State unit of the party, asking them to work as a "team".

The BJP seems to believe it can expand into this fractured space. While Punjab presents a distinct political landscape where religion, region and caste-based coalitions remain central to the State's electoral arithmetic, the party has already been reaching out to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits in a bid to pull-off another case of 'social engineering' in order to get a foothold in the State. The Scheduled Castes account for 31.91% of the population in Punjab, while the OBCs account for around 25%-30%. Simultaneously, the party has also been working to project its pro-Sikh image by propagating the Central government's steps taken in the interest of Sikhs since 2014.

With the BJP buoyed by renewed confidence, the AAP weakened from within, and the Congress consumed by its own internal discord, Punjab's electoral space is shaping up to be unusually crowded. In such a multi-cornered contest, the possibility of a clear mandate could be remote.

RE meets global electricity demand for the first time

Despite rapid renewable capacity growth globally, geopolitical shocks expose India's dependence on fossil fuel imports from West Asia

DATA POINT

Areena Arora

In 2025, global electricity generation increased by roughly 850 terawatt-hours (TWh), according to data from the Ember Energy Institute. This increase was supplied almost entirely by solar and wind energy, contributing 636 TWh and 204 TWh respectively. Other renewables added another 23 TWh. Coal generation and oil meanwhile fell by 67 TWh and 12 TWh respectively. This is the first year in which expanded electricity demand did not require an increase in fossil fuels.

Over the past decade, the cost of solar and wind energy has dropped steeply, and battery storage and grid integration capacities have improved drastically, supporting an uptick in reliance on renewable energy sources. In 2025, coal's share of global electricity production fell by just over 1% and solar energy increased by nearly 2%. The dependence on oil also went down.

Major superpowers are embracing the change. China, for instance, saw its fossil fuel generation fall for the first time since 2015. The country saw a strong 5% growth in electricity demand and a 15% growth in clean energy generation, met largely by solar and wind energy. Solar energy in China grew by 40% compared to 2024 and wind energy increased by 14%. Solar energy alone met two-thirds of the increase in the country's electricity demand in 2025, according to a report by Ember Energy.

Fossil fuel demand fell in India as well. Together, the fall in demand in India and China has pushed global fossil fuel generation to stagnation, according to the report. Fossil fuel generation fell in both India (down 3.3%) and China (down 0.9%), driven by clean power usage and demand growth.

How is this different from the earlier years? For two decades, even as renewable electricity capacity grew at double-digit rates, fossil fuel generation remained relevant and kept climbing because absolute electricity demand was rising faster than what renewables could cover. The rising consumption relied on coal and gas-fuelled energy. Even as renewable energy gained market share, it could not displace fossil fuels in absolute terms. However, that pattern reversed in 2025.

Globally, coal's share in electricity production declined from 36% in 2015 to 33% in 2024 **(Chart 1)**. Coal generation fell in absolute terms for the first time last year, as renewables outpaced demand growth. Natural gas also saw a modest 45 TWh increase, entirely offset by renewable gains.

The effect of war

India's crude oil imports fell by 17% year-over-year in March 2026 to 18.9 million tonnes, compared with 22.8 million tonnes in March 2025 **(Chart 2)**. The decline comes amid the closure of the Strait of Hormuz starting March 1 due to the U.S.-Israel conflict with Iran. This narrow waterway handles a significant share of global oil and gas shipments. India imports 89% of its crude oil from mostly Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The Indian basket crude (simplify) price averaged $113.49 per barrel in March 2026, compared with $72.47 in March 2025, a 56% increase year-over-year.

India's primary energy supply consists of coal, followed by oil, natural gas and then renewables **(Chart 3)**.

India's natural gas consumption rose in March 2026 despite supply disruptions. Natural gas available for consumption went up by 7% from March 2025. This increase came despite a 4.9% decline in domestic production. The gap was filled by LNG imports, which jumped by 20.5% by March this year. India's LNG imports reached 27 million metric tonnes (mmt) in 2024-25, the highest on record and double the 13.5 mmt imported in 2011-12. India's LPG imports also surged with expanded household access. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana increased LPG connections from 62% of households in 2016 to nearly 100% by 2025, driving imports to 18 mmt in 2025-26 from 16.48 mmt in 2020-21.

Crude oil, LNG, and LPG are all imported heavily from West Asian suppliers. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz disrupted all three simultaneously. India's response included accelerating renewable approvals, maximising refinery output, and paying ₹30,000 crore to oil marketing companies in FY 2025-26 to cushion LPG losses. LPG prices rose by ₹60 per cylinder after the conflict began.

On the flip side, India's renewable capacity grew by over 210% in the past decade. In FY 2024-25, renewable energy accounted for 89% of India's new capacity additions. Yet absolute energy dependence on imports has also deepened. India imports 89% of crude oil, 47% of natural gas, and 26% of coal despite being the world's third-largest coal producer. The renewable buildout has not yet reduced India's reliance on imported fossil fuels.

Renewable capacity takes years to translate into reliable, usable power and geopolitical shocks affect energy supply in the instant short-term. When the Strait of Hormuz closed in early March, India could not wait for wind farms to reach completion or battery capacity to scale. It responded by maximising output from existing coal and gas infrastructure, instructing domestic suppliers to prioritise domestic users and accelerating imports of LNG and LPG from alternative suppliers.

The global energy transition advanced significantly in 2025. India's renewable capacity is growing at the fastest rate globally. However, import dependence on a conflict zone exists alongside clean energy progress in India.

Perilous present, cleaner future

Towards sustainability: Solar panels being placed at the CNNC Tianwan tidal flat photovoltaic power plant in Lianyungang, in China's eastern Jiangsu province, on April 19.

Chart 1: The shift towards renewables for global electricity generation, with an uptick in solar and wind energy (Figures in %)

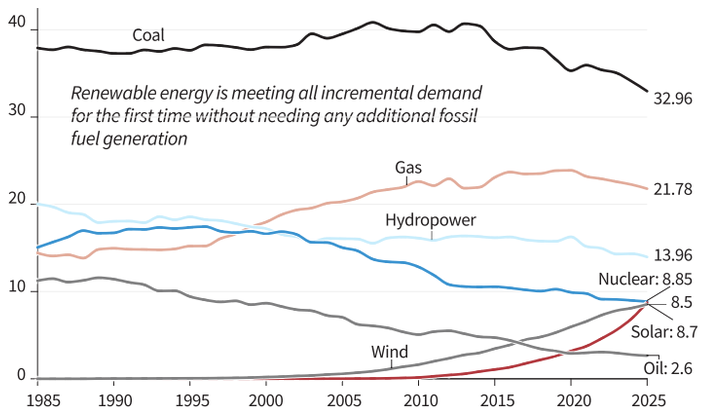


Chart 2: The fall in India's crude oil imports in March

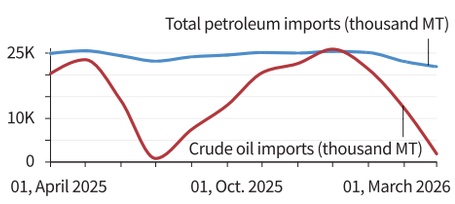
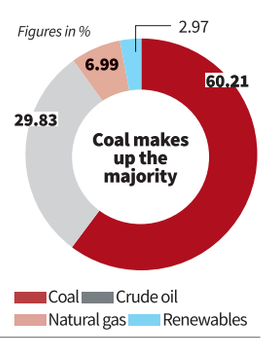


Chart 3: The makeup of India's energy sources



Data for the charts were sourced from Ember (2026), Energy Institute- Statistical Review of World Energy (2025) - with major processing by Our World in Data; Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell; Energy Statistics India 2025 report by the Ministry of Statistics and Planning Implementation

FROM THE ARCHIVES
The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 6, 1976

Supreme Court defines life imprisonment

New Delhi, May 5: The notion that life imprisonment implies imprisonment for 20 or 14 years is wrong. Life imprisonment means "imprisonment for the entire life of the prisoner" unless the Government chooses to remit the same earlier, the Supreme Court to-day ruled.

A sentence of life imprisonment did not automatically come to an end after 20 years. After serving a jail term of 20 years, including remissions, a life convict could not ask to be released as a matter of right, the Court held.

Under Section 401 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, it was the "undoubted discretion" of the "appropriate Government" to "remit or refuse to remit" the sentence and where the State Government refused to remit the sentence, a High Court could not issue a writ under Article 226 of the Constitution directing the Government to release the prisoner, the Court ruled.

One Rattan Singh was convicted by the Sessions Judge Bhind (Madhya Pradesh) on charges of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment on October 16, 1957. He appealed for a transfer to Amritsar in Punjab. The same was granted.

On May 7, 1971, the prisoner made a representation to the Government seeking release.

The Punjab Government forwarded the representation to the Madhya Pradesh Government and the latter, rejected it.

The prisoner then filed a writ petition under Article 226 of the Constitution before the Punjab and Haryana High Court on the ground that having already served sentence of more than 20 years, he was entitled to be released "as a matter of course" under the provisions of the Jail Manual and the Prison Act.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 6, 1926

The British Gazette

London, May 4: The Government is publishing a penny newspaper called "The British Gazette". The first issue to-morrow will be distributed in the whole of London area.

The "British Gazette" is being distributed at Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and the surrounding districts by air.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Growth recorded by Hong Kong in the first three months of 2026

5.9 in per cent. Hong Kong's economy grew by 5.9% in the first three months of 2026, the government said on Tuesday while also warning of "downside risks" from the West Asia crisis. The figure was the strongest since the 7.6% growth recorded in the second quarter of 2021. Hong Kong has set an annual growth target of 2.5 to 3.5 percent for 2026. AFP

Percentage increase in India's coffee exports in January-April 2026

26.6 in per cent. India's coffee exports rose 26.6 per cent to 1.74 lakh tonnes in the January-April period of 2026, mainly driven by higher shipments of robusta and instant coffee, government data showed. The country had exported 1.37 lakh tonnes of coffee in the year-ago period. India ships arabica and robusta varieties, as well as instant coffee. PTI

Sub-sectors identified for faster clearance of FDI proposals by India

40 Rare earth magnets and printed circuit boards are among 40 sub-sectors identified by the government for clearance within 60 days of FDI proposals from China and other countries sharing land borders with India. The government has also laid out guidelines for FDI proposals from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Afghanistan. PTI

Amount approved by the M.P. cabinet for various departments

38,555 in ₹ crore. The Madhya Pradesh cabinet on Tuesday approved funds of ₹ 38,555 crore for various departments. The cabinet earmarked ₹32,405 crore for road infrastructure and maintenance of government housing for 2026-2031, ₹2,442.04 crore for the "Self-Reliance in Pulses Mission". PTI

Villages dependent on tankers for water supply in Marathwada

92 With rising summer heat, 92 villages across three districts of Maharashtra's Marathwada region are now dependent on tankers for the supply of water, a report has said. As of Tuesday, 156 tankers are supplying water to 92 villages and 36 settlements in the districts of Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Jalna, Latur and Hingoli. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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India's energy security amid conflicts

The conflict in West Asia has shown how geopolitical shocks can transmit to India's domestic economy, given that the country imports over 85% of its crude needs. In a fragmented energy market, India's edge lies not in self-sufficiency but in optionality.

EXPLAINER

Deepanshu Mohan
Aditi Lazarus

The conflict in West Asia has demonstrated the speed with which geopolitical shocks have been transmitted to India's domestic economy. The head of the International Energy Agency has described the current geoeconomic crisis as more severe than the combined shocks of 1973, 1979 and 2022.

The price of Brent crude oil rose to $109.03 per barrel after hitting highs of around $120 during the conflict. At a domestic level, India is projected to see its economy slow from 7.4% growth in FY26 to 6.5% in FY27 with a projected increase in inflation from 2.3% to 4.4% due to the impact of disruptions observed in the energy supply chains.

Energy security can no longer be defined solely as purchasing fuel at the lowest possible price. It now rests on resilience, diversification, and protection of macroeconomic stability.

Navigating the crisis: An Indian-flagged tanker carrying crude oil that transited through the Strait of Hormuz, is seen docked in Mumbai. AFP

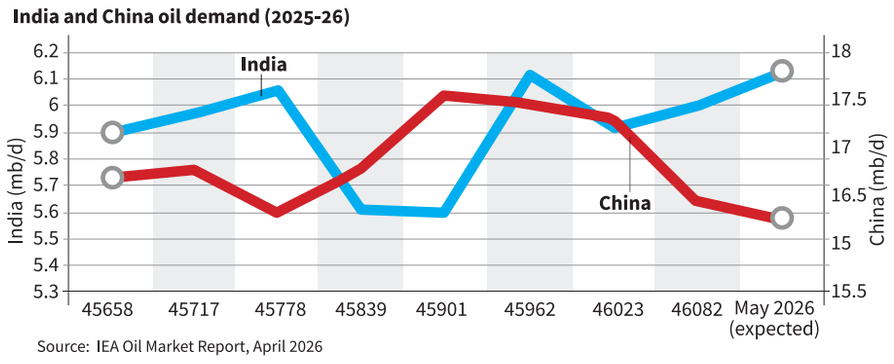
THE GIST

- India has long relied on crude oil imports but has handled repeated geoeconomic shocks better than many comparable importers.
- Its import basket—spanning Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia, and the United States, remains geographically diversified.
- While expansion into solar, batteries, and EVs may reduce oil use over time, reliance on lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper, and rare earths may increase in the future.

Energy requirements

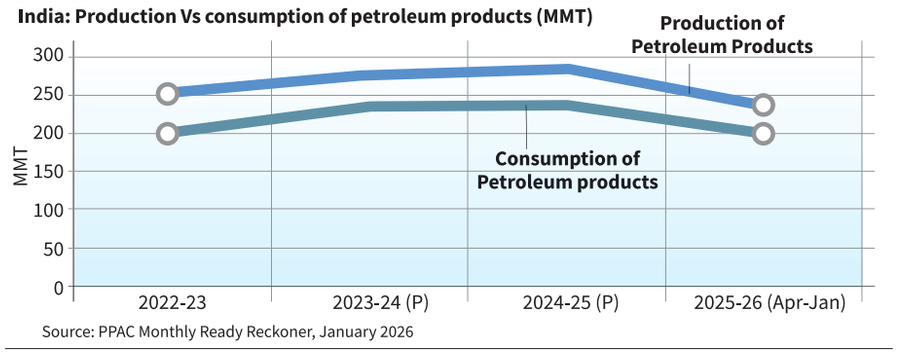
India is now the world's third-largest oil consumer, with high dependence on crude imports. As a result, fluctuations in crude oil prices, freight rates, and currency exchange rates remain a concern, especially during geoeconomic conflicts

India and China oil demand (2025-26)



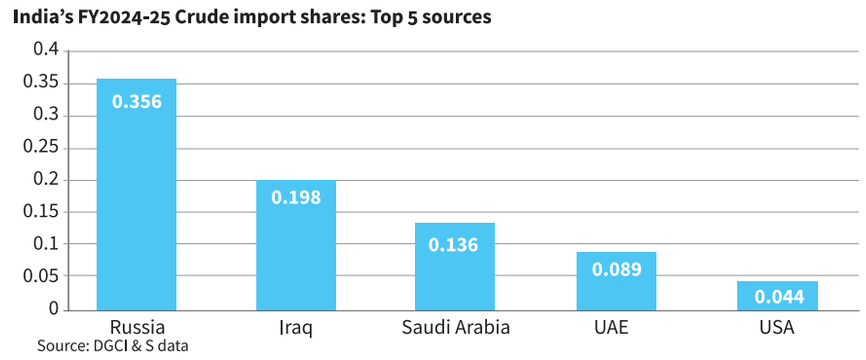
Source: IEA Oil Market Report, April 2026

India: Production Vs consumption of petroleum products (MMT)



Source: PPAC Monthly Ready Reckoner, January 2026

India's FY2024-25 Crude import shares: Top 5 sources



Source: DGCI & S data

Breakdown of the old energy market order

The Russia-Ukraine War was the first major warning to the pre-existing energy market order. It exposed the perils of energy dependence overnight.

Europe once relied on Russia for 45% of its gas imports. By 2025, that had fallen to 12%. Europe did not respond by chasing efficiency, it did so by buying insurance. Gas consumption by European Union (EU) countries fell by 20% between 2021 and 2024, while the combined imports of gas and liquified natural gas (LNG) declined by 18%.

Even when average LNG terminal utilisation was only 52% in the first half of 2025, Europe accepted spare capacity as the price of security.

While the war in Ukraine revealed the reliance on pipeline-based supplies, the conflict in West Asia demonstrated the reliance on sea transportation.

The Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 25% of the world's crude oil is transported, has once again become an extremely important chokepoint, transmitting price shocks rapidly across global markets.

Other powers have adapted differently. China has locked in nearly 25 million metric tons of LNG per year through contracts, South Korea has secured 273 million barrels of crude oil that will transit from outside the Strait of Hormuz, while Japan has stockpiled 470 million barrels, which is equivalent to 254 days of consumption.

Gulf shore exporters have regained much of their bargaining power due to spare capacity. The International Energy Agency (IEA) forecasts a contraction of 80 kb/d in the global demand for oil on average in 2026, with a decrease of 236 kb/d for OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and 254 kb/d for Middle East, while non-OECD demand still rises 152 kb/d. In this weaker market, India's demand growth becomes strategically valuable.

How India gained more room to manoeuvre

The potential threat of disruption of the Indian oil imports is real and immediate, since the country imports over 85% of its crude needs, with roughly 45% of its imports transiting through the Strait of Hormuz.

For years, India has depended heavily on imports. But the country has handled repeated shocks better than many comparable importers. It is now the world's third-largest oil consumer.

According to OPEC's forecast, India's consumption is expected to reach 5.74 million barrels per day (mb/d) in 2025 and 5.99 mb/d in 2026, while the IEA projects that Indian crude demand will rise approximately 130 kb/d, compared with 80 kb/d for China.

As Chinese demand becomes flatter and more cyclical, India has become one of the few large engines of incremental oil demand.

Before 2022, Russia supplied barely 2% of India's crude imports, however, by FY2024-25, that figure was around 36%, making Russia India's largest supplier. Flows from Russia picked up again as Gulf disruptions intensified.

Now, India's import basket also includes countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the United States, while remaining geographically diversified. In a fragmented energy market, India's edge lies not in self-sufficiency, but in optionality.

Tactical gains and structural risks

India has managed successive shocks well. First, India's crude oil dependence is extremely high, reaching 89.4% in FY2024-25. During that period, India produced only 28.7 million metric tons of crude oil domestically. As a result, fluctuations in crude oil prices, freight rates, and currency exchange rates continue to be a concern.

Second, geography still constrains strategy. Significant reductions in flows along Gulf sea lanes occurred due to tensions in 2026, and Indian LPG carriers, carrying a combined cargo of 97,000 metric tonnes required naval escort under Operation Sankalp. Diversification cannot bypass chokepoints.

Third, the energy transition creates fresh vulnerabilities. India's expansion into solar, batteries, electric vehicles (EV), and storage may reduce oil use over time. However, the reliance on lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper, and rare earths may increase in the future.

The way forward

India's dependence on critical minerals is tied to processing networks dominated elsewhere, especially by China, which controls over 91% of global rare-earth production, while India currently processes less than 5% of its projected 2035 battery-grade mineral requirements domestically. While India has adapted to the new oil order with considerable agility, having such tactical flexibility does not provide security in the long-term.

The next phase must focus on increasing larger strategic reserves, reducing the oil intensity in transport, strengthening maritime resilience, and ensuring security for supply chains of critical minerals. The real question is no longer whether India can switch suppliers during crises, but whether future crises will carry lower economic costs when they occur.

(Deepanshu Mohan is professor and dean, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is a visiting professor at LSE and a visiting academic fellow at University of Oxford. Srisoniya Subramoniam contributed to this column. Srisoniya and Aditi Lazarus are both research analysts with Centre for New Economics Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University)

CACHE

GETTY IMAGES

Industrial heat pumps and the case for cleaning industrial heat

Industry accounted for nearly half of India's final energy consumption in 2025, much of it still tied to fossil fuels. Cleaning up industrial heat is therefore not just a climate issue, but also one of air quality, competitiveness, energy security, and worker health.

Srinivas Ethiraj

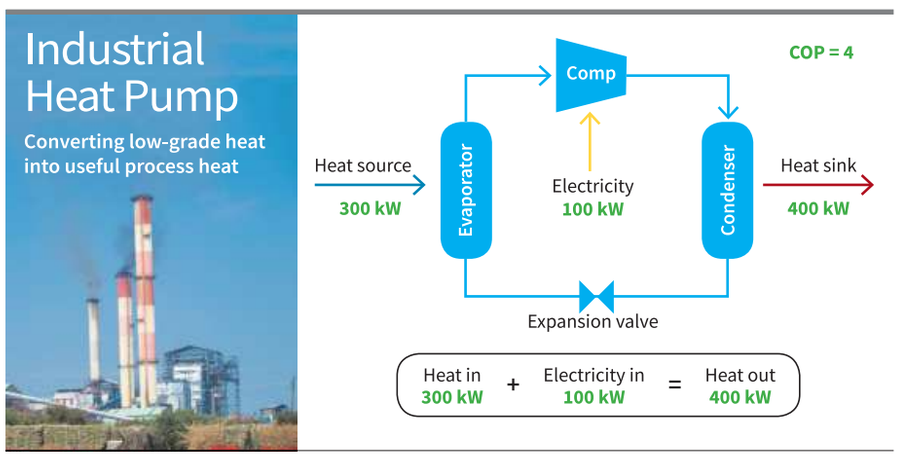
Industrial decarbonisation is often framed through solutions that promise deep emissions reductions (e.g. green hydrogen and carbon capture). These pathways are essential, particularly for hard-to-abate sectors, but are still several years away from large-scale adoption.

Even so, a significant share of manufacturing functions under very different operating conditions: one defined not by extreme temperatures but by the widespread demand for low-to-medium temperature process heat. Across sectors such as textiles, food processing, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and paper and pulp, this heat forms the backbone of production and continues to be largely met through combustion.

Industry accounted for nearly half of India's final energy consumption in 2025, much of it still tied to fossil fuels. The story becomes even sharper when we look at process steam. Industrial process steam alone is estimated to have generated 182 million metric tonnes of CO2 annually in India, along with 595 kilotonnes of SO2, 520 kilotons of particulate matter, and 516 kilotonnes of NOx.

This is why cleaning up industrial heat is not just a climate question. It is also an air quality, competitiveness, energy security, and worker-health question.

The opportunity is especially important for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in India. Spread across millions of units, MSMEs form the backbone of the country's manufacturing economy. Although they account for a smaller share of total industrial emissions (around 17%), their emissions are more fragmented and concentrated in sectors such as textiles, food processing, and paper. These are the sectors where coal, firewood, biomass, gas and furnace oil continue to run the conventional thermal systems such as boilers, thermic fluid heaters, dryers, evaporators and hot-water systems, etc.



Heat pumps as a solution

Heat pumps enter this conversation as one of the most practical technologies for this specific frontier of industrial heat. Unlike boilers, heat pumps do not create heat by burning fuel. They move and upgrade heat from one stream to another, using electricity. This is why they can deliver more useful heat than the electricity they consume. Industrial heat pumps often have a coefficient of performance of 3 to 5, meaning they can provide three to five units of heat for every unit of electricity consumed. Even at higher output temperatures, where performance falls, they can remain more efficient than simple electric resistance-based heating. This efficiency is the core of their decarbonisation value. It reduces the amount of electricity needed to electrify heat and improves the economics of switching away from combustion. If renewable electricity is available at competitive rates, the effective cost of heat from a heat pump becomes attractive even against conventional fuels.

What makes this transition compelling is the way industrial heat is currently produced and used. In a medium-sized textile finishing unit studied in Surat, around 92 percent of energy load was thermal, delivered through steam and industrial heat using a mix of Indonesian coal and lignite. The unit consumed roughly 0.42 kg of Indonesian coal per meter of processed fabric, illustrating the material intensity of fuel use embedded in routine operations. Despite this, steam is often used indirectly for generating hot water, maintaining vessel temperature, or heating surfaces rather than directly heating the product.

This reflects a central inefficiency. Conventional industrial thermal systems in such factories are often designed around the highest heat requirement, with boilers sized to meet peak demand. But many loads require lower-quality heat. In such cases, steam is generated at higher temperature and pressure, then reduced or diverted for lower-temperature applications. However, industrial heat pumps require a different engineering mindset: start with the lowest-temperature heat demand, then boost heat only where needed. This reverses the legacy boiler approach and can reduce overall energy use by 40-60 percent in suitable applications.

This right-sizing logic is particularly relevant in brownfield MSME clusters. Many boilers are old, oversized, manually operated in such settings, and run below optimal capacity. Replacing every boiler with a single large electric system is often not practical. But heat pumps can be modular. They can first serve specific loads: pre-heating boiler feedwater, supplying hot water, supporting dyeing and washing processes, recovering waste heat from effluents, or reducing steam demand in evaporators and drying streams.

Their role becomes even more interesting when heating and cooling are considered together. Industrial heat pumps can simultaneously generate hot water, steam, or hot air while producing cooling or dehumidified air as a by-product. In food processing and digital textile printing, where process heat is required alongside controlled cooling for process stability and equipment performance, heat pumps can simultaneously supply useful heat while reducing chiller or air-conditioner loads.

Health, safety and emission control

Beyond system efficiency, heat pumps can also improve worker health and safety. Workplace heat exposure is emerging as a serious occupational health risk, especially in labor-intensive factory environments where internal process heat compounds rising ambient temperatures. Globally, over 2.4 billion workers are exposed to excessive heat at work, with the highest exposure rates in Asia and the Pacific. Prolonged workplace heat is linked to heat exhaustion, heart stroke, cardiovascular strain, kidney disease, accident risk, and reduced cognitive performance.

In parallel, combustion-based process heat contributes to emission of harmful air pollutants exacerbating respiratory and cardiovascular health risks. The public health dimension is significant: fossil-fuel-driven air pollution caused an estimated 1.72 million premature deaths in India in 2022, with industrial heat systems being a key source of these emissions. In this context, increasing the use of electrified heating systems such as industrial heat pump technologies, particularly within the temperature ranges in which they are technically feasible can significantly improve air quality, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and reduce health harms associated with both air pollution and climate change. By displacing on-site combustion and enabling the integration of heating and cooling, heat pumps can create opportunities for spot and space cooling to improve thermal comfort on factory floors.

What emerges, then, is not just a technology shift but a systems transition. Scaling industrial heat pumps will depend on how well they are embedded into existing industrial ecosystems through better process integration, reliable access to low-cost electricity, and financing models that work for industries, especially MSMEs. Done right, it can unlock not just emissions reduction, but a more resilient, efficient, and safer model of industrial growth.

(Srinivas Ethiraj is assistant manager, Energy Transition, at the Vasudha Foundation.)

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Actor-turned-politician Vijay's TVK emerged as the single largest party in Tamil Nadu. Vijay has played several socially conscious roles. Here is a quiz on some of them:

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1:
TVK candidate Seenivasa Sethupathy defeated DMK leader K.R. Periyakaruppan in the Tiruppattur Assembly seat by one vote in the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. Which Vijay movie directed by A.R. Murugadoss popularised the power of a single vote?

QUESTION 2:
This man directed Vijay's first film in a leading role and also gave him the title of 'Ilaya Thalapathy (young commander)'. Name him.

QUESTION 3:
Vijay played triple roles in a film directed by Atlee. Name it.

QUESTION 4:
The film Thamizhan launched the career of a famous Bollywood actor. In it, Vijay's character spreads awareness about the law to the common man. Name the Bollywood actor and name Vijay's character, which is also the name of another Tamil actor.

QUESTION 5:
This film's tagline annoyed former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa. What was the name of the film and what was the tagline?

Visual question: This is a poster of a Vijay film that remains unreleased. Name the film which was stalled due to intense CBFC disputes. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Questions and answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party was formed as a vehicle for the _____ family after it lost control of its previous party. **Ans: Rajapaksa**

2. The firebrand South African politician who, after being expelled from the African National Congress, formed a communist, black nationalist party that in its first electoral outing won 25 seats. **Ans: Julius Malema**

3. Barely a year old and led by billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the X party contested the 2019 elections in Thailand while banking on progressive platform. Name X. **Ans: Future Forward**

4. Name of the movement that comedian Beppe Grillo launched that made its national debut in the 2013 general election in Italy. **Ans: Five Star Movement**

5. The _____ _____ was formed in 1977 after several opposition parties merged together specifically to defeat then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. **Ans: Janata Party**

Visual: Name the founder the Israeli party Kadima, who was also called the 'Butcher of Beirut'. **Ans: Ariel Sharon**

Early birds: C Saravanan | K.N. Viswanathan | Arun Kumar Singh | Sukdev Shet | Piyali Tuli

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

Why do we say "love all" in tennis? (A. Umar, Kadayanallur).
You have been watching the matches on T.V., haven't you? "Love," I understand, comes from the French "l'oeuf," which means "an egg." The egg, has for a long time symbolised "zero." So, when the umpire says "love all," what he means is that the score is "zero-zero." No one has scored a point as yet. This is one of the explanations. Some others have suggested that "love" comes from the phrase "for the love of the game." In the old days, people played because they enjoyed the game. They didn't play for money. Things have really changed since then, haven't they? Nowadays the first thing that most sportsmen say is, "Show me the money!"

What is the meaning of "to take a dig at"? (Vivek Srinivasan, Kerala).
This is a slang expression which is commonly used in American English. When you "take a dig at someone," you deliberately insult or annoy someone. It is also possible to say "to take a jab at someone." Here are a few examples:

In his speech, the Vice-Chancellor took several digs at the academic staff.

Mala loves to take jabs at people she doesn't like.

What is a "hen party"? (Abdul Jabbar, Vikarabad, A.P.).
A "hen party" is a party to which only ladies are invited; the men are strictly kept out. Before a wedding, for example, the bride and her female friends usually get together and have a good time. This would be called a hen party. Know what the opposite of a "hen party" is? A "stag party." It is a party to which only men are invited. Here is an example:

There was too much commotion at the hen party last night.

Should the word "government" be followed by a singular or a plural verb? (M. Muralisankar, Virudhnagar).
It can be followed by either a singular or a plural verb. For example, we can say:

The Government have decided to call off the meeting with the terrorists.

The Government has decided to call off the meeting with the terrorists.

Both sentences are grammatically acceptable. The meaning however is slightly different. In the second sentence – the one with the singular verb – you are thinking of the Government as a single entity. In other words, the various departments of the government form one big unit. In the first sentence, on the other hand, you are thinking of the government as consisting of distinct individual units. In this case, you don't see the various departments coming together to form a single entity. They all exist independently. So, whether you use a singular or a plural verb depends on you. It depends on the meaning that you wish to convey.

Here are some more nouns which can be followed by either a singular or plural verb: committee, jury, or staff.

Does one "eat" or "drink" soup? (C. Jayaraman, Secunderabad).
It depends on the soup. If it is thin soup, then you "drink" it. If, on the other hand, it is thick – it contains vegetables or large chunks of meat – then you definitely eat it. So it is O.K to say "Eat your soup."
Published in The Hindu on July 11, 2000

Word of the day

Astute:
marked by practical hardheaded intelligence

Synonyms: sharp, shrewd

Usage: *The minister's astute handling of the crisis helped avert further unrest.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/ydo2E8/astute

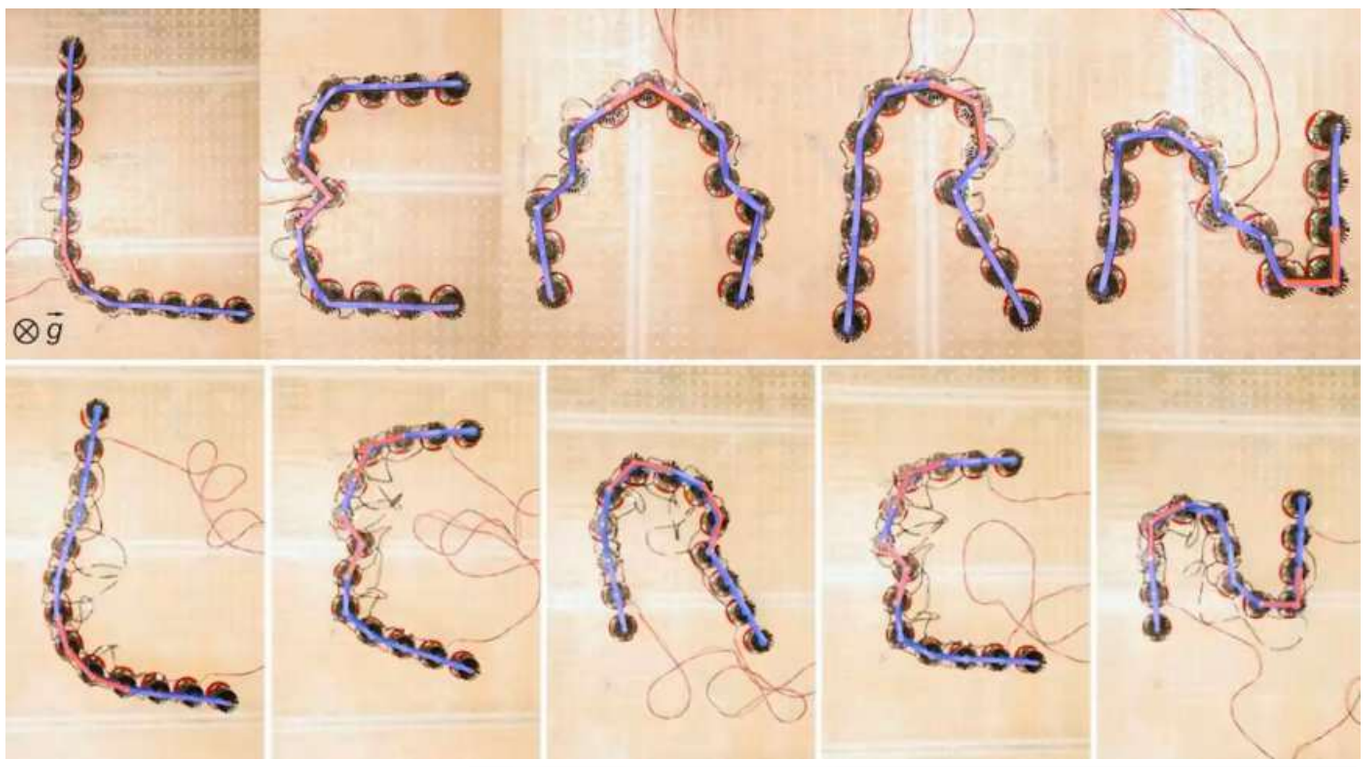
International Phonetic Alphabet: /əs'tju:t/

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

Scientists build metamaterial that can 'learn' to change shape

All life must adapt over time to changing conditions or they could go extinct; on the other hand, most non-living materials do not actively adjust their internal structure in response to conditions once they are made, but in a new study researchers from Europe have challenged this difference

Vasudevan Mukunth



Top, A robotic metamaterial spells the word 'LEARN'. A metamaterial is a special material whose properties are not determined by its chemical composition alone but also by its structure, giving rise to unusual properties.
COULAIS LAB/UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

When you exercise, your muscles become stronger. When you sow a plant, its stem will bend so that its leaves get more sunlight. Both these changes are examples of adaptation – when a biological material senses its environment, then reorganises its internal structure to survive better. All life must adapt over time to changing conditions. Populations that don't could become extinct.

However, most non-living materials do not actively adjust their internal structure in response to new conditions after they are made. When a metalsmith forges a bar of steel, its internal structure is mostly fixed from that point on, though it can still change due to heat, stress, etc. If you want a new bar with different properties, you need to engineer it anew.

However, in a new study in *Nature Physics*, researchers from Europe have challenged this difference. The team has reportedly built a synthetic material that can learn physically, by actively changing their internal mechanical properties based on external conditions.

Chain of units

The team used metamaterials for this work. These are special materials whose properties are not determined by their chemical composition alone but also by the structure, or the way in which they're physically arranged. As a result, they often have properties that natural materials don't.

In the last decade or so, scientists have used metamaterials to bend light in counterintuitive ways, shield buildings from earthquakes, and hide objects from radar, among other feats.

In the new study, the team built a robotic metamaterial consisting of a chain of connected units. Each unit had a small motor, an angle sensor, and a microcontroller.

Using these components, a unit could send and receive data to/from its adjacent units and change how much it bent in response. This way, the whole metamaterial could be as rigid as a metal spring or as flexible as a rubber band, or something else in between, based on how each unit responded to feedback from the two units attached to it. The researchers used a method called contrastive learning to 'teach' the metamaterial a particular shape.

While contrastive learning exists in machine-learning as an algorithm, the researchers implemented it here using only a hardware-based system.

Four steps to learn

First, the researchers kept the metamaterial chain in a straight line and set starting values for the stiffness of each unit. The stiffer a unit, the lesser it would bend in response to feedback.

Second, they applied an input: bending one unit in the chain by a fixed angle. This would change the rest of the chain into a particular shape, called the free state. Then, they would hold the input fixed and manually turn the other units so that the chain formed a new shape, like a 'U' or an 'L'. This was called the clamped state.

Finally, the microcontroller in each unit would compare its angle in the free state to that in the clamped state, and use the difference to adjust its stiffness using the motor. When the researchers repeated these four steps again and again, the metamaterial chain went from the free state to the clamped state in fewer steps. This is called contrastive learning because each unit 'learns' by contrasting the free and clamped states to figure out what it should do.

Thus, as the researchers explained in their paper, "Unlike traditional materials that are designed once and for all, our metamaterials have the ability to forget and learn new shape changes in sequence, to learn several shape changes that break reciprocity, and to learn multistable shape changes, which in turn allows them to perform reflex gripping actions and locomotion.

"Our findings establish metamaterials as an exciting platform for physical learning, which in turn opens avenues for the use of physical learning to design adaptive materials and robots."

The researchers reported that in one test, a chain of six units eventually 'learnt' to form a U-shape in a single step from a straight line.

Another 11-unit chain also 'learnt' to spell each letter of the word 'LEARN' in sequence, at each step 'forgetting' one shape and 'learning' the next one.

The researchers likened this ability (with some qualifications) to the adaptability of simple organisms.

Talking to each other

A usual question that arises after researchers report a successful finding in a lab is whether they would find the same thing at a larger scale or in the real world. The authors of the study addressed this question using only simulations, where they ran computer models of metamaterial chains with thousands of units. These models were not very complicated, however, as each unit had only the three components and 'learnt' only based on two inputs – the units on either side.

However, the models showed that as the chains became longer, the metamaterial 'learnt' at a slower pace. This was because the amount of deformation passing through the chain decayed over a particular length. Put differently, a 'signal' arising from one unit weakened significantly by the time it reached a distant unit.

The researchers found a simple fix: they allowed each unit to 'talk' to the nearest unit as well as the next-nearest unit, i.e. the units one and two steps away. With this rule, each unit's microcontroller received data about the angle of the unit two steps away, and used it with the 'knowledge' that the angle was X two steps away, not one. This allowed the inputs to propagate further along the chain than before. The researchers were able to have a 48-unit chain morph into the outline of a cat using just three inputs as a result.

The way the chain works is an example of local decision-making. It is unlike, say, the human body, where the brain receives inputs from multiple senses and makes many decisions, which the nervous system finally relays to different parts. Machine-learning models also use techniques like backpropagation, where the output generated near the end of a model is used to 'teach' computers near the beginning.

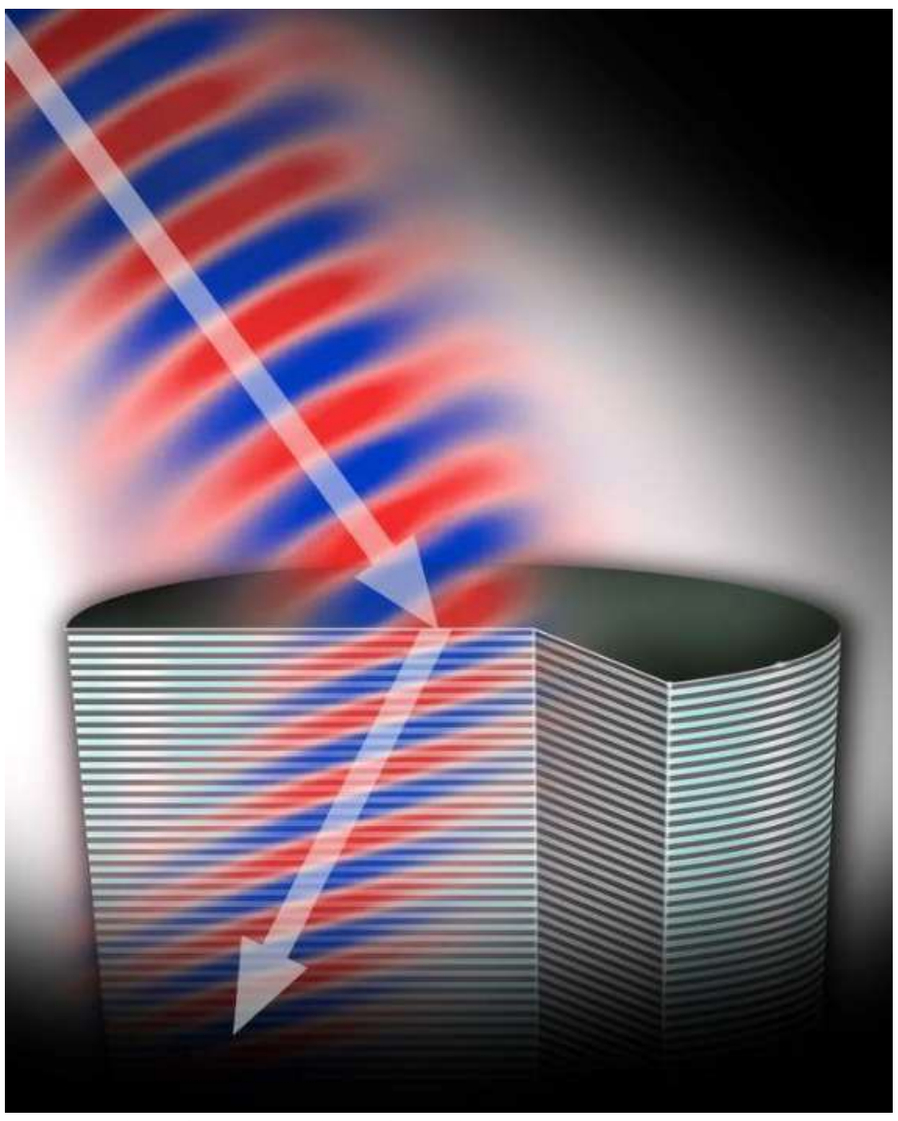
The metamaterial chain, however, made no such effort. Its 'learning' was based on the units before and after (or the next-nearest). This is useful in technological applications because it removes the need for complex networks to transfer data.

Taking a walk

The researchers also found that the chain responded differently depending on which side it was nudged. When they nudged one six-unit chain from the left end, the right end bent one way. But when they pushed it from the right end, the left end bent in a different way. This non-reciprocity, the researchers argued, allowed the metamaterial to 'learn' different ways to attain a final shape without requiring separate training.

In a commentary accompanying the paper, Karen Alim, of the Technical University of Munich, Germany, who wasn't associated with the study, wrote that such non-reciprocity tests scientists' understanding of 'intelligence' in materials beyond the bounds of traditional physics.

For example, physics dictates that



An artist's rendition of a metamaterial that refracts light the 'wrong' way when it enters the material.
KEITH DRAKE

> The programmable metamaterial wire presented by [the team] is a brilliant reduction in complexity that is key to disentangling the essential physics concepts that enable learning and constrain the space of learnable states
>
> **KAREN ALIM**
> Researcher at Technical University of Munich, Germany

when you push a spring, it will push back. This is because the spring wants to settle into its lowest energy state: where it is not compressed.

In this context, the spring can be said to 'learn' by finding the valley in its energy landscape. That is, if you take the spring to a different point in this landscape, by compressing or extending it by some amount, it will respond by making a beeline for just one spot: the valley.

However, per Dr. Lim, the chain metamaterial is non-reciprocal, so it doesn't have a simple energy landscape. In non-reciprocal systems, the energy required to move from point A to point B depends on the path the object takes – since there is more than one option. In these cases, it becomes a question of how much physical effort each path takes.

So while the spring 'learns' by minimising energy, the metamaterial chain 'learnt' by minimising work – in this case the work done by the motors. As a result, the chain was able to 'learn' different paths to a final shape the way a spring never can.

"Breaking down the complexity of learning in artificial intelligence systems and the brain into physical concepts appears to be an insurmountable task. The programmable metamaterial wire presented by [the team] is a brilliant reduction in complexity that is key to disentangling the essential physics concepts that enable learning and constrain the space of learnable states," Dr. Lim wrote.

Like a switch

The researchers also unexpectedly found bistable units – meaning they could act like switches. For example, when a moving object came in contact with a six-unit chain, the chain coiled itself around the object and gripped it. To release the object, the researchers only had to nudge one particular unit, which uncoiled the rest of the chain. (This unit was bistable.)

This is also why Dr. Lim wrote that the metamaterial chain should thus be seen as a dynamical system, i.e. something capable of adapting. According to her, the chain was able to perform life-like actions, like gripping an object, because it could 'navigate' through different stable states by minimising the work along specific paths.

Indeed, while the chains in the team's experiments illustrated what a metamaterial chain with just a few controllable parameters was capable of, they are also not ready for real-world use. The team needed an air table and impractically large components to make them work. But if these requirements are eased, such metamaterial chains could in future be used as advanced prosthetic limbs and in soft robots that need to respond agilely to obstacles.

Overall, they concluded, their "work paves the way for the design of adaptive metamaterials as well as soft and distributed robotics".

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Scientists examine a specialised refrigerator for cooling quantum computing chips at the Google Quantum AI lab in California, U.S. in 2024. REUTERS

A radiation 'glitch' limits quantum computing

Vasudevan Mukunth

What is the world's next great frontier in technology? There are multiple contenders: artificial general intelligence, programmable biology, sustainable energy, metamaterials, human-machine interfaces, and quantum computing. The future could in fact be more wondrous but also more difficult to predict because of how some of these technologies can work together. But there is still a long way to go – and quantum computing of late has illustrated that well.

Quantum computers are a new type of computer that promises to solve calculations significantly faster than today's 'traditional' computers. The problem is that these machines are also very fragile. They operate in temperatures lower than outer space and the slightest vibration or heat can cause them to stop working.

On May 4, researchers from Google Quantum AI published a paper in *Physical Review X* reporting that they had found a new ghost in the machine that poses another major threat to these computers – called correlated phase error bursts.

Scientists are working on a technology called quantum error correction – a safety net to allow a quantum computer to keep working even if a few qubits fail

High-energy particles from outer space and trace elements in the earth's crust both emit ionising radiation. When even a small dose of it strikes the silicon substrate of a quantum chip, it creates a splash of vibrations that ripple across the chip. These vibrations break apart the pairs of electrons that allow a superconductor to work. Many quantum computing chips are based on superconductors. The break-ups create a swarm of quasiparticles. It's like a cloud of electronic debris has flooded the chip.

A conventional chip is made of many semiconductors. A quantum chip is made of many qubits. Scientists were worried that the quasiparticles would interfere with sensitive parts of the qubits, causing a crash. So they developed a hardware design where a component acts like a fence that prevents the quasiparticles from jumping into sensitive parts of the qubit.

The solution worked too – until the current study revealed the new problem. Its authors found that even if the quasiparticles couldn't jump the fence, their mere presence near a qubit caused its frequency to shift. This is like some soldiers walking at a different pace than others in a march-past, falling out of sync and breaking up the parade.

A single dose of radiation could shift the frequencies of many qubits together by as much as 3 megahertz for 1 millisecond – an eternity in quantum computing. Because these shifts happen to many qubits at once, they hit the computer like a sudden loss of coordination.

Scientists are working on a technology called quantum error correction – a safety net to allow a quantum computer to keep working even if a few qubits fail. Among others, it depends on the assumption that errors in different qubits are independent of each other. The correlated burst nullifies this assumption. In fact, the authors of the study have said correlated phase error bursts could set an upper limit on how reliable current quantum computers can be.

Gianluigi Catelani, a scientist at the Jülich Research Centre, Germany, wrote in *Physics* that researchers already have at least two solutions in the works: 'traps' that absorb the static before it hits the qubits and technologies to dampen the splash.

For feedback and suggestions
for 'Science', please write to **science@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Daily page'

DELHI
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WEDNESDAY - MAY 6 - 2026

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WEDNESDAY - MAY 6, 2026

Gold rush

ETF-driven rise in gold demand needs watching

Bullion, after energy, is the biggest contributor to India's import bill. Bullion imports have traditionally declined when gold prices increased. Buyers cut back on grammage to meet their budgets. However, data from the World Gold Council (WGC) suggests that this long-held pattern is being disrupted. In January-March 2026, gold prices surged 81 per cent year-on-year, and yet domestic buyers actually increased their gold purchases by 10 per cent in volume terms and 88 per cent in the value terms ($25 billion against $13 billion).

Since India mines very little gold, this new trend in gold demand (its rising alongside price increase) can escalate the country's import bill, skew the trade balance and trigger foreign exchange outflows. Unlike energy or electronics imports, which power economic activity, household savings invested in gold are stockpiled and locked out of the financial system. WGC data provides some insights into this change in behaviour. Historically, the bulk of India's gold purchases has been from jewellery buyers looking to meet wedding commitments, or to use as collateral during distress. Lately though, investors have overtaken jewellery buyers as the main drivers of demand. Until 2024, over 70 per cent of gold demand, in volume terms, originated from jewellery buyers, with 30 per cent coming from bar and coin buyers. In 2025, demand from ETFs (exchange traded funds), bar/coin buyers picked up to 40 per cent of the total. In Q1 2026, purchases by investors in bars, coins and ETFs (exchange traded funds) at 54 per cent actually overtook jewellery buying as the main source of bullion demand. Jewellery buyers singed by the higher prices, cut back their volumes by 19 per cent, but bar/coin and ETF buyers upped their purchases by 34 per cent and 197 per cent respectively. Clearly, asset investors and consumers are acting in contrary ways. When prices spike, investors buy more. If investment demand continues to rise, India could face a secular surge in gold imports, irrespective of prices, widening the trade gap.

There are no easy policy fixes here. As households ramp up equity investments, they do need gold as a hedge against market volatility. Gold is also necessary insurance against geopolitical risks, a depreciating Rupee and debt returns that no longer match inflation. Rather than curb gold imports — which only pushes the activity underground — enabling remonetisation of the 30,000 tonne gold stockpile held by households presents a neat solution. Gold Monetisation Schemes which have failed in the past due to inadequate assaying infrastructure, need to be revived.

The Gem and Jewellery Council recently mooted a monetisation scheme where consumers deposit their physical gold with banks against electronic receipts, freeing up gold for re-use by jewellers. Remonetisation of gold and its re-use can be incentivised by exempting them from capital gains tax. In that case, demand from ETFs and jewellers can to an extent be met domestically, without recourse to imports.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Trump, Merz and Europe's security

As Donald Trump's second term has become overshadowed by plunging poll ratings and an illegal, ill-advised war in the Middle East, European governments have regularly been singled out to bear the brunt of the US president's growing frustration. Sir Keir Starmer's refusal to militarily back the attack on Iran led to unfavourable comparisons to both Winston Churchill and King Charles. "Unfriendly" Spain has been threatened with a trade embargo for similar reasons. Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, previously seen as a key political ally, has also been on the receiving end. Currently it is Germany's chancellor, Friedrich Merz, who finds himself in Washington's crosshairs. In the wake of Mr Merz's accurate observation that the US has no convincing strategy on Iran, the Pentagon has announced the future withdrawal of 5,000 US troops from bases in Germany. LONDON, MAY 4

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. EUROPE

Iran's Regime Ends the Cease-Fire

The cease-fire in the Persian Gulf has been broken, and the culprit is the regime in Iran. President Trump now faces a decision about how he plans to reopen the Strait of Hormuz: Give Iran's regime what it wants in negotiations or use the U.S. military to get ships through. On Sunday the President announced Project Freedom to guide commercial ships out of the Strait. Framed as a humanitarian mission to help ships and starving crews locked up in the Strait against their will, this was also a tactical move to break the Iranian blockade and restore energy flows. On Monday U.S. Central Command advised vessels to transit Hormuz on a route near Oman, away from Iran, explaining that it had "established an enhanced security area." MAY 4, NEW YORK

ANI

Daunting task for BJP in West Bengal

ECONOMIC REVIVAL. The BJP has to revive the State's moribund economy and overhaul the bureaucracy. But it faces a serious funds crunch

PRATIM RANJAN BOSE

The BJP has wrested a two-thirds majority in the West Bengal election. For a party with overwhelming presence in the rest of the country, this is not just another win. It's a homecoming. BJP's earlier avatar, the Jan Sangh, was founded by legendary educationist Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee from Kolkata.

His untimely death in 1953 and the rise of the Communists weakened the space for BJP. The 2026 win will contribute significantly to strengthening the party's ideological position.

Typical of the State's political tradition, BJP's rise is largely attributed to negative voting against the Trinamool Congress. Bengali Hindus, however, overwhelmingly voted for change. The outcome will strengthen the nation's security apparatus.

West Bengal is not merely a border State but also maintains connectivity to 8 per cent of India's landmass in the North-East, accounting for nearly half of the India-China border. A tectonic shift in the political landscape will, therefore, have definite geopolitical significance.

STRATEGIC STATE

The strategic importance of the State had gone up dramatically in the last few years with the rising interests of the US-led West in the Bay of Bengal region and tensions in Bangladesh and Myanmar. India-China rivalry remains a strategic constant.

Mamata Banerjee's politics of confrontation and tepid interest in growth and infrastructure development was a serious impediment to India's strategic planning. West Bengal missed the infra-building rush of the country over the last decade. Land was not provided even for border fencing.

The growing muscle of Islamists with connections across the border was an imminent concern. West Bengal witnessed a dozen or more riots in the Mamata era. The police force became politicised and misused, impacting law and order.

Given West Bengal's history of political violence, coupled with the sustained decline in its economic fortunes over the last half a century, the State became a drag on the national economy. BJP has to revive the State's fortunes and the job will not be easy.

Decades of Left rule (barring a few years of the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government) and TMC, destroyed the economy.

The Left rose to power through destruction of industry and so did Mamata. The results were visible in this poll season when high voter turnout in Bengal triggered a house-help crisis in the rest of the nation.

From third in terms of relative per capita income, Bengal now stands 24th. The decline is visible in a 200-300 per cent difference in agri-wages between West Bengal and Kerala, Tamil Nadu or Gujarat. The gap is wider if compared to North Bengal.

No wonder that Bengalis are crowding out the low-skill job markets from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. The comparison with neighbouring Bihar is revealing. Bihar suffers from high population growth. Bengal, on the other hand, reports India's lowest total fertility rate (TFR) — lower than China. Population has been shrinking in cities, starting with Kolkata, where TFR is lower than Japan.

At least two generations of small families have triggered aspirations which remained unfulfilled. Jobs are low-paying and offer limited prospects for upward mobility. Politics has patronised dole-oriented, sub-optimal living.

Given West Bengal's history of political violence, coupled with the sustained decline in its economic fortunes over the last half a century, the State became a drag on the national economy. The BJP's task will not be easy

The decimation of Bengal has been all-encompassing. Bihar not only sends out its poor, it is also churning out white-collar professionals in great numbers. Bengal's bureaucracy and police administration are run by Biharis. Kolkata, however, lost much of its national eminence in areas like law and finance.

FARM DISTRESS

The rural economy is struggling from the ill-effects of land reforms. The small land parcels have become uneconomic. Strict land ceiling and share-cropper rule limit prospects of land consolidation.

The poor give land to the rich on an annual lease. The rich do everything to keep it under their control, but in the absence of ownership they do not make major capital expenditure. Crop diversification and value creation prospects suffer. Bihar does not face such constraints.

The Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government of CPI(M) tried to reverse the trend by allowing entry of corporates in agri-marketing. His party blocked it. Mamata Banerjee's politics thrived on the status quo. Less said about her industrial policy the better.

In a bizarre decision in 2025, West Bengal retrospectively scrapped all industrial incentive schemes offered to businesses over the last three decades. The trigger lies in a lack of resources.

Lack of industries and low income have limited the scope of central tax share. The own-tax collection (approximately 45 per cent) is disproportionately dependent on liquor sales for growth. Own tax revenue buoyancy is low (below 1).

With its promises to double the doles offered by Mamata and implement the Seventh Pay Commission for State government employees and pensioners within 45 days of assuming power, the BJP government will be in a financial crunch from day one.

The saffron party promised to build industrial hubs on land available in the steel city of Durgapur, the port city of Haldia and Singur. This is surely doable but not easy. Any positive impact will take at least a decade to reflect in the overall economic health of the State.

The biggest problem lies in the availability of resources. The problem starts from the bureaucracy, which lacks quality officers, thanks to political interference. BJP has to undertake a thorough but careful overhaul of the system. A roughshod approach may end up creating more problems.

The challenge is huge. People have high expectations from the BJP. Can the party fulfil them?

The writer is an independent journalist

Fundamentals are under some stress

War effects are working their way through trade, economy and financial channels. A structured response is called for

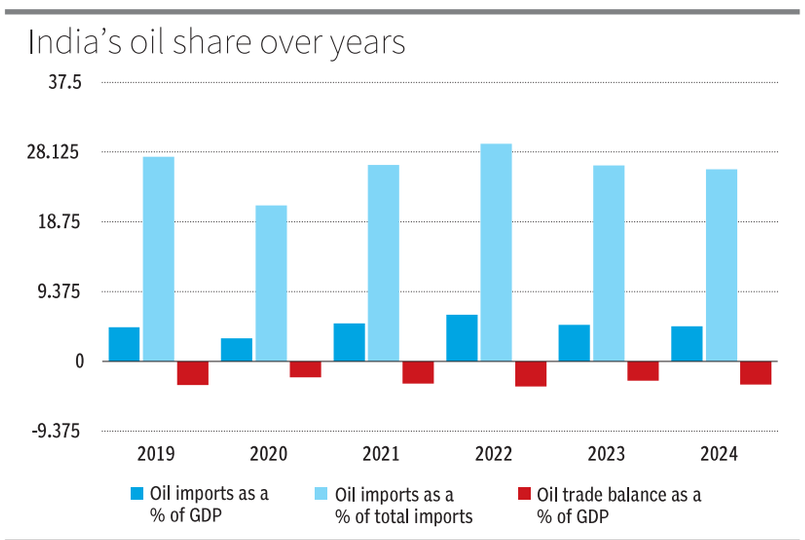
Saumitra Bhaduri
Shubham Anand

The ongoing pause in hostilities in West Asia has brought immediate relief to the people in the region, but the aftershocks to global energy infrastructure and supply chains persist. The war has disrupted the flow of crude oil and fertilizers creating bottlenecks in logistics and trade. Brent crude remains elevated, and India's economic outlook is clouded by persistent volatility.

Oil makes up 26-27 per cent of India's imports, and the oil trade deficit has averaged close to 3 per cent of GDP in recent years (*see figure*). In FY26, India's current account deficit was about 0.8 per cent of GDP, cushioned by services exports and remittances. But in a supply shock, that cushion shrinks fast because oil demand is relatively price-inelastic in the short run. Therefore, any price spike quickly inflates the import bill.

Next, the rupee, which had been stable for two years has come under pressure. By March 2026, it fell past the 95 mark against the dollar, nearly 10 per cent depreciation over the fiscal year. This was driven by higher oil prices and persistent capital outflows as global investors reassessed risk. In March alone, foreign portfolio outflows topped ₹1.3 lakh crore. While a weaker rupee can help exporters, it also raises the cost of essential imports and adds to inflation.

Despite these pressures, India's foreign exchange reserves remain strong, covering more than 10 months of imports. Short-term debt relative to reserves is also low, around 20 per cent. These buffers provide protection, but their resilience depends on how long global volatility persists and how deep the shocks go. For instance, remittances have provided a strong buffer, but these are at risk as nearly 38 per cent come from the Gulf.



Source: RBI

RBI'S RESPONSE

Against this backdrop, the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has chosen to keep policy rates unchanged.

The RBI has acted with targeted measures such as limiting banks' foreign currency positions, easing capital rules, and improving access to working capital for small businesses. Its move to limit net open positions of banks in onshore markets helped the rupee recover a bit. While these actions have provided short-term relief, relying heavily on foreign exchange intervention and engineered stability is not a viable long-term strategy.

The stress on the Indian economy is coming through several channels. First is supply disruption. Energy-intensive sectors are directly affected, but the impact quickly cascades to other sectors. The non-availability of fertilizers and other chemicals may affect the output of agricultural and industrial products, compounding the inflationary impact. Second, logistics costs are rising, as storage and transport are highly energy intensive. Increased logistics costs cascade through the economy, raising the prices of all final products.

Third, Indian exports are taking a hit from both demand and supply sides. The war has affected not only direct trade, but has also caused a slowdown in other major markets. With West Asia accounting for over 16 per cent of India's exports in 2023-24, any sustained disruption will hit export earnings.

Fourth, fiscal slippage against the budgeted 4.3 per cent of GDP remains a risk, owing to lower excise duty and corporate tax collections, reduced dividend payouts by oil marketing companies (OMCs), and a higher subsidy burden.

Policymakers must remain vigilant. The outcome of the conflict, US tariff investigations, and the monsoon's performance will all shape the next steps of monetary policy. Until there is more clarity, the RBI's cautious approach is justified.

Resilience will depend on maintaining a strong services surplus and remittance inflows, while expanding manufacturing so the non-oil tradable base grows. Attracting stable, long-term capital and encouraging local currency financing will be crucial. Structurally, energy security must be addressed.

Bhaduri is Professor and Anand is Ph.D scholar at Madras School of Economics (MSE), Chennai

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Learning from the enemy

This refers to the Editorial "Power shift" (May 5).

Despite a series of defeats by Opposition parties including the ones in West Bengal and Assam now, they continue to blame the BJP for real and imaginary derelictions of Constitutional responsibility and nothing else. BJP's committed cadre and a leadership which is ready to invest in time and a ceaseless energy to guide and perform ensured its victory.

BJP insisted on Hindutva in Assam and campaigned for the "poriborton" of a "corrupt" government in Bengal, but the Opposition kept its anti-BJP rhetoric unchanged.

YG Chouksey
Pune

Apropos, 'Power shift', (May 5).

India's latest Assembly round delivered a split but emphatic verdict — sweeping rejection of incumbency in key States, alongside continuity in Assam and Puducherry. Voters proved impatient, exacting, and ready to disrupt the status quo when governance falters. In West Bengal, the BJP's surge marked a decisive collapse of Mamata Banerjee's TMC. Fatigue, corruption, nepotism, and creeping thuggishness, combined with the limits of welfare-led governance, triggered a backlash that upended 15 years of dominance.

Tamil Nadu saw a structural rupture as Vijay's TVK broke the Dravidian duopoly, sidelining DMK and AIADMK. Younger voters, untethered to old legacies, backed an untested force promising sharper governance. Kerala reaffirmed its cycle, with anti-incumbency lifting the UDF over the LDF.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Building resilience

Apropos of the article 'An agenda for risk mitigation' (May 5).

The author rightly highlights the risks from volatile foreign portfolio flows and the persistent current account deficit. While diversifying financing sources is essential, we also need steadier progress on the ground. Encouraging household financial savings through better products, pushing manufacturing and exports beyond a few sectors, and maintaining fiscal discipline would help reduce dependence on hot money.

M Barathi
Bengaluru

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Implications of Manus

Slow erosion of rule of law in tech geopolitics

GBS Bindra

An attempt by Meta Platforms to acquire Manus, an artificial intelligence start-up, and its subsequent blocking by Chinese authorities, marks more than a routine regulatory intervention. It signals a deeper shift in how states are exercising power over global technology flows, not merely to regulate markets, but to shape them in alignment with strategic and political priorities.

Taken in isolation, China's move is consistent with its long-standing emphasis on digital sovereignty. When viewed alongside recent US actions against TikTok, however, a more concerning pattern begins to emerge: the gradual side-lining of rule-based processes in favour of discretionary state power.

TECH FIRMS. Operate in fragmented regulatory environment

TIGHT CONTROL

For years, China has maintained a tightly controlled technology ecosystem, justified on grounds of national security, data governance, and political stability. The reported Manus decision fits within this broader framework. What makes the current moment distinct, however, is not China's behaviour alone, but the convergence of approaches across geopolitical rivals that once claimed fundamentally different philosophies of governance.

The US, historically a champion of open markets and a rules-based order, offered an instructive example in its posture towards TikTok, owned by ByteDance. The effort to compel divestiture of TikTok's US operations, under the threat of a ban, was framed as a national security imperative. While such concerns may be valid, the process extended beyond established mechanisms such as the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), combining executive pressure and legislative intervention in ways that raised questions about transparency and procedural consistency. When legal frameworks appear to be stretched or supplemented in this manner, the predictability they are meant to provide weakens.

It is within this evolving context that China's actions must be understood. When one major power normalises interventionist behaviour under broad and sometimes opaque justifications, it lowers the threshold for others to follow. The result is the emergence of a global environment in which legal principles risk becoming secondary to strategic imperatives. The implications are far-reaching. At its core, the rule of law provides predictability, fairness, and accountability. It assures investors that decisions will be governed by transparent criteria rather than shifting political considerations. It enables firms to plan cross-border investments with confidence that regulatory processes will remain consistent. When state action begins to appear selective or contingent, that assurance weakens.

The effects are already visible. Global technology firms increasingly operate in fragmented regulatory environments, where compliance involves not only adherence to formal rules but also anticipation of political sensitivities. Capital flows become more cautious, and innovation ecosystems risk becoming siloed. Smaller firms, lacking the capacity to navigate such uncertainty, are disproportionately affected.

This is not to suggest that economic decision-making can be insulated from geopolitical considerations. It rarely has been. The more relevant question is whether strategic interests are pursued through mechanisms that offer transparency, consistency, and recourse, or through ad hoc exercises of power that leave affected parties with limited avenues of challenge.

Institutional frameworks do exist. CFIUS, despite its limitations, provides a structured review process.

For India, the erosion of predictable regulatory norms presents a complex challenge. Balancing openness with strategic caution becomes more difficult in an environment where major powers themselves appear to be redefining the boundaries of acceptable intervention. The Manus episode may fade quickly from public attention. The broader trend it reflects will not.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow at the Avinyum Foundation and former Managing Director of CGI India

Can the WTO get back on track?

UNCERTAINTY AHEAD. The Yaounde Ministerial Conference has mired the WTO in a deeper deadlock than ever

ABHIJIT DAS

TRADE AGENDA. The forthcoming meeting of the WTO General Council is likely to provide pointers on the trade body's future

With the meeting of World Trade Organization's General Council scheduled to be held on May 6-7, WTO members have an opportunity to pick up the pieces after the failure of the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC-14) held in Yaounde recently. While on the issue of Investment Facilitation Agreement (IFA) a pathway for breaking the deadlock might be in sight, on some other issues the developments at MC-14 may have made the task of putting the WTO back on track more difficult. These developments are discussed below.

At MC-14 India continued its resolute opposition to the inclusion of IFA as an Annex 4 plurilateral agreement at the WTO. India also signalled the possibility of taking this issue forward by undertaking multilateral negotiations on guardrails for plurilateral agreements. At MC-14 some other countries also adopted a similar approach on this issue. This holds the promise of bringing clarity and certainty on IFA and systemic issues related to plurilateral agreements.

Let us turn to issues on which developments at MC-14 may have deepened the divide among the WTO membership. First, at MC-14 it became evident that the US was interested in an outcome on just one issue — moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions. Unlike the past ministerial meetings where the members agreed to a two-year extension of this moratorium, at Yaounde the US insisted on a longer period of the moratorium. Almost all countries, including India, showed little appetite to resist the US demand and quickly acquiesced to a four-year moratorium. At the end, on account of the stiff opposition of Brazil and Turkiye to this unreasonable demand of the US, no decision could be taken. If the US had confined its ambitions to what had been agreed to on this moratorium at some of the earlier ministerial conferences, a deadlock could have been avoided at Yaounde.

Second, at MC-14 the US strongly opposed the extension of the moratorium on another issue of particular interest to many developing countries: non-violation complaints related to disputes under the agreement on intellectual property rights (TRIPS Agreement). In past ministerial conferences, WTO members had agreed to two-year extension of this moratorium, which mirrored the period of extension of the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions. This provided an assurance to WTO members, especially the developing countries, that they would not be sued for resorting to various flexibilities under the TRIPS Agreement. With the US aggressively seeking at least a four-year period of moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions but firmly opposing the moratorium on non-violation complaints under the TRIPS Agreement, the stage is set for another negotiating logjam.

Perhaps the most controversial issue is the declaration made by a group of 66 WTO members to implement the Agreement on Electronic Commerce through interim arrangements

ELECTRONIC COMMERCE

Third, and perhaps the most controversial, issue is the declaration made by a group of 66 WTO members to implement the Agreement on Electronic Commerce (AEC) through interim arrangements, with the ultimate objective of subsequently adding it as an Annex 4 plurilateral agreement at the WTO. Controversially, the AEC stipulates that even when it is implemented through the interim arrangements and is not yet part of the WTO, it will be serviced by the WTO secretariat with the Director-General of the WTO (DG) administering certain aspects of the agreement. This is highly problematic for many reasons.

First, WTO rules do not provide for the DG and the secretariat to administer even limited aspects of agreements that are outside the WTO. What is envisaged under the interim arrangements of the AEC amounts to the DG unilaterally arrogating to herself role and responsibilities going beyond the WTO rules. Second, this development represents a surreptitious attempt by certain WTO members to curtail the role of the entire membership but expand the powers of the DG through the backdoor. Third, this would divert resources away from activities mandated by WTO rules and instead direct them towards initiatives with questionable legal status. Finally, this would take forward the attempts by some developed countries to delegitimise the WTO and push forward their agenda of WTO reform, which would further bend the organisation in line with their interests.

In conclusion, developments at the Yaounde Ministerial Conference have mired the WTO in a deeper deadlock than before. It remains to be seen whether developed countries limit their vaulting ambitions and seek to get this inter-governmental organisation back on track, or they manufacture another crisis for pushing their agenda of remoulding the WTO to further serve their interests at the cost of most developing countries. The forthcoming meeting of the WTO General Council is likely to provide pointers about the future of this organisation.

The writer is an international trade expert and author of the book 'Strategies in GATT and WTO Negotiations'. Views are personal

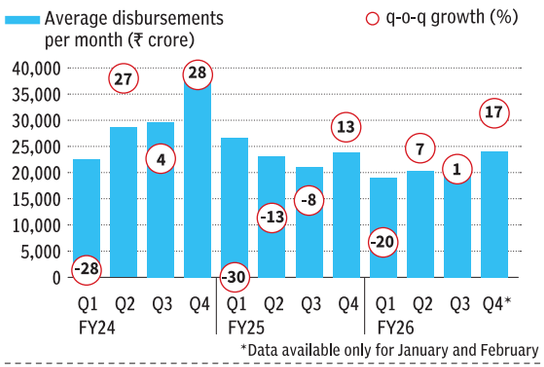
STATISTALK.

Compiled **Nishanth Gopalakrishnan** | Graphic **Visveswaran V**

Microfinance sector finds its feet

The crisis in the microfinance sector was the most talked about in banking circles in FY25. With players pushing for growth despite borrowers being overleveraged, bad loans spiralled out of control. In response, the industry adopted stringent underwriting standards, which led to a decline in disbursements. Its portfolio shrank to ₹3.2 lakh crore from the FY24 peak of ₹4.4 lakh crore, led by repayments and write-offs. However, these measures have paid off and a recovery is underway, as shown in the charts below. Nevertheless, with the ongoing scramble for energy, likely higher fertilizer costs and a below-normal rainfall looming large, sustainability of this recovery remains to be seen.

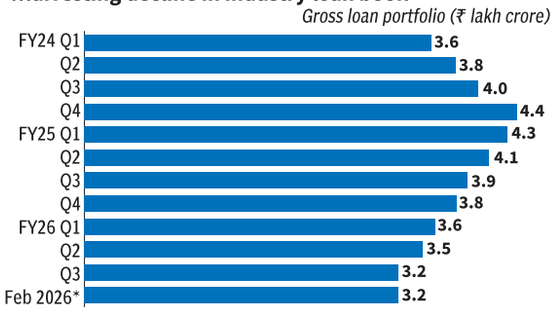
Disbursements recover...



*Data available only for January and February

...arresting decline in industry loan book

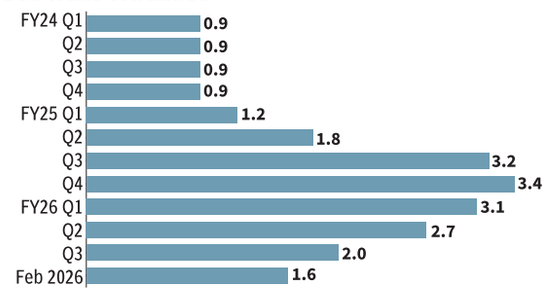
Gross loan portfolio (₹ lakh crore)



*FY26 Q4 data not available. Portfolio as of March 2026 likely to be higher than that as of December 2025.

Bad loans contained

PAR 91-180 (%)



PAR stands for portfolio at risk. PAR 91-180 represents the share of loans (by value) that are overdue by at least 90 days but not beyond 180 days.

Significant drop in overleveraged borrowers

Active lender associations (share of gross loan portfolio in %)

	Up to 2	Three	Four	Five and above
FY25 Q1	65.4	15.5	9.5	9.7
FY25 Q2	68.1	15.0	8.7	8.2
FY25 Q3	70.2	14.9	8.2	6.7
FY25 Q4	73.1	14.7	7.3	4.9
FY26 Q1	75.3	14.8	6.2	3.8
FY26 Q2	75.2	16.0	5.7	3.1
FY26 Q3	78.8	15.0	4.3	1.9

Active lender association represents the number of lenders a borrower is indebted to at the same time

Source: CRIF Highmark

On businessline.in

Rising longevity: A threat to social security

With reforms that combine public policy, employer engagement and financial innovation, societies can support healthy ageing, say **US Mishra** and **Santosh Kumar Dash**

https://tinyurl.com/4nymtc57

Odisha and West Bengal's contrasting growth paths

While Odisha has made strides in growth and fiscal health, Bengal fares better in human development, argues **Amarendra Das**

https://tinyurl.com/y838xz9v

The employment profile of India's young adults

The labour market is increasingly polarised between extreme overwork and underemployment, say **Vidya Mahambare, Niharika Gowthaman, Poonam Munjal** and **Palash Baruah**

https://tinyurl.com/ye3zru6u

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 6, 2006

Tatas plan supercomputer venture

The Tata Group is likely to float a new company whose focus will be top-end supercomputers, according to reliable sources in the group. The first initiative of this new venture, in which the Group Chairman, Mr Ratan Tata, is said to have taken personal interest, will be to build a machine based on a parallel supercomputing architecture that Prof Narendra Krishna Karmakar, the well-known Indian computer scientist, has claimed to have developed.

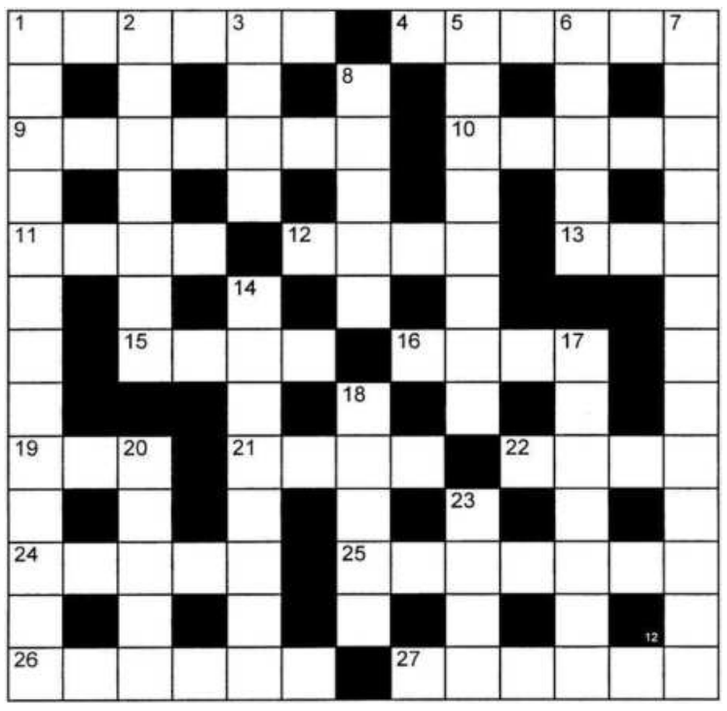
India aiming for Pan-Asian FTA: Manmohan

Having concluded free trade agreements with SAARC, Singapore and Thailand, India is pursuing similar arrangements with other Asian countries, the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, said. Addressing the Board of ADB, he said India is working closely with ASEAN, Japan, China and South Korea.

Hyundai plans 1.2-litre diesel compact car

In a bid to take on car market leader Maruti, the country's second largest carmaker Hyundai Motor plans to introduce a compact car, which could be powered by a 1.2-litre diesel engine. The new car would enjoy the benefit of the excise duty cut announced in this year's Budget.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2673



EASY

ACROSS

1. Harbinger of Spring (6)
4. Northern sea-duck (6)
9. Ancestry (7)
10. One resisting authority (5)
11. In a frenzy (4)
12. Welfare payment order (4)
13. First woman (3)
15. Turn up with the snout (4)
16. Succeed in test (4)
19. Reverential wonder (3)
21. Return sound (4)
22. Parasitic insect (4)
24. Forefinger (5)
25. Persevere (7)
26. Latest, most recent (6)
27. Male parent (6)

DOWN

1. Joint working (13)
2. Sincerity, frankness (7)
3. Gemstone (4)
5. Two-striper (8)
6. Furniture item (5)
7. Switchback railway (6-7)
8. Satan (5)
14. Strikes down as if with halbert (8)
17. Void of regard to others (7)
18. Give form to (5)
20. Settle permanent provision on (5)
23. Song in opera (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Clocked a bird for intruding into one's home (6)
4. Might provide escort for sea duck (6)
9. One's descent from angel that is not straightforward (7)
10. Be up in arms with beer about a pound (5)
11. Running so wild in the forenoon is all right (4)
12. Welfare cheque one had in growth being halved (4)
13. Cain's mother would go to and fro (3)
15. There's nothing in decay that's at the bottom of it (4)
16. Don't answer the question, but get through it (4)
19. Wonderment one may find in a weekend (3)
21. A sound return to be had from the oche (4)
22. Caught on the hop it will sound as if it will run away (4)
24. Finger that points to the list of contents (5)
25. Obstinately continue with press it represents (7)
26. The most recent we sent out (6)
27. Sire, or an address to priest (6)

DOWN

1. Joint effort at making robin coo at all (13)
2. Frankness with which cheer-leader can get around (7)
3. Stone for ring given to a friend (4)
5. Eucharistic cloth for an NCO (8)
6. Times list may be on the board (5)
7. Or, sell car to re-fashion a ride at the fair (6-7)
8. A wicked person starts decrying wickedness (5)
14. Fells one in order to please ox (8)
17. Flesh is turned to it when not thinking of others (7)
18. Form heaps of it (5)
20. We'd no alternative but to enrich it with a gift (5)
23. A song giving one a change of air (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2672

ACROSS 1. Humanity 7. Phial 8. Million 9. Garment 10. Lock 12. English 14. Shelved 17. Wine 18. Quondam 21. Ailment 22. Eland 23. Deserter

DOWN 1. Humble 2. Molecule 3. Naik 4. Tingle 5. Dice 6. Clutch 7. Paragon 11. Divided 13. Incident 14. Sequel 15. Damage 16. Fetter 19. Oval 20. Flue

The Hindustan Times
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{ OUR TAKE }

Don't jeopardise Iran ceasefire

The war and blockade have hurt the global economy. No country should derail the ceasefire

At a time when a fragile ceasefire is all that is preventing West Asia from tipping over the brink, Iran's attack on a crucial oil industry complex in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a development that could lead to a dangerous flare-up that everyone is keen to avoid. Talks between the US and Iran for a negotiated end to the war that began in February are clearly stalemated and the attack — which Iranian officials have indicated was a response to US President Donald Trump's "Project Freedom" that is aimed at forcing open the Strait of Hormuz — could jeopardise already frail energy supply chains.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's move to condemn the attacks on the Fujairah Petroleum Industries Zone, which injured three Indian citizens, has to be seen in this context. The Fujairah oil complex is currently the only operational energy export facility in the UAE, and Modi said the targeting of civilians and infrastructure is "unacceptable", while expressing solidarity with the UAE and reiterating India's support for a peaceful end to the West Asia conflict through dialogue and diplomacy. India, which has kept a wary eye on energy and fertiliser prices that have been creeping upwards, also reiterated its call for safe and unimpeded navigation through the Strait of Hormuz in the interest of global energy security. The World Bank has already forecast a 24% surge in global energy prices in 2026 and any fresh hostilities, and further strikes on energy facilities across West Asia, will squeeze the economies of the Global South.

The Iran-US negotiations are unlikely to lead to an understanding until there is a realisation by all the stakeholders that there is no military solution to the West Asia crisis. The conflict has already challenged many of the concepts that have been basic to the management of security in the region and a clear vacuum has emerged that can be filled by regional players such as Egypt or Türkiye or a global player such as China. The West Asia conflict has also cast a shadow over India's presidency of Brics this year, primarily because of the divisions between Iran and the UAE. India and the Global South should do more to nudge all parties to the conflict back towards the negotiating table so that steps are taken towards a more lasting peace and stable global energy supplies and unimpeded commerce.

For the Indian Left, the battle is to stay relevant

The defeat of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government in Kerala has significance beyond the borders of the state. For the first time since 1977, when the CPM-led Left Front won office in West Bengal, India will not have a single government led by a Communist party. Ironically, this comes two years after the Communist movement in India marked its birth centenary.

The Communist movement has had a chequered history in both pre- and post-independent India. The internationalism underpinning its ideology has led to the organisation adopting tactics that often went against nationalist undercurrents and the State. The Communist Party of India (CPI) went underground in 1948 for a brief period, only to emerge as the largest non-Congress opposition in Parliament in 1952. In 1957, the Communists won office in Kerala and, since then, the party has helmed governments in West Bengal and Tripura in the past 50 years. In the recent polls, the CPM, which emerged from the CPI in 1964, and became the larger party, lost office in Kerala, failed to revive in West Bengal, and remained irrelevant in Tamil Nadu and Assam.

What happens next? Will it reflect on how it lost the plot? Or will it self-destruct by refusing to change? In European and Latin American democracies, the Communist parties mutated into new Left outfits, engaging with market economies and the idea of social democracy to remain electorally relevant. Governments led by the CPI and CPM in Kerala have had some success in building welfare societies, though these parties are reluctant to acknowledge their engagement in social democracy. Contradictions arise when demands of governance clash with the party's ideological goals and the leadership fails to communicate with cadres, as it happened in Kerala. The battle between dogma and electoral pressures, when combined with anti-incumbency and poor tactics, creates the perfect storm.

Operation Sindoor & the doctrine of consequence

Operation Sindoor made it clear to those behind cross-border terrorism that a major attack would not necessarily be absorbed through mourning, dossiers and diplomatic appeals — that the cost might be more direct

The conceptual core of Sindoor was simple. Not revenge, but consequence. Revenge is emotional; consequence is colder. PTI

Syed Akbaruddin

For years, India was asked to turn grief into restraint. After Pahalgam, it turned grief into consequence. Families had been shattered before. The nation had mourned before. Television studios had been filled with anger before. Leaders had condemned before. Foreign governments had sympathised before, and then, almost in the same breath, urged India to show restraint. A few days later, the world would move on. India would be expected to carry its grief with dignity.

In May 2025, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India broke that script.

Operation Sindoor matters because it sent a message. The old cycle had become intolerable. Cross-border terrorism could no longer remain a low-cost instrument for those who planned, financed or enabled it. India was not seeking war. It was restoring consequence.

The conceptual core of Sindoor was simple. Not revenge, but consequence. Revenge is emotional; consequence is colder. It asks who enabled the violence, what infrastructure sustained it, and what cost can be imposed without losing control of the crisis. Revenge seeks satisfaction; consequence seeks deterrence.

This was the logic of India's strikes on terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The objective was not to start a war with Pakistan. It was to tell those who had treated India's caution as a permanent shield that they had made a dangerous assumption. India's desire for stability could not be exploited endlessly.

Sindoor did not abandon restraint. It redefined it. Restraint did not mean doing nothing. It meant choosing targets carefully and striking terrorist infrastructure without turning the crisis into an open-ended campaign. The aim was not reckless escalation, but controlled consequence.

Another feature of the Indian response deserves attention. It was cohesive. India did not respond only through the armed forces. It responded as a State. Military action sat alongside diplomatic signalling, legal and economic measures, and a wider campaign to explain India's case abroad.

Parliamentary engagement was especially important. It sent a broader message. This was not the anger of one party or one government alone. It was a national position against cross-border terrorism. Legislators across political lines carried the case that terrorism cannot be excused or sanitised. It did not remove every doubt in foreign capitals or mean every country accepted every Indian claim. But it gave India's response a political depth that military action alone could not provide. Consequence was not only delivered at the border, it was explained in world capitals.

Washington's role needs to be assessed with perspective. President Donald Trump repeatedly claimed that he ended the India-Pakistan crisis. Pakistan, meanwhile, has regained some room in Washington since Operation Sindoor. There is truth in the anxiety, but not in the conclusion.

In every India-Pakistan crisis, Washington calls both sides, urges restraint and later claims influence. That is crisis diplomacy, not command authority. India's position was that the cessation of firing came through direct military channels between the two DGMOs. More importantly, India did not stop before acting. It acted, absorbed retaliation, imposed costs and accepted an off-ramp only after the punitive purpose had been served. The US may have helped locate the exit ramp. It did not write India's opening move or determine its limits.

Pakistan's renewed usefulness to Washington should not be exaggerated. Islamabad has always known how to monetise crisis geography. It offers access and tactical convenience whenever the US needs a route into Afghanistan or a channel to Iran. That may give Pakistan visibility. It does not give it strategic equivalence with India. Pakistan can be useful in a crisis. India's economic weight and demographic scale make it central to any serious American strategy in the Indo-Pacific, from technology and supply chains to the Indian Ocean.

Still, India should draw one sober lesson. No external power, least of all the US, will subordinate its interests to India's preferences. Washington will engage Pakistan when Pakistan serves a purpose. That is how great powers behave. India's answer should be capability: Forces that are ready, diplomats who move fast, an economy with weight, and the confidence to work with America without depending on American approval.

The harder question is whether Sindoor deterred terrorism. The honest answer is that it did not remove the networks that recruit, fund and protect militants. But deterrence does not always mean making the threat disappear. Sometimes it means forcing the other side to think twice and risk more. Operation Sindoor restored uncertainty for those who had grown comfortable with Indian predictability. It made clear to those behind cross-border terrorism that a major attack would not necessarily be absorbed through mourning, dossiers and diplomatic appeals. The cost might be more direct.

Sindoor does not mean India will strike after every provocation. It means India will not surrender the choice in advance. A serious doctrine of consequence is not a reflex. It preserves choice rather than replacing judgment. Sometimes the response may be military. Sometimes it may be diplomatic, financial, legal, covert, cyber or technological. The point is to make impunity harder. That requires work beyond the battlefield. It must be harder to infiltrate, harder to fund, harder to deny and harder to misrepresent the next attack. Consequence needs capability behind it.

A year later, Sindoor's measures, from putting the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance to diplomatic downgrades, endure. Peace remains India's preference. It should remain so. But the operation also made clear that peace cannot be a bargain in which India supplies restraint while the other side supplies the next outrage.

Syed Akbaruddin served as India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and is currently dean, Kautilya School of Public Policy. The views expressed are personal

{ SIMPLY ECONOMICS }

Pramit Bhattacharya

Need a grand bargain to boost job growth

A series of worker protests in North India amid the rollout of the new labour codes has drawn attention to India's lopsided labour regime once again. India's labour regime offers very little protection to the vast majority of the country's workforce that is employed in the unorganised sector. It seemingly offers very generous protection to those employed in the organised sector.

Yet, enforcement of labour laws remains patchy, given the limited resources of the State.

India's labour regime has been disjointed right from the start. In the early part of the 20th century, both British administrators and Congress politicians struggled to reconcile the competing demands of a heterogeneous workforce and a diverse group of employers. A compromise was reached only at the fag end of the British Raj, when major employer groups and trade unions agreed to a contributory model of sickness insurance (involving paid sickness leave and medical benefits) for industrial workers.

Soon after Independence, the Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) and the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) were set up to offer sickness insurance and retirement planning benefits to workers in the organised sector. Workers in the unorganised sector remained outside the social safety net. There were several attempts to devise a broader safety net, centred around a universal unemployment insurance scheme, political scientist Louise Tillin wrote in her recent book, Making India Work. But they all ended in failure.

The labour regime took a turn for the worse in the 1970s. Following industrial unrest, the Indian State made retrenchment more difficult than before, in a bid to appease trade unions. At the same time, employers were encouraged to hire more contractual workers, who could be fired more easily. The labour department was systematically starved of funds, weakening its ability to enforce labour laws. The liberalisation of the economy in 1991 accelerated these trends. If the labour regime differed for organised and unorganised workers earlier, now it differed for workers within the organised sector.

Most large employers in the country had to rely on regulatory arbitrage to survive and grow. Legal and compliance cells were set up specifically to deal with India's byzantine labour laws, and find workarounds. Contractual workers were hired en masse to bypass the rigid rules governing the employment of regular workers. For small and medium enterprises, bribes to labour officials became part of the usual cost of doing business.

This dysfunctional labour regime has hit India's manufacturing sector the hardest. Manufacturing's share in the workforce and its share in the national output have stagnated for several decades. India's weak industrial base is not just an economic liability. It is also a geopolitical constraint in a world of growing conflicts.

The new labour codes address only a small part of the problem. They simplify multiple, overlapping legislation into a set of four well-organised codes. They offer greater flexibility to employers and recognise new kinds of work (such as platform or gig work). Yet, the basic structure of the existing labour regime stands.

Large factories still need to take government permission to layoff workers (only the threshold has been raised), contract workers are still prohibited in core activities (a provision that has been routinely flouted, and almost impossible to enforce in the modern workplace), and social security benefits still remain unequal across different categories of workers.

What India needs is a grand bargain between citizens, firms, and the State that protects worker rights and eliminates regulatory micromanagement at the same time. We need a more minimalist labour code that focuses on workplace safety, basic working conditions, and effective grievance redressals. These norms should apply to all firms, regardless of their size, and to all workers, regardless of the nature of their contracts. The unspoken hierarchy in the labour market — with different levels of social protection for organised regular workers, organised contractual workers, gig workers, and unorganised workers — must end.

Instead of a lopsided social security setup, we need a universal unemployment insurance mechanism. That should enable distressed firms to lay off workers without State permission, and allow unemployed workers to meet their basic needs while they look for other jobs. Minimum wages (and annual increments to it) should be based on a transparent and predictable formula, so that employers are spared sudden increases in wage bills, and employees are protected from rising costs of living.

If Indian capitalism has to grow while India remains a democracy, we must build a rational, fair, and predictable labour regime. Industrialists should not expect the Indian society, or the Indian State, to tolerate the kind of labour repression that China or East Asia practised when they industrialised at breakneck speed.

At the same time, labour activists cannot expect the same labour standards here as in Europe. Indian labour norms must be tailored to suit local conditions, and take into account the limited capacity of the Indian State — in providing social security, in enforcing contracts, and in monitoring violations. Without a reset in capital-labour relations, we should not expect a labour market boom.

If Indian capitalism has to grow while India remains a democracy, we must build a rational, fair labour regime. HT PHOTO

Pramit Bhattacharya is a Bengaluru-based journalist. The views expressed are personal

{ VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY } PRESIDENT, UKRAINE

It is utter cynicism to ask for a ceasefire in order to hold propaganda celebrations while carrying out missile and drone strikes every single day leading up to it

On Moscow's plan for truce on May 9

Extreme punishments: When care morphs into control

It begins with an image that is difficult to forget — a small child, barely five, tied to a gate under the unforgiving afternoon sun. There is no ambiguity in the scene, only discomfort. A punishment meant to be seen, meant to shame, meant perhaps to "teach a lesson". But meted out to whom, and at what cost? The incident in Faridkot, Punjab, involving the suspension of an assistant sub-inspector who allegedly subjected her granddaughter to this treatment, has rightly provoked outrage. Yet, outrage alone is an incomplete response. What demands attention is not only the act, but the logic that sustains it — the quiet acceptance of harsh discipline as both necessary and justified.

There is no defensible interpretation of what happened. It is abusive, degrading, and dangerous. But what really underscores the gravity of the lapse is that it was allegedly carried out by a police officer — someone entrusted with enforcing the law. That said, reducing the episode to individual misconduct allows the larger system to remain unexamined.

Suman Verma

Policing in India operates under conditions of chronic strain. Long hours, unpredictable demands, and repeated exposure to stress and conflict take a cumulative toll. Despite this, institutional attention to the mental well-being of police personnel remains minimal. Counselling services, where they exist, are often inaccessible or underutilised. It is, therefore, necessary to ask whether those tasked with maintaining public order are themselves adequately supported in managing stress within their personal lives. The answer, more often than not, is in the negative.

Even so, stress does not fully account for the nature of the punishment. Tying a child to a gate, in full public view, is not an impulsive act alone — it reflects a deeper belief system. Across many households, discipline is still equated with severity, and effectiveness with fear. Public punishment, in particular, carries a performative dimension: It asserts authority not just over the child, but before an audience.

This is where the boundary between discipline and abuse collapses. Research in developmental psychology has long established that extreme punitive practices — especially those involving humiliation or physical harm — do not produce resilience or respect. They produce fear, anxiety, and, often, aggression. Obedience extracted under duress is neither stable nor developmentally healthy.

In this case, the child's vulnerability is compounded by circumstance. With parents reportedly living abroad, she is likely already negotiating the emotional strain of separation. In the immediate term, such an incident can trigger acute distress — fear, confusion, withdrawal, and a profound loss of trust in the caregiver. The very figure meant to ensure safety becomes a source of threat.

The longer-term consequences are more insidious. Early exposure to such experiences can disrupt emotional regulation, erode self-worth, and increase the likelihood of anxiety and depressive symptoms. It may also normalise coercive behaviour, shaping how the child understands relationships and authority in later life. For children in transnational families, where caregiving arrangements are already stretched and substituted, such ruptures can have lasting psychological effects.

What, then, should be the response? Suspension is necessary — it signals accountability. But it is not, and cannot be, the end of the matter. A purely punitive approach addresses the act but leaves its roots untouched.

A more effective response must operate on multiple levels. Child protection norms must be enforced consistently and without exception. Police reforms must move beyond administrative restructuring to include sustained investment in mental health — mandatory counselling, periodic psychological assessments, and training in managing stress and family dynamics. Equally, there is a pressing need to challenge the social acceptance of harsh discipline through public awareness and parenting interventions that promote non-violent, evidence-based practices.

At the same time, both individuals in this incident require attention. The child needs immediate, trauma-informed support to restore a sense of safety and trust. The grandparent, without being absolved of responsibility, requires psychological evaluation and intervention. Without such engagement, the cycle is merely paused, not broken.

The Faridkot incident is disturbing precisely because it is not as rare as we might wish to believe. It exposes how easily care can slip into control, and discipline into cruelty, when stress, silence, and social norms converge. A child tied to a gate is not just a moment of anger. It is a warning — of what happens when systems fail, and when we continue to look away from the everyday violences we have learned to excuse.

Suman Verma is a developmental psychologist and a researcher whose work engages with child protection, school stress, welfare systems, and public policy. She is an associate editor of the International Journal of Behavioral Development. The views expressed are personal

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Empty chairs

Govt should not delay board appointments at PSBs

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has issued draft "Governance Amendment Directions", which, it says, are intended to improve how the boards of banks, including scheduled commercial banks, payments banks, small-finance banks, and local-area banks, operate. Earlier, specific prescriptive instructions had been provided, but the regulator believes that principle-based guidance is a better way to deal with issues of increasing complexity. These new norms are due to come into force later this year, after stakeholder consultations are taken into account. While this is an important step by the RBI to improve bank governance, it implies that the composition and capacity of bank boards is a crucial ingredient in it. And here, an issue arises: What happens if the boards simply do not have the required members? Under such circumstances, the guidance provided by the RBI, particularly as it is now designed around principles, may fail in its application.

Public-sector banks (PSBs) grapple with this aspect, largely due to the Union government's delays in appointing board members, including chairpersons. The directions of the RBI draft stress the importance of the non-executive chairpersons' role, since the board convenes under their direction and they play a crucial agenda-setting function. It is deeply concerning that a mere three of the 11 state-controlled banks have a non-executive chairperson at the moment. As this newspaper has reported, some of them have been missing this position for a considerable length of time. This is also true of other senior positions. Canara Bank, which is among the top PSBs, has not had a managing director, who also serves as chief executive officer, for nearly four months.

Even the boards themselves are shorthanded, aside from the failure to appoint chairpersons. Two of the 11 PSBs have only seven members on their board. The highest number of members that any of the nationalised banks' boards has is 10, and only three of them do so. Of particular concern is that several also lack a director appointed in the category of chartered accountants. Such an appointment is required to ensure that the audit committee of the board, to which many vital duties are delegated, functions in accordance with the regulations. Most also lack the full complement of independent directors, making do with RBI and government nominees. This is a broader problem, of course. There is a shortage of independent directors in the private sector, even as various regulations have piled more and more duties on to those roles.

Over the years, the government has made significant intervention in institutionalising the appointment processes. But of late, action seems to have lagged. The fact is, with or without the RBI's new directions, PSBs require a well-functioning, fully formed board. Without a proper audit committee, for instance, tasks of basic governance will remain unfulfilled. The bank board's undercapacity problem will only increase with the shift to principle-based governance. The norms require boards to dedicate sufficient time to strategy and risk governance, but those that do not have their full strength and have few independent voices or financial expertise will wind up being unable to properly discharge these duties. This will eventually affect the performance of PSBs, with broader implications for the economy.

Watching the earth

Drishti will enhance capabilities

Bengaluru-based space startup GalaxEye's Mission Drishti demonstrates new capabilities being developed by India's nascent aerospace sector. The 190-kg earth-observation satellite was placed in orbit 500 km above the earth by SpaceX's Falcon9 rocket recently. India's aerospace startups are working alongside the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro), NewSpace India Ltd (NSIL), and Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) to develop technologies. Drishti is a big breakthrough in that it significantly enhances India's observational capability. It uses proprietary technology to combine two observational systems. It puts a "synthetic aperture radar" (SAR) sensor and a seven-band multispectral electro-optical (EO) imager on a single satellite in what GalaxEye calls an "OptoSAR" combination. GalaxEye claims this is the first satellite to integrate EO and SAR, enabling all-weather, day-and-night imaging capabilities.

SAR typically outputs black and white radar images. The EO imagers take pictures in the human spectrum and beyond. Programmes based on Nvidia's Jetson Orin computing platform processes much of the raw data in orbit, stitching together data streams from the two technologies to output high-quality images with up to 1.5 metres accuracy. The orbit surveys the same regions once every four days, allowing it to pick up recent changes. Optical images are often obscured by cloud cover or pollution. This is especially problematic in highly polluted tropical regions such as India, where there is cloud cover 70 per cent of the time. Radar penetrates clouds and smoke but images require interpretation. Moreover, it is difficult to point SAR and EO imagers at exactly the same region at precisely the same time. Drishti has worked out methods to ensure the two systems look at the same place.

GalaxEye claims it has signed distribution partnerships across over 20 countries, even before full commissioning. Multiple government departments, including the defence and agriculture ministries, and the Defence Space Agency have expressed interest. GalaxEye was founded in 2021 and has raised over $20 million from investors. The technology was developed with support from IN-SPACe, the single-window agency for space, which provided access to testing infrastructure and regulatory approval. The dual-imaging system has use cases and applications across defence, agriculture, disaster management, maritime monitoring, and infrastructure planning.

Drishti, thus, gives India an observational system that can compare with and perhaps supersede that provided by commercial global imagery providers such as Maxar. It is under sovereign control as well as being protected by global patents. Maxar, for example, has been instructed by the United States government to not provide images of the Iran conflict but Drishti can do that. GalaxEye intends to build a 10-12 satellite constellation and sharpen resolution further to 0.3 metres to 0.5 metres in subsequent iterations, scaling up satellite size to 500 kg. This is a significant step towards global competitiveness. This buildup of sovereign capability, albeit in the domain of private enterprise, ensures strategic independence for India, not to mention the possibility of generating significant revenue streams. It is a clear validation of the policy of opening up aerospace.

More guidance and assessment

A revamped NITI Aayog and EAC-PM should supplement efforts at understanding the state of the Indian economy

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

RAISINA HILL
A K BHATTACHARYA

Till a few years ago, an internationally acclaimed information technology company was known for its tactful management of its periodic profit guidance. In the normal course of announcing its quarterly results, the company would present a profit growth number for the coming quarters. A retrospective analysis showed that its guidance number for profit growth in the upcoming quarters invariably turned out to be slightly lower than the actual performance that was eventually announced. Many experts interpreted this as a classic case of managing expectations and springing a positive surprise. The stock market and analysts would marvel at the company's ability to exceed its guidance. Over time, this was also described as that company's deliberate guidance management policy.

Should the government's think tank and the Prime Minister's advisory body also follow this principle of providing guidance on the Indian economy's growth and inflation trajectory? Of course, there should be no need to follow the kind of guidance management policy that the company in question might have adopted. But more analyses and forecasts on how the Indian economy is going to fare can surely be of immense help. Not only markets, but even the government's policymakers would benefit from such early assessments.

At present, such guidance comes principally from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the annual Economic Survey from the Union finance ministry. The RBI's assessment is more frequent, coming every two months along with the monetary policy reviews. The annual Economic Survey's outlook for the economy is comprehensive but it can quickly become outdated, as recent developments show. For instance, the Economic Survey for 2025-26 was presented on January 29, almost a month before the war began in West Asia. It had, therefore, forecast an economic growth rate of 6.8 to 7.2 per cent for the Indian economy in 2026-27, which is not what anyone is expecting now.

In recent years, the Monthly Economic Review (MER), produced by the finance ministry, has made a big positive difference to understanding the state of the economy. With a revamped structure and updated content, the MER provides a comprehensive analysis of how the economy is performing and what the headwinds or tailwinds might be. Yet, it prefers not to project a specific growth or inflation number for the year. Perhaps, it can use its own sources of information and parameters, including those of high-frequency indicators, to estimate a growth number that can serve as a more precise barometer for the Indian economy.

The ongoing conflict in West Asia has cast a long shadow over the Indian economy's growth prospects and its ability to keep inflation in check and the external sector under control. In 2025-26, India's gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a healthy pace of 7.6 per cent. Forecasts for growth in 2026-27 from government outfits, international institutions and rating agencies indicate a lower growth rate than what was achieved in 2025-26. Retail inflation projections for the coming months also are on the higher side, compared to 2.1 per cent for 2025-26. And India's balance of payments pressure is set to increase.

The April edition of MER pulls no punches when it says: "India enters FY2026-27 at the intersection of domestic resilience and external turbulence. The outgoing fiscal year delivered real GDP growth of 7.6 per cent, the strongest in recent years, encouraging a 7-7.4 per cent forecast for the upcoming financial year, only to be clouded by an altered macro-outlook in the wake of the West Asia war. A 'supply shock' is apparent in the economy. An accompanying demand compression is a serious concern, given high prices, rising inflation, and a reduced pace of economic activity. Inflation may become cost-push as business/producers pass on their increased input costs to protect their profit margins."

What is missing in India at present is a similar assessment from two of its major institutions — the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) and the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog). While the RBI and the finance ministry present a broad outline of the state of the Indian economy to the nation, the two bodies (EAC-PM and NITI Aayog) currently do not issue similar reports with monthly, quarterly or annual frequency. To be sure, these two institutions produce a large number of reports. But these reports focus on sectors and schemes run by the government.

There is no reason for the EAC-PM or the NITI Aayog not to issue a quarterly or a half-yearly report on the state of the Indian economy and the measures they believe the government should consider. In the past, EAC-PM did produce such reviews of the Indian economy, igniting a healthy debate over how the economy should be managed. In its earlier avatar as the Planning Commission, NITI Aayog was also engaged in producing such reviews to supplement the work done by the RBI or the finance ministry.

It is not that the EAC-PM or NITI Aayog lacks the resources to produce such reports for the government. The EAC-PM has many part-time members, who are also economists with credibility and competence. Similarly, the NITI Aayog has just been reconstituted with Ashok Lahiri, a former chief economic advisor, as its new vice-chairman.

It is time the country had access to a larger and a more varied range of assessments of the Indian economy. The RBI and the finance ministry should continue to bring out its periodic reports on the state of the economy. Given the volatility in the global economic order, caused by the West Asian conflict, the demise of the multilateral trading system and the United States' tariff tantrums, the EAC-PM and a new-look NITI Aayog can supplement the efforts of the RBI and the finance ministry in improving our understanding of the Indian economy and offering policy prescriptions.

The consensus on China's economy is wrong

Is China's development model short-changing domestic consumers? Although there is almost universal agreement that it is, that does not make it true.

Among the various forms that this argument takes, the simplest is based on the mercantilist-free trade dichotomy: China's model is mercantilist and therefore preferential towards production and investment over consumption and welfare. For example, in *Trade Wars Are Class Wars*, Matthew C Klein and Michael Pettis contend that there is a serious distributional conflict within China ("class wars"), with policymakers favouring elites and cronies in big business, and thus prioritising profits over wage income. Alternatively, some argue that repressive labour policies are critical for the success of the Chinese and East Asian model more generally.

Exhibit A for all these arguments is the share of household consumption in Chinese gross domestic product (GDP). Although this metric is lower in China than in the United States, it was respectably high until the early 1990s. That is when China turned mercantilist, running large current-account surpluses that brought the consumption share down dramatically. This metric bottomed out at about 35 per cent in 2010, and stands at only 40 per cent today — substantially below the US and even below comparable countries in East Asia.

ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

But this often-cited metric is potentially misleading in three ways: It is of more interest to macro-economists than development economists; it does not assess countries at comparable points in development time (meaning at similar points in their growth trajectory); and it is probably of more interest to analysts than to Chinese consumers. The latter arguably care more about how their consumption is changing in real time than about the notional share of GDP or some counterfactual scenario envisioning an alternative development strategy.

That is why my 2011 book on China, *Eclipse,* offered an alternative metric. When one looks at Chinese household consumption per capita alongside comparable countries in terms of their post-war growth "take-off time," the picture changes.

If consumption per capita is a reasonable proxy for the standard of living, Chinese citizens have done remarkably well, even better than their counterparts in the fastest-growing East Asian countries. For example, between 1978 and 2024, Chinese household consumption per capita grew by an astounding 7.6 per cent per year, on average, compared to 5.2 per cent growth in Japan, 5.7 per cent in South Korea, and 6.2 per cent in Taiwan over a comparable 46-year period. That makes China's performance not just impressive but unprecedented.

Of course, several caveats are in order. China's growth and consumption data might be dodgy. Averages can conceal sharp changes in income distribution, masking the median citizen's real experience. And China started off at lower levels of consumption, which tends to flatter catch-up growth rates (at their starting points, other countries' consumption was 3-5 times that of China). Nonetheless, the notion that the Chinese consumer is being short-changed is not consistent with reality.

It is also noteworthy that China's extreme mercantilist phase — when the consumption share of GDP declined sharply from the late 1990s — did not cause any slowdown in per capita consumption growth. Although the consumption share of GDP was declining, GDP itself was rising so rapidly (owing to the broader development strategy) that absolute levels of consumption surged, too.

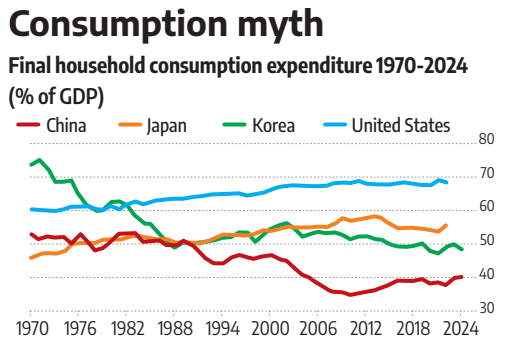
To put it differently, even if real (inflation-adjusted) wages are growing more slowly than productivity at every point in time, preserving global competitiveness will allow for faster and more durable growth over time on the back of the resulting export juggernaut. This is indeed what the data show. Average annual Chinese household per capita consumption growth was 7.9 per cent during the phase of peak mercantilism (1995-2010), coinciding with the sharp decline in the consumption share of GDP; when that went into reverse after 2010, consumption growth declined to 6.2 per cent.

What policy conclusions can be drawn from these trends? For starters, China's mercantilist strategy can be questioned on the grounds that it harms other developing countries by occupying excessive export space in low-skilled goods, as Shoumitro Chatterjee of Johns Hopkins and I recently argued. Moreover, the distortions (from industrial policy and exchange-rate undervaluation) that sustain Chinese mercantilism have generated global imbalances and triggered trade conflicts. And China's approach is also leading to excessive, unproductive investment at home — a problem with the potential to jeopardise future growth.

For all these reasons, calling on China to change its development strategy may well be warranted. But critics cannot question Chinese mercantilism on the grounds that it penalises Chinese consumers. Labour repression has evidently not come in the way of soaring economic gains. It seems odd to criticise a country for delivering growth rates in standards of living and consumption that have been perhaps the fastest, longest, and most broad-based (affecting hundreds of millions of people) in history. The prevailing consensus tells us more about China watchers than it does about realities on the ground. We should be wary of "China bashing" masquerading as a concern for Chinese consumers.

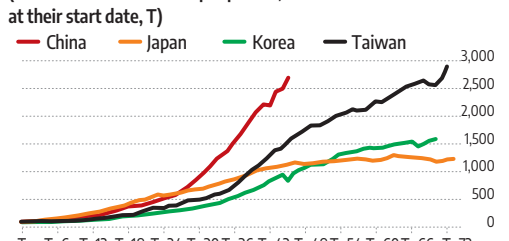
Consumption myth

Final household consumption expenditure 1970-2024
(% of GDP)



Source: World Bank's World Development Indicators

Household consumption per capita in "Take-off Time"
(Constant US 2021 dollars per person; index at 100 for all countries at their start date, T)



Source: Penn World Tables, Version 11. To obtain household consumption per person, the series "rconna" which is total final consumption is divided by population and then multiplied by the share of household consumption in total consumption, using the series "csh_c" and "csh_g". T = 1978 for China, 1950 for Japan, 1953 for Korea and 1951 for Taiwan

The author is a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and co-author (with Devesh Kapur) of *A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey* (HarperCollins India, 2025). ©Project Syndicate, 2026

Cultivating a new vocation

BOOK REVIEW

NEHA KIRPAL

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of city dwellers buying second homes in rural hilly towns in search of a better quality of life. Arti Dwarkadas' debut book is her memoir about moving from Mumbai to a 10-acre organic farm that she cofounded at Raigad, Maharashtra, along with a friend in 2021.

Ms Dwarkadas' mother had "the greenest thumb", so she grew up in a home filled with plants. Naturally, some of that early influence in her childhood rubbed off, and her own balcony garden became her refuge, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. One day, she received a call from a friend asking whether she would be interested in buying farmland, going organic and growing her own food. Surprisingly, she found herself saying yes. "The idea of doing something real, something grounded and unpredictable, was strangely exhilarating," she recalls.

This was the beginning of a wild misadventure, comprising everything from bureaucratic mazes to bovine ambushes and a colourful cast of characters. After much research, Ms Dwarkadas and her friend zeroed in on two plots near Kolad, a town known mostly for white water rafting. Navigating a wild, unfamiliar land as a farming novice, her first hurdle was getting a farmer's certificate to buy the land. Moreover, the sale deed had to be translated from English to Marathi. Ownership was just the beginning.

This was followed by the logistics of construction, electricity permissions and the task of transforming the land into a functioning farm. Ms Dwarkadas also talks about using Google Lens for farming, which turned out to be a "wildlife Sherlock Holmes" — "arriving just in time to identify creatures, unravel their backstories and occasionally warn us about their lethal tendencies."

Over the years, the author found herself integrating more closely with rural life, and connecting with the locals, who too began warming to her. In the process, Ms Dwarkadas came to realise that she had grown as a person. Along the way, she recounts all the lessons she has learnt — patience, humility, resilience, and the art of laughing at oneself — apart from the several joys it has given her. "There's a special kind of fulfilment that comes from watching people — especially children — connect with the land in a way that feels primal and pure, a reminder that the earth is meant to be touched, nurtured and understood," writes Ms Dwarkadas.

The author also provides a field guide for city dwellers who may be interested in venturing into farm life. "Choosing the right land is everything," she advises at the outset. One should start with simple, hardy crops that are already well suited to the region's soil, climate and local conditions, she adds. Ms Dwarkadas also emphasises on the importance of building local relationships, where goodwill, patience and trust are the most valuable currency. "Farming might start with land, but it takes root in community," she writes.

Two Bandra Girls Buy a Farm: Chaos, Community and Crops in Rural Maharashtra
by Arti Dwarkadas
Published by Westland
218 pages ₹499

The bureaucracy will test you, warns Ms Dwarkadas, adding that it helps to stay organised, making detailed checklists of permits and documents as well as hiring someone local who understands the intricacies of the system. "Build trust slowly, and understand that rural work rhythms are tied to weather, festivals and tradition — not your calendar," she writes. Further, allocating a generous budget and planning for infrastructure early is key. "A good access road, secure storage, fencing and reliable irrigation systems are non-negotiable investments," writes Ms Dwarkadas.

The author also advises diversifying crops to reduce risks. "Accept that no amount of planning can override nature's unpredictability," she writes. The rewards from farming are slow, seasonal and often intangible, she warns. Finally, Ms Dwarkadas advises celebrating every milestone, whether big or small. "Farming is as much about the journey as the destination, and celebrating along the way keeps that journey meaningful and fulfilling," she writes.

"Packed with action, drama and the occasional plot twist," farm life is a test of one's patience, grit and optimism — and so, not everyone's cup of tea. However, the book is also a quiet reflection on getting out of one's comfort zone. "There's a kind of peace in taking risks and sticking it out, even when it feels impossible," she concludes.

The reviewer is a New Delhi-based freelance writer

OUR VIEW

MINT

India has a chance to fix its east-west imbalance

The BJP's West Bengal win places this state under the same party that rules at the Centre. This could improve its governance and help address India's uneven economic emergence

The emphatic victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in elections to the West Bengal assembly focuses attention on an important aspect of India's political economy: the role of politics and governance in economic development. The link is hard to quantify, especially in an era where economics is increasingly about mathematical models. However, as pointed out by a paper on 'The relative economic performance of Indian states during the period 1960-61 to 2023-24' by Sanjeev Sanyal, member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM), and Aakanksha Arora, joint director, EAC-PM, there is no getting away from harsh facts: the economic performance of Indian states has been vastly disparate. West Bengal, which accounted for the third-largest slice of the country's GDP at 10.5% in 1960-61, saw its share shrink to 5.6% by 2023-24, the most severe reduction among states. Accordingly, its per capita income went from 127.5% of the national average to 83.7% over the same period. Another eastern state, Assam, which had an above-average per capita income in 1960-61, saw it drop in relative terms to 61.2% in 2010-11, though it improved to 73.7% in 2023-24. Likewise, Bihar; the undivided state's relative per capita income was 70.3% in 1960-61, hit a low of 31% in 2000-01 and then stayed at around 33% after it was split into Bihar and Jharkhand. Odisha, also in the east, saw a consistent decline on that measure over the three decades to 1990-91 (70.9% to 54.3%), but then recorded a significant turnaround, taking its figure to 88.5% in 2023-24.

The reasons for the relatively poor showing of our major eastern states vary. What is indisputable, however, is that they have lagged not just the rest of the country, but more notably, western states like Gujarat and Maharashtra. The eastern states have been resource-rich, but appear to have been held back by a combination of adverse factors. Some states have lacked business-friendly policies. Land acquisition for industrial projects in West Bengal has been difficult, for example, as seen in the Nandigram and Singur episodes (in the latter, Tata Motors moved a car factory to Gujarat). Eastern states have also lacked the sort of growth hubs full of local talent—such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad in the south—that could attract tech-related investment. Law-and-order has been sub-par too, though a long Maoist rebellion in eastern forest belts is said to have finally been quelled. In general, weak governance often features in investor complaints. Now with West Bengal under the same political dispensation as the Centre and the BJP part of ruling alliances in Bihar and Odisha, can investors expect a shift in business conditions for the better? If so, the country would get a chance to address an economic divide that has not got as much attention as the gap between the north and south.

In the mid-1980s, demographer Ashish Bose coined the acronym 'Bimaru' for Bihar, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (UP) in a paper that outlined the slow progress of these states that were home to almost 40% of India's population. Since then, these four states have made concerted efforts to shake off that tag, MP and UP especially. If eastern states undergo a gear shift in favour of economic growth, it might well be time for a new acronym, Biba, which means 'vibrant,' for Bihar, Bengal and Assam.

THEIR VIEW

The denarius fate: has the dollar started to lose its reserve status?

US actions have eroded the world's trust in it but it's still unclear which currency could replace it

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As the economic consequences of US President Donald Trump's war against Iran become evident, policymakers around the world are running out of patience. The recent Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in Washington made this abundantly clear, with UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves lamenting the "folly" of a war that is "not ours."

But much of the cost will be borne by the US itself. The immediate effects are visible: a sharp rise in gas prices, inflation climbing to a two-year high and growing concerns that, as consumers cut back on spending to offset higher costs, unemployment will rise.

While these short-term shocks are serious, a major risk that has received less attention is that the dollar could lose its status as the world's primary trade and reserve currency.

The decline of a reserve currency is a slow process. The British pound ceded its dominance to the US dollar over roughly two decades, beginning in the 1920s. As Barry Eichengreen has noted, the Roman denarius—arguably the world's first international currency—also unravelled over a long period, starting when Emperor Nero debased it in the first century CE.

Any international currency ultimately depends on trust. I witnessed this during my time as chief economic advisor to the Indian government under prime minister Manmohan Singh. On 5 August 2011, Standard and Poor's downgraded the US long-term credit rating from AAA to AA+, fuelling fears of immediate capital flight. Instead, the opposite happened: money flowed into the US economy. In the face of global turbulence, investors trusted that the US would honour its obligations, no matter the cost.

That trust, a cornerstone of soft power, is rapidly eroding. Samantha Power, the former administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), highlighted this in a recent lecture at Cornell University, where she criticized the Trump administration's decision to dismantle the agency. The abrupt and "heartless" manner in which it was shut down, she said, halted humanitarian aid without warning, leading to immense suffering among populations around the world that had depended on its continuity.

The closure of USAID, alongside Trump's military adventures in Iran and Venezuela and relentless verbal attacks on long-standing allies like Canada and Denmark, has cast a shadow over America's global standing and trustworthiness.

This, in turn, puts the dollar's hegemonic status at risk.

To understand the potential cost, consider seigniorage: because the US dollar is globally trusted, the [country's central bank], its Federal Reserve, can print a $10 bill for less than seven cents, and it will be accepted at full value around the world. As empires from Rome to Britain have shown, issuing the world's leading currency allows a country to create value almost out of thin air. Losing that capacity would slow economic growth.

Unless American policy reverses course, this year may go down in history as the moment the American dollar began to lose its status as the world's currency.

This raises an important follow-up question: Which currency will replace the dollar? The renminbi of China appears to be the strongest candidate. A decade ago, the Chinese currency gained credibility when the International Monetary Fund included it in the basket of global currencies underpinning Special Drawing Rights (the Fund's reserve asset), but it was still widely dismissed as "no match" for the greenback. Today, the prospect of renminbi primacy no longer seems unthinkable.

Yet China's ability to assume that global role is far from assured. As economist Qiao Liu observed in his 2016 book *Corporate China 2.0: The Great Shakeup*, the country combines an "authoritative political regime" with more flexible institutional arrangements in which "relationships still matter," a hybrid that does not readily inspire the kind of global confidence a reserve currency requires.

Chinese President Xi Jinping appears to understand this dynamic. In a 2024 speech, Xi emphasized the need to internationalize the renminbi to bolster China's soft power, calling for a "powerful currency that can be widely used in international trade, investment, and foreign-exchange markets and attain reserve currency status." But the main obstacle to reserve-currency status for the renminbi—the maintenance of capital controls—remains firmly in place.

The strongest rebuke of Trump's policies over the past year came from an unexpected source: King Charles III of the UK. His address to the US Congress on 28 April, delivered with characteristic British wit and restraint, sent a clear message that the US is on the wrong path, one that could destroy its global standing.

There was, however, cause for optimism. The repeated bursts of bipartisan applause that Charles received from members of US Congress suggested they were already aware of America's predicament. ©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE

10 YEARS AGO

mint

Finance bill passed in Lok Sabha

Daiichi wins damages from Singh brothers

India moves a step closer to adopting a new bankruptcy law

A problem of cash

RBI proposes on-tap bank licences, bars conglomerates

Cattle deaths and hunger signal looming famine in Bundelkhand

JUST A THOUGHT

"West Bengal had a head start in industrialization, but it failed to sustain that advantage.

AMARTYA SEN

MY VIEW | ECO SQUARE

India needs a clear near-term plan for energy resilience

LEENA SRIVASTAVA

is an independent expert on climate change and clean energy.

For a little over two months now, the world has speculated on the impact of the Israel-US-Iran war on the world economy. As the war's disruption stretched on, concern began turning into panic over energy and food security. India is in a particularly vulnerable position—both directly, given its high energy dependence on West Asia, and indirectly due to the ripple effects of various impacts across the world.

India's large import dependence makes adaptive responses to economic and social impacts of the war enormously challenging, especially in the immediate time-frame of two years. Approaches to re-evaluating and strengthening energy security in time periods beyond that would have greater degrees of freedom.

At an aggregate level, the government has managed to limit price increases for most petroleum products by getting state-owned oil companies to absorb a good part of the crude-oil cost rise, while cushioning the rest of the impact on its own fiscal account. But last week's steep price increases for commercial LPG have revealed the unsustainability of this approach. Projections by global experts of the years needed to revert to 'normalcy' do not portend well for the country, highlighting an urgent need for strategic interventions that could have a large impact.

Here is a quick recap of our most significant vulnerabilities. India imports about 90% of its crude oil, even if imports from West Asia are roughly half of this. Also, India exports over 25% of the major refinery products it produces (such as naphtha, diesel and petrol), indicating that the country's import vulnerability is not as severe as it *prima facie* seems. The exception here is LPG and the 'heavy ends' (fuel oil, bitumen, etc) from the petroleum refining barrel. LPG is, by far, the most sensitive product in the mix; India imports over 60% of its consumption, most of it typically from West Asia.

India also imports nearly half of its natural gas requirement. A large part of this is used for non-energy applications, such as fertilizer and petrochemical production, but its consumption as a fuel for mobility and source of energy in other processes is also very significant. Supply-chain disruptions to fertilizer imports (although the potential for diversification exists) have combined with natural-gas scarcity to threaten food production in India with a double whammy.

Reducing vulnerabilities around energy in India in the immediate term would mean addressing demand-supply gaps for various end-uses, in particular for LPG and natural gas, while insulating India's economically vulnerable populations from price increases, their indirect impact included. An unusually hot summer this year as a likely consequence of the El Niño effect also calls for special attention to the poor.

Immediate relief measures could be taken that are well aligned with the country's climate goals

Over 85% of LPG in India is consumed by household consumers, but there are large disparities between regions and income classes. Higher income classes consume more than double the quantity of LPG consumed by lower income classes, while populations in many states have very poor access to cooking gas. The experience of recent weeks has reinforced the reality that in times of shortage, it is the poor that are deprived first, whereas higher income consumers in urban areas tend to suffer little disruption; many of them have back-up LPG cylinders. A much more nuanced approach is therefore needed to build LPG resilience in the immediate term.

Richer segments of society must be nudged to move to electric hobs right away, with their supply of LPG constrained to maybe a cylinder every two months for special uses. Also, LPG pricing should differ by usage location and cylinder size, so that better-off consumers pay more. Within the commercial-use category, small enterprises could be given cheaper access. The use of LPG for automobiles could be entirely discouraged. Overall, sharp demand management could shift richer users to electricity while relieving the rest.

Mobility fuels in India are already heavily taxed. Price increases can be cushioned through adjustments of the tax structure if the government so chooses. At the same time, India has several years of experience with electric vehicles (EVs), charging stations and battery storage. The multiple challenges that have been identified for an accelerated uptake of EVs could largely be addressed through regulatory changes and government orders. A significant reduction in vulnerability may be possible to achieve if we combine this with demand-management measures such as work-from-home and the use of large-capacity carriers by corporates, public institutions and industry.

India could achieve cleaner electricity generation by using more natural gas and renewables as its basic sources of energy, but given our vulnerabilities around agriculture and food production, we now have all the more reason to prioritize renewable power generation—particularly since this has already proven to be economically attractive—while we use natural gas for urea production. The renewables sector in India is robust, the bottlenecks are well known and India has the capacity to address them.

In essence, India should focus on the immediate solutions that are available to enhance its energy resilience in these times of stress, while ensuring that these are aligned with longer term objectives and climate commitments. An empowered committee to design and implement such a near-term energy resilience strategy is the need of the hour.

MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

Industrial policy is back in vogue but can every country pursue it?

The World Bank has endorsed the idea under some conditions but doesn't ask whether universal adoption would weaken it

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BLOOMBERG

Dennis Robertson was not only one of the finest economic minds of the 20th century, but also an elegant writer who was known for his witticisms. In an essay written in 1956, Robertson quipped: "High-brow opinion is like a hunted hare; if you stand in the same place, or nearly the same place, it can be relied upon to come round to you in a circle."

Those words resonate while reading a new report by the World Bank on industrial policy, or targeted government intervention to shape the economic structure of a country by promoting, protecting or developing specific industries deemed vital to economic growth, export competitiveness, import substitution or geopolitical strategy. In simpler terms, the government has a say in what is produced within a country. The multilateral lender had famously released a report in 1993 on the miracle economies of East Asia, where it had said that the main reasons for success stories in the region were sound macroeconomic management, investment in human capital and productivity growth driven by export industries. Industrial policy to aid specific sectors or companies was less important in comparison.

Cut to 2026. World Bank chief economist Indermit Gill wrote in the foreword to its new report that the earlier injunction against industrial policy "has not aged well—it has the practical value of a floppy disk today." In 2019, economists at the International Monetary Fund had a witty title for a paper that described industrial policy as 'the policy that shall not be named.' Be it the analogy of the hunted hare, the floppy disk or Lord Voldemort of Harry Potter novels, it is clear that the pendulum has swung back towards industrial policy.

At the heart of the new framework is a set of three country characteristics that the report argues are decisive in determining what kind of industrial policy is feasible. These are: government capacity for sustained interaction with multiple businesses and industries; local market size to achieve economies of scale; and fiscal space to bear the costs of business subsidies without sacrificing spending on social services. Interestingly, the World Bank says that India scores well on all three, which implicitly means it has the requisite means to pursue industrial policy.

This is a useful taxonomy. It does what good policy frameworks are supposed to do: it converts an ideological debate into a diagnostic one. The question is no longer whether industrial policy is virtuous or vicious in the abstract, but whether a particular government in a particular country at a particular moment has the three things it needs to make a particular tool work.

These three traits determine which of 15 possible industrial policy tools will work best—ranging from industrial parks and job-skills training all the way to import tariffs, production subsidies and competitive exchange-rate devaluations. These tools are a mix of sharp and blunt instruments, and their effectiveness depends on progressively higher levels of market size, government capacity and fiscal space.

In the case of India, there is a lot of attention paid to industrial policy at the sub-national level, especially in Tamil Nadu. The World Bank has paid special attention to how the state succeeded in attracting production of Apple's iPhone 16 through a combination of what it describes as a top-down and bottom-up approach. The former includes subsidies for specific industries, while the latter covers specific coordination failures such as lack of housing for workers. It built housing for 18,000 workers near the factory site even before the production facility came up, something that a private builder may not have invested in without guarantees of adequate rental returns.

One salient fact about industrial policy in our times is that most governments seem to have some variant of it. The World Bank reports that all 183 member countries target at least one industry. There are some noteworthy patterns here. For example, poor countries often depend on blunt instruments such as higher tariffs to promote domestic production, while upper-middle-income countries are big spenders on business subsidies.

However, Gill warns in a recent blog on the World Bank website: "By itself, industrial policy has seldom been a game-changer: the record shows that, *even under ideal conditions* (emphasis added), it results in an average gain of just 1% of [gross domestic product]. Still, in an era of persistently sluggish growth, every option to boost growth ought to be considered."

The report's most important omission is this: Can all 183 countries pursue an industrial policy simultaneously? It is akin to a mutual depreciation problem in foreign-exchange markets. It is logically impossible for all countries to depreciate their currencies together. Just as all countries cannot run trade surpluses. Does something similar apply to industrial policy?

The East Asian success stories had something that no framework can manufacture on demand: they were exporting into a global economy that was broadly open and not itself engaged in the same game. South Korea's shipbuilding and semiconductor industries were subsidized at home and targeted markets overseas that, whatever their imperfections, were not simultaneously running competing subsidy programmes of comparable scale. It is hard to believe, for example, that all major economies can achieve economies of scale—and hence efficiency—in semiconductors for domestic use.

In other words, is the very ubiquity of industrial policy in our times also a barrier to its eventual success?

MINT CURATOR

Why a wealth tax is unlikely to prevent power concentration

It'll probably just empower bureaucrats in the government instead

ALLISON SCHRAGER
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering economics.

Various states in America have flirted with wealth taxes. ISTOCKPHOTO

It's happening. California looks likely to put a 'one-time' tax of 5% on wealth above $1 billion on the ballot in November and polls suggest it could pass—despite opposition from some economists (not so surprising) and Democratic politicians (more so). Meanwhile, calls to tax the rich are resounding across the country, from New York's proposed '*pied-à-terre* tax' to Washington State's first-ever income tax, imposed only on millionaires.

As someone who has been arguing for more than a decade that these taxes are bad economics, I find all this disheartening. I missed the point. I thought the argument was about optimal allocation of resources, but it is really about the redistribution of power. I concede that concentration of power among the wealthy can be harmful. But using the tax code to fix it will create worse problems.

Wealth taxes—that is, taxes on assets as opposed to income—are bad economics because they are nearly impossible to collect to the point where they are largely self-defeating and can often result in less tax revenue. They not only discourage entrepreneurship and job creation, but also distort capital allocation. All of this is bad for growth. Still, one of the economists behind the California tax has admitted that it may reduce wealth in the economy overall, but that is a price worth paying because inequality is so toxic.

Other prominent economists argue the problem with wealth inequality is that it makes the rich too powerful: They can lobby the president and Congress to ensure they maintain their status, which can distort markets and policy. This is a fair point. No one elected Elon Musk, who has amassed a lot of power in markets, media and even the government.

At the same time, it worries me how much anger is directed at the wealthy. Increasingly, Americans don't see self-made billionaires as success stories worthy of admiration. Nearly half of Americans despise them, seeing the wealthy as the beneficiaries of a corrupt system who got rich at their expense.

I can point out, as I have, that wealth creation is not zero-sum, or how much the US economy benefits from companies such as Amazon and the jobs they create. But the anger is there and it exists for a reason: Many positional goods and services are in short supply. If you're not wealthy, it is hard to move, or find a home you like, or afford many things that now feel necessary to a middle-class life. There is resentment that the rich live by different rules. They don't have to worry about paying their mortgage, affording good schools or finding a job with health insurance.

Now we are told all our jobs could disappear—just as the rich who have created the job-stealing technology get richer. The subsequent resentment could tear the US apart, which could be another reason to justify punitive taxes on the wealthy. The result is the societal equivalent of what we economists call a doom loop.

I am not saying that there are no serious issues at stake. My point is that high taxes are not the way to address them. No, Elon Musk does not always spend his money wisely. But I am not convinced the government would do better.

There are at least two other flaws with this rationale for a wealth tax. One is that imposing high taxes on the wealthy won't necessarily reduce their power; it will simply reallocate it to bureaucrats. True, they are theoretically accountable to the public, but giving them more influence is a recipe for more corruption. At least billionaires are subject to the discipline and transparency of the market and their shareholders. Another flaw is that a lot depends on who decides what counts as 'too much' wealth. Maybe it's $1 billion today, but who's to say that won't be lowered over time, or used against perceived political enemies? Appropriating wealth to limit power has certainly not worked well in other countries.

Don't get me wrong: Taxes are a necessary fact of life. Americans have big expectations for their government and it doesn't collect enough revenue to finance itself. The very rich are already paying a lot, but they could pay more. But the principles of good tax policy aren't about resentment or power—they're about raising revenue while minimizing distortions, maximizing feasibility and emphasizing salience.

Concentration of power is a problem, especially when paired with a corrupt government. But that can be better addressed by working on the weakness and loss of trust in institutions. If you think the rich have too much power, fine. But punishing them by making them less rich will only make everyone poorer by reducing growth. And if inequality makes people resentful, a no-growth economy will make them even more so—and miserable besides. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Why AI is evolving with so few self-restraints in place

RAHUL MATTHAN

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In December 2024, a number of scientists from around the world signed a four-page paper in *Science* that urged their own community to ensure that an entire class of organisms is never created. Their efforts managed to halt progress in a field that many of them had themselves been pursuing. This marked a rare moment in science when an entire field voluntarily abandoned the path it had been on because of the risks scientists saw ahead of them.

The science in question was mirror-life, and the fact that such a moratorium was achieved raises the question of why similar outcomes were not achieved in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). How was a small band of scientists able to pause progress in mirror-life when some of the most powerful voices in technology failed to do so in AI?

For this, we need to first understand what mirror-life is.

All complex naturally occurring biological molecules exist in one of two mirror-image forms, or chiralities. These forms are identical in every respect except that one cannot be superimposed on the other, much like our left hand cannot on our right. DNA for example, exists as right-handed nucleotides and the proteins they encode are made up of left-handed amino acids. This pattern repeats in every microbe, plant and animal, and has done so for four billion years.

A mirror organism would be identical to its natural counterpart, except that its orientation would be reversed. It would have left-handed nucleotides encoding right-handed proteins, and its every molecule would be a mirror image of its natural counterpart. Nothing like this exists in nature, but until the paper in *Science*, efforts had been underway to create such an organism. It was effortful but not beyond the realm of the possible.

The concern is not whether we can create these molecules, but what happens once we do. Our immune systems, the bacteriophages and other elements of our biome that keep us healthy, as well as the antibiotics we use to fight disease, all rely on chirality-specific bindings. None of them would be able to protect us from mirror-microbes that exist under an entirely different set of rules. Even benign mirror bacteria would breeze through our defences—because nothing in nature can check their spread.

What is truly remarkable about the 2024 paper is that its lead author, Kate Adamala, had been one of four principal investigators on a major US National Science Foundation-funded grant for mirror cell research. Since then, the Mirror Biology Dialogues Fund has convened follow-on meetings in Manchester and at the Pasteur Institute, with another planned at the National University of Singapore. So far, the moratorium has held.

Too much is at stake for AI to follow life science fields where risks made scientists give up pursuits

Five conditions made it stick: the field itself agreed that the harm would be uncontainable; no commercial capital had flowed into this dangerous capability; the community was small enough to coordinate; no state had staked its competitive position on getting there first; and the pioneers could be persuaded to abandon their own work. Had all five not held simultaneously, there may still be scientists going down this path.

This is not the first time the scientific community has chosen to pause its own progress. When recombinant DNA became a reality, Paul Berg, Stanley Cohen and Herbert Boyer—each a pioneer in the field—were central to the Asilomar conference and the moratorium that followed. The safety guidelines that emerged became guardrails for the research that came after. The mirror life community is following in their footsteps.

The AI community attempted the same Asilomar approach when, in March 2023, the Future of Life Institute released an open letter calling for a six-month pause on frontier AI development. Thousands signed, including a luminary in the field, Yoshua Bengio. But unlike recombinant DNA and mirror-life, AI development did not stop and continues at a blistering pace to this day.

As it happens, AI fails on every one of those five conditions. There is no consensus that its harms are uncontainable; most AI labs believe they will be able to constrain the technology enough to ensure no harm results. By the time the Future of Life Institute got its act together, AI labs were already worth tens of billions and had committed to spending more. The community was large, multinational and fractured along ideological and ethical lines, and the US and China had already staked their national strategy on AI dominance. Even though Hinton and Bengio advised caution, it was the founders of AI labs who really mattered—and they were going hell for leather.

But the deeper asymmetry is in the stakes. Mirror life would only have destroyed the biological commons. As serious as this is, frontier AI accelerates the very disciplines—biology, immunology, ecology—that produced the mirror life moratorium in the first place. A broad pause risks slowing entire fields that depend on it to do their work.

The mirror-life example cannot serve as a model for AI policy. While there may be narrow verticals where the same diagnostic applies (autonomous biological design assistance may be one), these are specialist sub-problems whose answers cannot drive the governance of AI as a whole. For that, we must build governance capacity—through post-deployment transparency, capability evaluations and the steady augmentation of regulatory skills that can meet the demands of a new and dynamic technology. While mirror life is a precedent worth admiring, it's not one we can follow.

Editor's TAKE

Nepal's Lipulekh protest tests ties with India

Nepal's latest objection to reopening the Lipulekh route for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra is a reminder of an old wound that refuses to heal

Nepal's new government, under Prime Minister Balen Shah, is less than two months old, but it is already rewriting governance and the rules of engagement with its neighbours. Balen Shah came to power after Gen Z protests and has quickly cracked down on the corrupt and ailing system, making headlines for his radical reforms. He has also resolved to assert Nepal's sovereignty and keep the two bigger nations, India and China, at bay. It may not be high on his agenda, but he cannot afford to appear yielding when it comes to India. The latest protest by Nepal regarding the Lipulekh route to Mansarovar must be seen in this context.

Nepal's latest objection to India and China reopening the Lipulekh route for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra is not new. Yet this time, the context is different. The boundary question has always been both a matter of diplomatic posturing and a domestic necessity in Nepalese politics– something leaders in Nepal have always used to stir public sentiment and deflect attention from pressing internal issues they could not resolve.

Under leaders like K P Sharma Oli, the Lipulekh-Kalapani issue was a tool to deflect attention. Shah inherits that hardened reality. But his leadership emerges from a very different moment. The movement that reshaped Nepal's politics in 2025 was not about territory or identity; it was about governance – jobs, accountability, and representation.

That distinction matters. It means the Shah government's legitimacy rests primarily on its ability to deliver internally, not on external posture. But at the same time, he cannot appear soft on border issues or on the Lipulekh Pass, as accepting Indian position would erode his credibility.

Lipulekh is considered a sacred gateway for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra – a traditional route for Indian pilgrims travelling to Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar in Tibet. It has been under India's control for a long time. Nepal's Foreign Ministry's objection-carefully worded, routed through diplomatic channels, and restrained in tone – is more formal than menacing. But the message is clear: sovereignty must be defended and transaction must be on equal footing. At one level, India-Nepal relationship remains intact – open borders, economic interdependence, and deep cultural ties are proof enough. But beneath that stability, Nepal today is less willing to appear deferential.

Within Nepal's domestic politics, complacency towards India can be construed as weakness. India's position on Lipulekh has been consistent, rooted in its reading of history and long-standing administrative control. In Kathmandu, however, the issue is no longer just about territory – it is about voice, respect, and equality. China's role in this triangular dynamic remains careful and calculated. While Beijing is directly involved in reopening the route, it has avoided taking a clear stand on the sovereignty question. For India, the instinct to treat Lipulekh as a settled matter is understandable but must be recalibrated keeping sentiments of Nepal today. The challenge is no longer legal clarity; it is political sensitivity.

Why we need a new information world order

In an age where information moves faster than our ability to process it, clarity is giving way to confusion. What we are witnessing is not just a period of global instability, but a deeper crisis in how conflict is communicated — and understood

CHAITANYA K PRASAD

There's a strange kind of fatigue in the air right now.

You can feel it when you open your phone in the morning. Another alert. Another headline. Another "breaking" situation somewhere in the world that suddenly feels a little too close for comfort. Wars don't feel distant any more; they feel immediate, almost personal. And not necessarily because we understand them better, but because we're constantly watching them unfold in real time.

But here's the thing no one really talks about enough: we're not just living through a time of conflict; we're living through a crisis in how that conflict is being communicated. And that changes everything.

We've built a world where information moves faster than we can process it. There was a time when news came with some kind of pause-time to verify, to reflect, to contextualise. That gap doesn't exist any more. Now it's instant. Continuous. Overwhelming. And in theory, that should make us more informed. But in reality, it often just makes us more anxious.

Because when everything is urgent, nothing is clear. You see a video, but you don't know when it was shot. You read a headline, but you don't know what's been left out. You scroll through opinions that sound like facts and facts that are framed like opinions. Somewhere in all of this, truth starts to feel... slippery.

Whenever things get messy in the information space, the instinct is to swing to extremes. Either clamp down, control the narrative, restrict information, filter what people can see-or do the opposite: let everything flow freely and assume the truth will somehow sort itself out. Both approaches sound logical. Both fail in practice.

Over-controlling information creates distrust. People start questioning what's being hidden, and that uncertainty often does more damage than the information itself. But a completely unfiltered environment isn't any better. It rewards the loudest voices, the most dramatic takes, the content that triggers reaction, not reflection. So we're stuck in this loop. Too much control feels suffocating. Too little control feels chaotic. What we actually need is something far more nuanced-and, honestly, far more difficult.

This is where the idea of a basic framework, or even an informal SOP, for crisis communication begins to make sense. Not as a tool to dictate what people can or cannot say, but as a way to shape how things are said when the stakes are high. Because in moments of conflict, communication is not casual-every word carries weight. Tone matters more, timing matters more, and the impact of even the smallest misstep is amplified.

A LITTLE MORE CARE. A LITTLE MORE AWARENESS OF IMPACT. A RECOGNITION THAT WHAT WE SAY, AND HOW WE SAY IT, CAN SHAPE HOW OTHERS UNDERSTAND THE WORLD

A slight exaggeration can spiral into widespread panic. A half-verified update can unintentionally escalate tensions. A dramatic headline can distort perception, making a situation feel more immediate or more severe than it actually is. In such an environment, the way information is framed becomes just as important as the information itself.

What complicates this further today is the role of technology, particularly AI-generated content. We are no longer just dealing with misreporting or bias; we are dealing with entirely fabricated realities that can look convincingly real. AI-generated images, deepfakes, synthetic audio, and manipulated videos can circulate within minutes, often before they are even questioned. A single fabricated visual, if believable enough, can influence public sentiment, trigger outrage, or even provoke real-world consequences before the truth has a chance to catch up.

This makes the responsibility around dissemination even more critical. It is no longer enough to verify what is being said; we now have to verify what we are seeing and hearing as well. The burden of discernment has increased-not just for media institutions, but for individuals too.

Responsible dissemination, then, does not require complicated rules or rigid control. It simply calls for a few grounding principles: slowing down just enough to verify before amplifying, offering context rather than isolated fragments, clearly separating what is known from what is still uncertain, and avoiding language that triggers unnecessary alarm. It also means being cautious with visual content, especially in a time where authenticity itself can be manufactured. Equally important is the willingness to acknowledge uncertainty when it exists, rather than filling gaps with speculation.

None of this takes away from people's ability to speak. It does not silence voices or restrict expression. It simply asks for a little more awareness, a little more care, and a little more intention in how those voices are used-especially when the line between reality and manipulation is becoming increasingly difficult to draw.

Now this is where it gets interesting. Because while traditional systems are struggling to keep up, an entire generation has found its own way of dealing with all of this. Gen Z isn't sitting around waiting for perfectly curated information. They're reacting in real time. Processing in real time. And a lot of that processing is happening through humour.

Memes, jokes, dark humour about "the world ending"-on the surface, it can look unserious. Almost detached. But it's actually the opposite. It's how people cope when things feel too big to fully grasp. When someone jokes about "impending doom", it's not because they don't care. It's because sitting with the full weight of reality all the time is exhausting.

Humour becomes a filter. A buffer. A way to stay engaged without being completely overwhelmed. But even this space isn't immune to problems. Because the same tools that help people cope can also blur lines-between satire and misinformation, between commentary and distortion. And when everything is wrapped in irony, it sometimes becomes harder to tell what's real.

It's not about removing emotion. That's impossible-and, honestly, not even desirable. People are going to feel things, react, and interpret. But perhaps responsibility, in this moment, looks like balance: not feeding fear just because it gets attention, not simplifying complex situations into easy narratives, not turning every development into a "turning point".

It also means institutions stepping up-not by controlling the narrative, but by being clearer, faster, and more transparent. Because when official communication is slow or vague, speculation fills the gap instantly. And it means all of us-because, at this point, we are all part of the information ecosystem-pausing for a moment before we share, react, or amplify. Maybe this "new information world order" does not come from one big policy or global agreement. Maybe it is something quieter-a shift in how we treat information when things feel uncertain. A little more care. A little more awareness of impact.

A recognition that what we say, and how we say it, can shape how others understand the world. Because right now, the real danger isn't just conflict itself. It's confusion. And if we're not careful, that confusion becomes its own kind of crisis. At the end of the day, this isn't about restricting voices. It's about making sure those voices don't unintentionally make an already fragile situation worse. Because in a world where everything feels constantly on edge, clarity is no longer a luxury. It is stability.

Chaitanya K Prasad is a commentator and writer on cinema, branding, media management, and geo-strategic communication. He has co-authored the book When Branding Met the Movies, published by the National Book Trust. Inputs were provided by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavie Srinivasan.

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PIC TALK

People offer prayers on 'Angarki Sankashti Chaturthi' at Siddhivinayak Temple, in Mumbai.

PHOTO: PTI

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How devotion leads to experiencing God

AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

2ND OPINION

In order to experience God, we must learn some facts about God and His relationship with us. God has three main roles vis-à-vis us. The first is the continuation of creation based on dharma (the highest principles). The main feature here is the karmaphala principle, which is: "What you sow is what you reap." The second is to help all those who turn to God, as appropriate. The third is to micromanage the lives of devotees in order to take them towards liberation. God uses His ichcha shakti (divine willpower) to do all this.

God respects the free will of all souls — His parts (the Bhagavad Gita 15.7). Didn't Lord Krishna involve Arjuna in the Mahabharata war only after Arjuna agreed, stating that he would do what the Lord asked him to do, which was to fight to uphold dharma? God adjusts His response according to what suits a particular devotee. In my case, my Lord has much to reform in order to help me qualify for the privileged position of liberation. Only very advanced devotees, like Swami Vivekananda, attain it at a relatively young age.

For others, kriyamana (what is presently being done) is crucial. Svabhava (nature) change is what has to be addressed. Don't we each have a unique nature due to our varied past? God deletes the balance prarabdha (accumulated karmaphalas) prior to granting liberation, once the nature becomes acceptable.

Now, about experiencing God: the first thing you need to do is to have His company 24x7. It is not practical to do this in a temple, but it is possible with a large photograph of an avatar (incarnation). You also have to ensure that the image is such that the Lord's eyes are painted in a way that they appear to follow you and see whatever you are doing. This photograph must be hung in the room where you spend most of your time. In my case, it is my bedroom, where I have also placed my worktable.

Now become aware that God is watching you. He does, whether you realise it or not. Lord Krishna has clearly stated that His eyes are everywhere (Bhagavad Gita 13.14). This is a good start. Now begin praying for whatever you need. Remember, God will not be pleased if your prayers are for anything even remotely against dharma.

Simultaneously, start some spiritual practice, such as chanting God's names-in your case, the name of the avatar chosen by you. Now a communication has been established between you and God. It is a good time to seek guidance and help in whatever you do. God will respond because you have met all the necessary conditions for it.

You will be surprised, as God uses many mediums and ways to communicate. In my case, my Lord usually speaks to me early in the morning. Additionally, intuitions come regularly. The extent of my purity determines how receptive I am. Life has taken a superb turn; I am able to experience and enjoy God's company whenever I turn to Him.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

RISING TENSIONS IN STRAIT THREATEN GLOBAL STABILITY

US President Donald Trump on Monday issued a stark warning to Iran, stating that it would be "blown off the face of the Earth" if it targeted US vessels escorting ships through the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz.

The remarks come amid heightened tensions following reports that ships moving under a US-led escort operation, dubbed "Project Freedom" by United States Central Command, came under attack in the region. Trump alleged that Iranian forces had fired on multiple vessels, including a South Korean cargo ship.

Iran swiftly rejected these allegations, with officials denying any deliberate attack on foreign commercial vessels. A spokesperson for Iran's foreign ministry stated that Tehran remains committed to freedom of navigation but warned against what it described as "provocative military posturing" by the United States.

Iranian officials also cautioned that any escalation or direct confrontation would destabilise global energy routes. They reiterated that security in the Strait should be maintained through regional cooperation rather than "external intervention".

The Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of the world's oil supply passes, remains on edge amid the ongoing crisis, with global markets closely monitoring developments for signs of further escalation.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A performing government has been rejected

The results of the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections convey that the people of the state, particularly women, students, and youngsters who have benefited the most during the DMK rule, have become blatantly ungrateful and have fallen prey to a despicable cine craze. This is more so when they have gone to the extent of defeating Chief Minister MK Stalin, who spent every minute of his time on the uplift of the state across key parameters and made it the number one state among all states in India.

It is unfortunate that a performing government has been defeated by immature fans of an inexperienced actor, from whom not much can be expected for the benefit of the state.

In the defeat of the DMK government, and particularly CM Stalin, one also has doubts about the involvement of the Election Commission of India, which has appeared blatantly partisan in favour of the ruling BJP dispensation, which worked day and night for the defeat of the DMK government, especially CM Stalin, who was gaining popularity at the national level as well. The DMK should seek verification of the votes polled and recorded in the EVMs with the VVPAT records.

THARCIUS S FERNANDO | CHENNAI

BJP's lotus blooms in Bengal

BJP has won a resounding election victory in West Bengal, a state that had been a rare opposition stronghold, expanding its consolidation of power across the country. It is the first time that the Indian Prime Minister's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won Assembly elections in West Bengal, a large and politically significant state in eastern India.

Over the past 15 years, the state had been ruled by the Trinamool Congress (TMC), a key opposition party, under the leadership of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Banerjee had been one of the most outspoken critics of Narendra Modi and his religious nationalist agenda over the past 12 years.

In a result that will have significant implications for India's political landscape, and deal another demoralising blow to the already weakened opposition, the BJP won more than 205 out of 294 seats in Bengal's Assembly, a landmark majority and a significant moment in the state's history.

The West Bengal Assembly elections will be remembered for long. People's power has prevailed, and BJP's politics of governance has triumphed. The victory strengthens the party's influence in eastern India, marking a major political shift in the region.

CK SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

Vijay reshapes Tamil Nadu politics

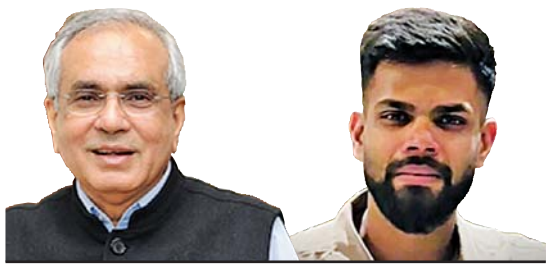
Against considerable scepticism, Joseph Vijay has turned doubt into momentum, delivering a striking political debut that few anticipated. His emergence comes at a moment when public discontent has been steadily building against the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), with criticisms of entrenched corruption and "divide and rule" governance shaping voter sentiment and testing the leadership of Chief Minister MK Stalin. It is important to note that the Chief Minister lost in his own constituency. At the same time, the opposition has struggled to present a credible alternative. The alliance between the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has faltered due to internal divisions and declining public trust. This vacuum has created an opening that Vijay has swiftly occupied. Blending star power with grassroots outreach, he has connected with younger voters and those disillusioned with traditional politics. His rise signals a shift in Tamil Nadu's political landscape, where legacy alone no longer guarantees loyalty.

It also reflects a growing demand for fresh leadership and new political narratives. The electorate now appears more willing to challenge long-standing political dominance.

AP THIRUVADI | CHENNAI

One nation, one election: The reform India cannot defer any longer

The choice before India is not between democracy and development. It is between a democracy aligned with its aspirations and one that is not. That alignment begins, though it does not end, with this reform



RAJIV KUMAR | RAJDEEP SINGH

A democracy that is perpetually distracted cannot deliver desired development.

There is a peculiar kind of paralysis that visits the world's largest democracy with clockwork regularity. It does not announce itself. It simply settles-quietly, methodically-over the machinery of the Indian state every few months. It happens as yet another election cycle begins somewhere across its thirty-six states and union territories. Executive decisions are deferred. Files move with greater caution. Senior bureaucrats are shifted en masse. Political leaders trade governance for rallies. And a nation attempting one of the most consequential structural transformations in modern economic history shifts into a lower gear-not by choice, but by design.

This is the hidden cost of India's staggered electoral calendar. And it is a cost the country can no longer afford as it grapples with enormous challenges in meeting the rising aspirations of its young population amid turbulent global times.

The architecture of interruption

India's founding fathers bestowed upon us a synchronised electoral democracy. From 1951 through 1967, Lok Sabha and state assembly elections were held simultaneously. That synchronisation unravelled progressively-through premature dissolutions of state assemblies between 1968 and 1971 and through subsequent constitutional developments-producing the fragmented, rolling electoral calendar that characterises Indian polity today. The negative consequences have compounded with each passing decade.

Between 2019 and 2024, elections were conducted across nearly every major Indian state, at different times, triggering the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). The constitutionally mandated MCC, necessary for free and fair elections, typically extends for six to eight weeks for each election, redirecting policy attention and pausing administrative action. Multiplied across a near-continuous cycle of state polls, its cumulative effect can be structural, substantial, and often irreversible.

The financial dimension reinforces this picture. The Centre for Media Studies, in its 2024 assessment, estimated that India's general elections that year involved total expenditure of approximately ₹1.35 lakh crore ($8 billion), making it the most expensive democratic exercise in recorded history. Aggregated across five years of state elections, local body polls, and by-elections, the cumulative figure rises manifold. Yet even this understates the true cost. The higher cost lies in the compounding drag of deferred decisions, delayed projects, and long-horizon planning repeatedly subordinated to the short-term imperatives of the electoral cycle. Every election also triggers a cycle of freebies and quid pro quo, which is inimical to good governance.

India, at this juncture, should be attempting a structural leap across multiple dimensions of development. The capital expenditure budget of the Centre and states has grown by 100 per cent between 2020 and 2025. This record outlay of ₹11 lakh crore in the FY27 budget, largely on infrastructure, should ideally not be subject to unpredictable interruptions caused by recurring elections. Such investments require sustained monitoring, multi-year financing certainty, and uninterrupted institutional attention. A governance model that enters election mode four to six times a year is, by its very architecture, incompatible with that requirement.

The clearest illustration of this governance disruption, caused by repeated elections, is perhaps the still incomplete railway freight corridors — the West to East and the Delhi to Mumbai projects-which have been ongoing for the past 18 years. The projects were approved by the Cabinet in 2006. Changes in government at the Centre and in the intervening states have delayed the clearing of bottlenecks in land acquisition and other constraints. In the meantime, project costs have ballooned from roughly ₹28,181 crore (initial sanction in 2008 for EDFC and WDFC) to over ₹81,459 crore by 2015. The opportunity cost of congested tracks, delays in freight movement, and revenue loss can hardly be estimated. Several such examples abound. It is time to restrain the currently prevalent ultra-hyper democracy that vitiates optimal policy design and timely project execution. No single government is responsible for this pattern. The structure is. And that structural gap is precisely what needs to change.

The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, which submitted its unanimous report to the Government in March 2024, frames One Nation One Election (ONOE) not as an administrative convenience but as a governance imperative. Drawing on inputs from constitutional experts, administrative bodies, and over forty-seven political parties, the Committee recommends a phased transition-aligning state electoral cycles with the Lok Sabha over a defined period, with appropriate constitutional provisions to manage synchronisation where needed.

The widely expressed concerns about federalism are legitimate and deserve serious engagement. India's states are constitutional entities, not administrative subdivisions. Their electorates have the right to hold state governments accountable on their own terms. Any reform that dilutes that right would be worse than the problem it seeks to solve.

But the Kovind Committee does not propose to dilute state sovereignty. It proposes to synchronise electoral timing. Every voter will retain their rights. Every state government will retain its constitutional mandate. Only the calendar changes. And that will enhance the capacity of the executive to address development challenges.

The argument for ONOE rests on a simple proposition: infrastructure projects and long-term programmes, interrupted repeatedly by election-induced pauses, will perform sub-optimally. The results are time overruns, inflated budgets, and administrative inertia. This should not be acceptable at a time when India must accelerate growth to achieve Viksit Bharat by 2047.

India's ambitions are generational in scale. Its current electoral calendar is ultra-short-term, making it misaligned with development imperatives. It is an institutional design problem-one that compounds silently with every election cycle.

ONOE will not resolve all governance challenges. It is not a panacea. But it is a structural precondition for a democracy that seeks to plan and execute over sustained periods, rather than remain perpetually distracted by multiple electoral cycles.

The choice before India is not between democracy and development. It is between a democracy aligned with its aspirations and one that is not. That alignment begins, though it does not end, with this reform.

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INDIA'S AMBITIONS ARE GENERATIONAL IN SCALE. ITS CURRENT ELECTORAL CALENDAR IS ULTRA-SHORT-TERM, MAKING IT MISALIGNED WITH DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVES.

Rajiv Kumar, Chairman at Pahlé India Foundation; and Rajdeep Singh, Executive Assistant to the Leadership Office at Pahlé India Foundation

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Public health challenges in migration and conflict

SHANTESH KUMAR SINGH | WEIAM AL-HUNAISHI

Global health is a shared responsibility among all nations, not the duty of any single country, because no nation exists in complete isolation in today's interconnected world. This basic concept has been the foundation for ensuring that no one is left behind until today. It has guided international cooperation since the adoption of the Constitution of the World Health Organization in 1948 and led to the development of the International Health Regulations in 1969 and their revision in 2005. This cooperation is reflected in Article 1 of the World Health Assembly in May 1980: "THE WORLD AND ALL ITS PEOPLES HAVE WON FREEDOM FROM SMALLPOX". Therefore, it was a collective global effort that won the battle against and eradicated smallpox worldwide. However, this concept now appears to be under jeopardy amid the current massive changes in the multilateral world.

The current trend of international negotiations suggests the possibility of emerging threats such as Mpox, a return of COVID-19, and the increasing spread of influenza. These risks require a comprehensive understanding of their underlying mechanisms, cross-national variations, and the available strategies for prevention and mitigation. This cannot be achieved by one country alone; it requires collaboration, trust, knowledge-sharing, and transparency. Such cooperation cannot be sustained through bilateral negotiations that protect one side over the other. This raises the question: have we truly been within a multilateral system, or has it been ruled by bilateral arrangements that continue without fulfilling multilateral obligations? And how will this impact different countries?

There are multiple perspectives regarding the decisions the Trump administration has made since early 2025. They could be seen as a way to direct health priorities, with multilateralism shifting towards bilateral and power-based interests rather than collective global interests, which does not work well in health. They may also highlight a defect that has been eroding multilateral diplomacy for a long time, though this was not very clear before 2025. However, one thing is evident: the growing focus on health security over "health for all" and the broader improvement of the international economy.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, many countries are under multiple stressors; many are in conflict or in a fragile state. The sense of possibly being left without support since January 2025 has revealed these countries' vulnerabilities in terms of public health. In countries such as Yemen and Sudan, all the main aspects of the health system have been depleted because of civil conflicts, and the added weight of losing support has had a major impact. In Yemen, the depleted health system must deal with increased morbidity and mortality caused by the conflict, alongside the spread of communicable diseases, a rising burden of non-communicable diseases, and widespread malnutrition.

The health systems of both countries need to support a huge number of internally displaced persons-over three million in Yemen and over nine million in Sudan. Yemen also acts as a transit country for migrants, which requires additional support from health services. In 2025, over one hundred and fifty thousand migrants passed through the country, with more than 21,500 in December alone, marking an increasing trend in migrant arrivals. These migrants have significant health needs, particularly regarding communicable diseases, which could become a future concern for the government of Yemen and surrounding countries. Prioritising such needs and determining how countries should address them remain critical questions. Irregular migration predisposes both migrants and the local population to increased health risks.

A study by LP Goldsmith on COVID-19 vaccination equity among undocumented migrants highlighted that low vaccination coverage, driven by supply — and demand-related barriers such as limited vaccine availability, documentation requirements, fear of deportation, lack of accessible information, and weak local health systems, further increases public health vulnerabilities in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This represents a serious situation that requires multi-level investment, including strengthening health infrastructure, improving biological disaster preparedness, and building inclusive health systems-all of which demand doubled or even tripled rebuilding efforts in contexts of collapsed governance following civil conflict.

At the same time, countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar may also be at risk of disease spread and may require support. This could influence the emerging shape of multilateral health cooperation. Addressing these issues will involve shifting priorities, especially in light of changing geopolitical interests. Prioritising national health security alone will lead to greater individualism if all countries follow the same approach. This also reinforces the perception that outbreaks originate only in developing countries-an unpredictable and misleading assumption that may further deepen divisions between nations. Many countries are already under extreme political and social tensions. Should we wait until another large-scale global health crisis spreads, and a new wave of widespread mortality leads to the loss of a large percentage of the world's population, as smallpox once did-killing over 1.4 million annually worldwide in the 1960s-before we regain our solidarity as humans and our sympathy for one another and for the world? Must we wait until then to admit that it is our shared responsibility? Or is this a call to rediscover that same solidarity and unified aim to protect against diseases?

The global landscape is likely to disproportionately affect countries that are already at the bottom of the priority list for support during crises, making them increasingly vulnerable to future disease outbreaks. In the end, will the answer be closing borders? And how will that impact the world? These are questions that must be asked and carefully considered.

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Puducherry's fight for the 8-hour workday

SANTHOSH MATHEW

History does not always announce itself with grand monuments or textbook chapters. Sometimes, it hides in a simple roadside statue, quietly watching the world move on. On the Puducherry-Cuddalore Road stands such a reminder — a tribute to workers whose sacrifice gave Asia one of its most important labour rights: the 8-hour workday.

As the 90th anniversary of the Savana Mill Labour Strike is remembered, the spotlight falls on a remarkable truth-Puducherry became the first place in Asia to implement the 8-hour workday in 1937. This was not a gift from rulers. It was earned through courage, unity, and sacrifice. In the 1930s, Puducherry was under French colonial rule.

Textile mills formed the backbone of the local economy. Among them, the Savana Mill stood as a symbol of both industrial growth and human suffering. Workers toiled for nearly 14 hours a day. Wages were painfully low. Working conditions were harsh and exhausting. There were no formal rights, no protections, no voice.

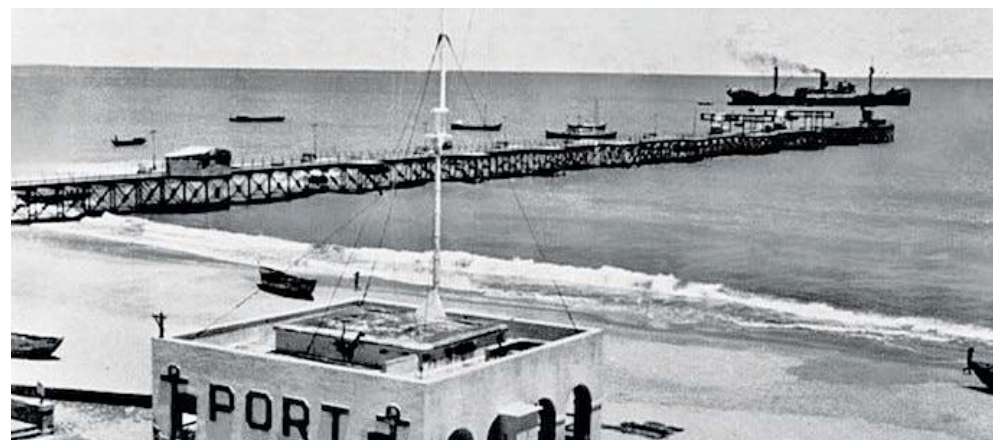
The idea of limiting work to eight hours had already stirred movements in other parts of the world. In Puducherry, it sounded almost impossible. Still, the workers chose to dream-and then to act. On July 30, 1936, the workers of Savana Mill launched a historic strike. Their demands were clear: an 8-hour workday, fair wages, and the right to form unions. This was more than a protest. It was a demand for dignity and recognition as human beings, not just as labouring hands.

The response from the French colonial administration was swift and brutal. Armed forces confronted unarmed workers. Gunfire broke out. Twelve workers lost their lives. The day entered history as a "Black Day" for Puducherry.

Families were shattered. The streets carried the silence of grief and anger. Sacrifice often becomes the turning point of history. The deaths of these workers did not crush the movement. It strengthened it. Public outrage grew. The incident exposed the deep injustice of colonial labour practices. Pressure mounted on the authorities.

The result came within a year. In 1937, Puducherry achieved what no other region in Asia had at the time — the official implementation of the 8-hour workday. This was a landmark moment. It placed Puducherry ahead of many parts of the continent in labour reform. It proved that organised resistance could force even a colonial regime to change its policies.

This achievement carries global significance. The demand for an 8-hour workday had earlier shaken the United States during the Haymarket Affair. Workers there had also faced violence



while fighting for the same cause. Puducherry's victory connected it to this global wave of labour movements. It showed that the spirit of resistance knew no boundaries-geographical or political. The Workers' Memorial on the Puducherry-Cuddalore Road stands today in honour of those who laid down their lives.

Many pass by without knowing that this place represents a breakthrough for workers across Asia. It is not just a statue. It is a symbol of one of the earliest victories for labour rights on the continent.

The 8-hour workday now feels normal. It shapes daily life across industries. Offices, factories, and institutions follow this rhythm. Behind this normalcy lies a history of struggle. The workers of Puducherry turned an impossible demand into a living reality. This 90th anniversary is not just about remembering the past.

It is about understanding the value of what was achieved. In today's world, where work patterns are changing rapidly and debates on labour rights continue, the story of Puducherry offers a powerful lesson. Rights are not permanent unless they are protected and remembered.

Puducherry's place in history deserves wider recognition. It stands as a pioneer in Asia's labour movement. It reminds us that even under colonial rule, ordinary workers could reshape systems through unity and determination.

The next time one passes that quiet statue on the Puducherry-Cuddalore Road, it is worth pausing for a moment. Those figures represent more than memory. They represent a victory that changed working life across a continent. Eight hours of work. Eight hours of rest. Eight hours to live as human beings. This simple idea became a reality in Puducherry in 1937. And that changed Asia forever.

Conclusion

The victory of Puducherry's workers did more than shorten the workday — it redefined the relationship between labour and power. It showed that even under colonial rule, organised workers could compel structural change, setting a precedent that echoed across Asia's emerging labour movements.

The 8-hour day became a foundation for modern labour rights, influencing wage structures, workplace safety norms, and the idea of work-life balance itself. Its implications endure today, as new forms of employment challenge established protections. The lesson is clear: rights are neither automatic nor permanent.

They must be defended, adapted, and renewed. Puducherry's achievement is not just history — it is a living benchmark for dignity at work.

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CONTRAPUNTO

In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies

– WINSTON CHURCHILL

Pump Primer

Govt has borne higher crude bill for two months. It should wait a while longer, to avoid stoking inflation

Uneasy lie heads burdened with crowns. More so when US and Iran are trading fire again, crude is inching up, and rumours of petrol and diesel price hikes are swirling. For the incoming CMs of Kerala, TN and Bengal, plus Himanta in Assam, this isn't the best time to start an innings. Vijay, TN's prospective CM, has promised households six free LPG cylinders per year. If domestic LPG follows the 48% hike in commercial LPG rates, TN's subsidy bill will rise by a few thousand crores. Himanta has also promised two LPG refills per household, per year.

The Iran war is equally a headache for Centre, which must balance the rising import bill with risk of inflation. Early in March, unnamed govt sources had suggested fuel prices wouldn't rise until crude crossed $130. It hasn't crossed $126 so far, and on Tuesday, despite Iran's attack on Fujairah in UAE, it was at $113. Maybe, it's not time to pass on the cost to customers yet. Also consider the consequences of a hike. A 10% increase in pump prices is estimated to push up inflation by 0.5-0.6 percentage points. Now, when analysts see inflation touching 5.2% this fiscal, even a small fuel price hike could push it too close to RBI's 6% upper limit.

Beyond abstract numbers, higher diesel prices would push up cost of transportation, making everything costlier. And higher petrol prices could dent demand for private vehicles, which picked up pace last Oct, only after a generous GST cut. In US and Europe, higher fuel prices have boosted interest in EVs, but India isn't ready for a wholesale switch to electrics yet. Meanwhile, vehicle sales are a significant contributor to Centre and state revenues. So are fuels. In fact, between 2021-22 and 2024-25, Centre and states together earned more than `30L crore from petrol and diesel sales. Crude fell in that period, but pump prices didn't. Hence, there's a case for govt to continue bearing the increased cost of crude for some more time. Blockade of Hormuz is a global problem, and it can't continue indefinitely. But inflation resulting from higher pump prices would be India's problem alone, and bringing it under control could take months, or years, with secondary costs like higher interest rates and slower growth.

Rich In So Many Ways

Indian politicians come from a delightful range of occupations

What does one make of the extraordinary feat of Martin family's winsome 'threesome', who won three assembly seats, from three parties, in two legislatures, TN and Puducherry? Lottery businessman Martin's wife, TN's richest candidate (`5,863cr, gulp), is now an ADMK legislator, their son-in-law is a TVK MLA, and their son floated his own outfit in neighbouring Puducherry to win a seat. No gawking – it's all legit. The cliché writes itself – lottery czar Martin's family hit the jackpot. Contesting and campaigning are so much about financial muscle and personal branding now, it's all kosher. Lower that eyebrow.

What's equally true is that riches of state assemblies aren't confined to fat cats. Just as rich is the interesting, even bewildering, sometimes odd, mix of people who dream big, and dare to enter the electoral fray, frightening for those with thin skins, unthinkable for those with slim means. Leave aside the brains (family parties, career netas, activists and lawyers), the beauts (superstars, sportstars, B-grade actors), the babus & cops, even the motley mix of musicians and monks. The field keeps widening. Among the most novel trades, in this round, is that of a TVK winner – a vastu expert and 'medical astrologer', who some time ago, reportedly got into a bit of a snafu over posts on astrology curing cancer. As they say, we need all kinds infused in the dizzying cocktail that's a legislature.

On a more sobering note, mothers of rape-murder victims also find themselves winners, in perhaps, a closure of sorts. But who is to argue the legislature is no place for a goat farmer, or quack, soldier or domestic help, mime artist or YouTuber, purohit or tantrik? For the software engineer, investment banker and coder. All manner of occupations fetch up. The labourer may find it beyond his reach to contest, but not so the murder undertrial, or super scamster, for whom a win could be just the ticket needed. In the diversity of what passes as 'work', neta affidavits have even had, simply, "shop rent". No matter the grievances with Indian Netadom, reality is it draws the citizen in, like only politics can.

Namaste blessing

The Indian gesture of greeting and parting, is a truly universal salutation

Jug Suraiya

Long before the Covid pandemic made physical contact with others in the form of the Western handshake a no-no for fear of infection, the namaste, the salutation of bidding 'Welcome' and 'Farewell', had a truly universal significance.

Elegant and graceful, in the true sense of the term as being full of grace, the namaste is far preferable as a gesture of goodwill to the Western custom of shaking hands, which, reasons of personal hygiene apart, only too often can turn into a contest of bone-crushing machismo, or conversely, feel like physical intimacy being taken with a dead fish, limp and damp.

Most of us perform the namaste as a matter of routine social protocol, like covering one's mouth while yawning, and not picking one's nose, at least not in full public view.

But a post doing the rounds of social media reminds us that there is a profound wealth of meaning behind the act of putting the palms of our hands together, often erroneously described as 'folding one's hands', which would require bones of plasticine pliability that can be made to assume shapes of origamic ingenuity.

secondopinion

The word Namaste is derived from 'Nama', meaning 'to bow', and 'Te', meaning 'you'.

So when we do a Namaste to someone, we are saying, through the sign language of the Anjali mudra, that we are bowing to the other.

Far from being a sign of obsequious humility, like Chinese kowtowing is said to be, the implied bow is an acknowledgment of the universal Brahmatma that, through the individual Atma, unifies all of humanity, without division of nationality, race, religion, or language.

The gesture of the namaste embodies a spiritual significance. It is a form of momentary meditation in that by conjoining our hands at a level with our heart, we are said to connect nerve circuitry, which promotes calmness and a sense of inward peace, which is emanated towards the person being so greeted.

So the next time we offer someone a namaste, we are affording ourselves, and its recipient, a glimpse on Earth of Hi heaven.

Will Dravidian Still Be Goliath?

Vijay's rise will likely fundamentally change Tamil Nadu politics, by adding new demands to the old model of social justice. Under-45 voters want upward mobility & cleaner govts, and that will require retooling the system nurtured for decades

Uday Chandra

Vijay's victory in Tamil Nadu is easy to interpret as the rise of another film star in a state in which cinematic acclaim and political success are enmeshed. It may, however, mark a more consequential shift to a post-Dravidian phase in Tamil politics. Post-Dravidian does not mean anti-Dravidian. It means that welfarism, social justice, and Tamil pride are now being detached from the duopoly of the Dravidian parties over nearly six decades.

The numbers reveal the scale of the disruption. Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam won 108 seats in the 234-member assembly, ahead of DMK's 59 and ADMK's 47. TVK, short of a majority, is reportedly reaching out to Congress (5) and PMK (4) for support. Nonetheless, TVK has already done something remarkable by breaking the longstanding view in Tamil politics that voters have no choice except DMK or ADMK.

Vote shares tell a more nuanced story. TVK secured 34.92% of total votes, ahead of DMK's 24.19% and ADMK's 21.21%. These numbers suggest that the two Dravidian parties still command a substantial base, roughly 45%. But more Tamil voters considered options beyond the Dravidian duopoly.

Compared to 2021, the combined vote share of the two Dravidian parties fell from 71% to 45%. Signs of discontent were visible even in 2024 national elections, when the duopoly polled 47% together. But then, DMK contested only 22 of the 39 seats in Tamil Nadu. This is why Vijay should not be read simply as a flash in the pan. A broader shift appears underway to a post-Dravidian politics in which a thin ideological core coexists alongside welfarism.

For comparison, let's recall the older Dravidian world of ideas. Periyar fused rationalism, anti-caste critique, linguistic self-respect, and suspicion of North Indian domination. Karunanidhi added literary culture, welfarism, and party organisation. Stalin retained this institutionalised model of social justice via a powerful cadre-based party, and an administrative welfare machine. Vijay inherits vast expectations produced by this prior history, without the ideological grammar of Dravidianism.

Voters below 45 have grown up in an atmosphere in which Dravidianism is a system more than a movement. Even as they may have benefitted from its welfare architecture, they are not bound to its founding memories. For Gen Z voters, first-time voters, and urban voters, politics is encountered through jobs, education, social media, cinema, and urban infra. These voters may value social justice, but they also want cleaner govt, upward mobility, and recognition as different or new. TVK speaks to this demographic, which is emotionally

Image: AI

Tamil, broadly secular, welfare-friendly, but impatient with establishment parties.

The geographical spread of TVK's vote supports this reading. Its surge is especially visible in Chennai and its expanding urban-peri-urban belt. It won seats such as Royapuram, Villivakkam, Anna Nagar, Thousand Lights, Avadi, Poonamallee, Ponneri, Chengalpattu, and Shozhinganallur. In Poonamallee and Avadi, TVK crossed 52% of the vote. In Ponneri, it won by more than 55,000 votes. More than symbolic victories, these wins point to a new political geography shaped by salaried work, education, real estate corridors, and everyday frustration with urban governance.

Nor was this only a Chennai story. Vijay won both Perambur and Tiruchirappalli East. In the latter, he defeated the DMK incumbent by 27,416 votes, drawing support from low-income groups and younger voters. TVK also won six of nine seats in Trichy district, reversing the DMK's 2021 sweep there. This suggests that TVK's appeal travels beyond the metropolitan middle classes. He has promised welfare without inherited party loyalty, Tamil pride without old ideological baggage, and change without absorption into a BJP-led national order.

Yet, we should guard against overstatement. TVK did not sweep Tamil Nadu evenly. Older caste blocs, minority concentrations, local notables, and alliance networks still matter. PMK's four seats, for instance, cannot be understood without its Vanniyar base in northern Tamil Nadu. For TVK, whose appeal rests on generational freshness and cross-caste aspiration, PMK is both an asset and a warning.

Congress raises a different possibility. In the old order, it survived as a junior partner attached to a Dravidian party. In a fragmented new post-Dravidian field, it may matter differently as it stabilises a new formation. After UDF's win in Kerala, alongside govts in Karnataka and Telangana, Congress is increasingly a southern party. For Vijay, Congress offers something BJP cannot: national connect without Hindi-Hindu centralisation.

Vijay's politics, in sum, may prove less confrontational with Delhi than DMK's, but it cannot afford to appear assimilated into a national ideological project. The likely post-Dravidian attitude is, therefore, negotiated federalism with secular guardrails.

If Tamil Nadu's older exceptionalism in national politics lay in the dominance of Dravidian parties, it may now lie in the resilience of Dravidian political common sense in a new post-duopoly party system. Welfare, Tamil identity, secular caution, and federal bargaining remain, albeit in a new generation.

Vijay's challenge begins now. If he fails to turn charisma into organisation, and novelty into governance, 2026 will be remembered as a spectacular interruption. If he succeeds, a new post-Dravidian future beckons.

The writer is a political analyst

When The Voice That Once Called Out "Didi" Falls Silent

Defeat has exposed in TMC a rot that runs deep. Plus, like Pawars & Yadavs, Banerjees will see intra-family strains testing political bonds. BJP will be relentless. Mamata's first test, and a tough one, will be upcoming municipal & panchayat polls

Sayantan Ghosh

She was looking tired, surrounded by central security forces who were pushing her own security detail further away, creating a distance that felt more than physical. At 71, the strain of the moment showed. Mamata Banerjee was speaking to media outside the Bhabanipur counting centre. She stood there in her white sari with the blue border, but with the drape no longer careful, as if even habit had given way under the weight of what was unfolding. She was alone too.

She was alone because, in that instant, she knew Bhabanipur was slipping from her grasp. Not just a constituency, but a space that had mirrored her journey, grown with her, carried her name like a quiet certainty.

She was alone because even as she spoke before the press, raising allegations, speaking of manipulation, of manhandling by BJP workers, questioning the role of officials and the central forces inside the counting centre of Sakhawat Memorial School, somewhere within her the truth had already settled, heavy and irreversible. The people who had seen her as one of their own, watched her rise from a young, defiant voice in the neighbourhood to CM of West Bengal, had quietly withdrawn their faith.

She was alone even as a few tried to reach her. Her personal security officer and her poll agent tried to move past the layers of security, trying to come close, to bridge that sudden, unbearable distance. But even their presence could not alter the silence that had settled around her.

She was alone because she could already see what the numbers were beginning to reveal. TMC, the party she had built up with years of struggle, with an unyielding will, was unable to cross even 90 seats in this assembly election. And beyond that room, across the state, another colour was rising, spreading with a force that felt both sudden and long in the making. The saffron wave was no longer a challenge. It had become a verdict.

She was alone because her blue-white citadel had fallen. Not gradually, not with warning, but with a finality that left little room for denial. And in that moment, surrounded by uniforms, she stood with the realisation that power, which had walked beside her for most of her life, had begun to leave her. And that the voice that once called out "Didi" had fallen silent.

The void is unprecedented in her political life. Elected first in 1984, Mamata has known nothing but the rhythms of public office for 42 years. She broke from

Image: AI

Congress in 1998 to found TMC, served as a four-time Union minister, and became CM three times. Power was not abstract for her; it was visceral, the oxygen that fuelled her relentless energy. Losing it now, when her body shows the wear of decades of street battles and her party lies in tatters, will test the very core of her being. Power's withdrawal can be crueller than its pursuit.

The immediate storm is internal. West Bengal's politics has become a marketplace of ambition, where loyalty is transactional. Ironically, TMC under Mamata pioneered aggressive poaching. Now, with BJP in govt, and known for its organisational muscle in consolidating gains, the risk of MLAs jumping ship is acute.

Many TMC legislators will face immense pressure. Holding the flock together, without the glue of ministerial berths or administrative patronage, will demand every ounce of Mamata's legendary street-fighting skills, the party she built brick by brick risks crumbling if aspiration overrides ideology.

Compounding the crisis is the fact of two power centres within TMC: Mamata and her nephew Abhishek Banerjee. The younger leader has emerged as a formidable strategist, injecting energy, but also creating parallel structures. In a family-run party, such dynamics carry the seeds of future rupture. Indian politics is littered with examples – from the Pawars to the Yadavs – where generational transitions tested familial and political bonds.

Mamata remains the active, central decision-maker, unlike some ageing patriarchs who stepped back. But keeping Abhishek's ambition aligned with her vision, will be a delicate, emotionally charged tightrope. Any perceived slight could fracture the party at its most vulnerable moment.

Defeat has exposed a rot in TMC that runs deep – from grassroots to leadership. And now, any rebuilding of the party has to be done under relentless BJP pressure. Her loyal bases have fragmented: Muslim votes split, women shifted. Upcoming municipal and panchayat polls will be the first test, where defections have already begun. At 71, against a BJP machine that is neither regional nor fatigued, the challenge is Himalayan.

In the quiet moments after the noise fades, she must answer the winds blowing through her white sari: How many more roads must she walk before she finds her way back? The fight continues, but this time, it is against time, family, party, and her own shadow. Perhaps today, Didi stands not just defeated, but quietly undone by the very world she once built with her own hands.

The writer teaches communication at St Xavier's College, Kolkata

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacredspace

The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand.

Vince Lombardi

Tough Times Don't Last; Tough People Do

Sumit Paul

Our attitude decides how far we can go. With a positive attitude, one can succeed in life; with a negative attitude, one will fail to achieve the desired level of success. When there's hope, Lady Luck smiles upon you. A negative attitude fosters hopelessness; Arjun's winning attitude made him the most successful warrior in Kurukshetra, with the support of Krishn.

Duryodhan picked up quarrels, and that led to Mahabharat. Remember, the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, not our circumstances. Urdu poet-lyricist Nida Fazli said, "Duniya na jeet pao toh haro na aap ko/ Thodi bahut toh zehan mein naarazgi rahe" – if you cannot win the world, at least, don't lose yourself/Let there be a semblance of spirit and exasperation.

Looking at every exit as being an entrance somewhere else is what we call a 'positive' attitude. When you take control of your attitude, you take control of your life. "Tough times don't last, tough people do," is often attributed to Hollywood great Gregory Peck. In short, no guts, no story.

A positive attitude is gratitude to the universe; a negative attitude is the denial of the cosmos' benevolence. Appreciate what you have been given, and you will be promoted. Focus on an ocean of positives, not a puddle of negatives. Keep your face always towards the sunshine, and shadows will fall behind you.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Adolf Hitler's flawed attitude caused the Second World War and his own downfall. All-rounder Kapil Dev Nikhanj's positively philosophical attitude in the Final of the Prudential World Cup (1983) against the redoubtable West Indies – 'we had nothing to lose, only to gain' – helped the underdog Indian team defeat Clive Lloyd's seemingly invincible West Indies team.

The legendary pugilist Cassius Clay, aka Muhammad Ali, had an attitude that he would never bow before a white because the latter's pejorative attitude towards blacks spurred him on to become God of boxing. It was Ali who said, "To be a great champion, you must believe you are the best. If you're not, pretend you are." Battles, wars, and matches are won or lost depending on attitudes of individuals involved.

Belligerent attitudes of a few heads of state have spawned wars, violence and depredation in many parts of the world. Mankind is teeming with inspiring and uninspiring experiences and episodes related to a person, country, or community's individual or collective attitude. If you look the right way, you can see that the whole world is a garden, and if you look the wrong way, the world is a desert. We say in Hindi, jaisi drishti, vaisi srishti – the world is how you perceive it.

A man sees in the world what he carries in his heart. The most important thing you'll ever wear is your attitude. Attitude, a word we use so casually today, springs from the Latin aptitudo – a state of fitness, of being naturally aligned – born from aptus, meaning 'fit' or 'suited'. In Italian, attitudine suggests the posture one assumes before the world. Be always in the thick of action. Never quit or give up because age wrinkles the body, quitting wrinkles the soul. Develop a positive attitude because that's certitude.

A Remarkable Rise, BJP Joins Bengal Club

Make it stakeholder in national narrative

0, 3, 77, 206. These four numbers of seats won by BJP in West Bengal in the four assembly elections since Trinamool Congress (TMC) came to power in 2011 tell a remarkable story. But beyond the numbers, the party's rise over 15 yrs also highlights its ability to first create a demand among the state's electorate and then tap into it. Mamata Banerjee's political skills as an angry 56-yr-old leader that helped her topple the Left Front government and that, till now, kept BJP at bay, failed to match her administrative skills in government. Didi's mixture of the Left's trademark conflation of party with all aspects of public life, and her own brand of 'minority appeasement' only served anyone willing to challenge it. BJP did, and an anti-incumbent electorate rewarded it.

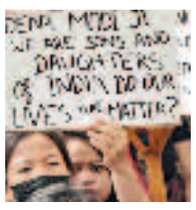
If 2021 was seen by many as BJP's failure to breach Fortress Bengal in the name of Brand Narendra Modi, the election also laid the ground for its 2026 triumph where the party became the option for a majority for multiple reasons that included — but not confined to — Hindu consolidation in a Bangladesh-bordering state. Unencumbered by TMC cadre coercion, and arguably helped by a more 'streamlined' voters' list by SIR — that may have affected TMC's Muslim support base more than others — voters chose to move out of TMC's gravitational tug. After decades of going 'ekla cholo re', Bengal has thought it fit to give joining the national political mainstream in the form of BJP governance a shot.

The incoming government has a job set out for itself. For one, after a false start in 2011, voters want a real 'poriborton'. This means many things to many people. But among non-negotiables would be getting a fix on Bengal's notorious political culture (sic) that has over decades prior to a TMC government normalised suspension of law and order at the altar of politics. Also at stake is making the state a wealth creator free of 'ransompolitik' and institutional corruption, and making it a stakeholder in the larger India economic story. All this won't happen overnight. But neither was Calcutta built — or damaged — in a day.

Don't Brush Manipur Under the Rug

Manipur is no longer in the spotlight. But it remains on simmer. Incidents in early April — including a blast that killed a 4-yr-old and his 6-mth-old sister — underscore how fragile the situation is. Meitei-Kuki tensions stretch back to the 1890s, when the princely state came under British protection and the divide-and-rule policy hardened social cleavages. Today, failure of GoI-appointed commission of inquiry to submit its report — despite 3 yrs and 4 extensions — has stalled any meaningful process of healing or institutional repair.

The conflict is a slow, combustible mix of history, land, identity and political power. Successive governments have managed it through a colonial-style equilibrium, maintaining a tense balance rather than addressing root causes. Trigger for the April 2023 violence was a Manipur High Court directive, asking the state to consider granting ST status to Meiteis. Constituting about 53% of the population and classified as OBC, Meiteis dominate the Imphal Valley. Kukis, who are STs, inhabit the hill districts that cover nearly 90% of the state's geography. Extending ST status to Meiteis would alter this balance, intensifying fears over land and political representation.



Relief camps still house thousands. Economic activity is uneven. While the inquiry report can't undo past violence, it can identify administrative failures and assign responsibility. It could also enable structural reforms: disarmament, a credible and representative peace mechanism, a calibrated approach to the ST demand that safeguards hill rights while addressing valley pressures, and a truth-and-reconciliation process. Sustainable progress will depend on confronting the past with clarity. The commission must submit its report without further delay.

JUST IN JEST

Didi does a Donald, insisting that the election has been, obviously, stolen

She Won't Go Gentle Into the Good Night

Fresh from losing West Bengal, Didi has declared with operatic conviction: 'No question of my resignation, I have not lost the election.' The line could well have been ghost-written by Donald-da, who continues to insist that the 2020 US election was stolen. The choreography is identical: deny defeat, blame the system, promise resurrection. But Mamata B's performance has a literary flourish. She channels Dylan Thomas, refusing to 'go gentle into that good night'. Instead, in typical fashion, she rages, rages against the dying of her political light, insisting that the fight was not with BJP but with EC, Emperor Palpatine to the former's Darth Vader.

Never mind the vast sartorial difference, Trump had his 'Stop the Steal' rallies, Mamata has now threatened with her 'No Raj Bhavan' press conferences and street mobilisation. Dada thunders about conspiracies; Didi hisses of 'shorojontro'. Both transform loss into theatre, defeat into defiance. Thomas' lines have become parody: 'Though wise men at their end know dark is right' — she insists the darkness is conspiracy, not mandate. So, Bengal, along with India, watches a familiar spectacle: a leader who will not concede, who insists history will repeat itself, who treats democracy as a stage where the curtain never falls. It's rage over resignation — bring out the roshogolla while we watch!

STATE OF PLAY Bengal win gives Modi strategic room shrinking for other world leaders

Delhi-Kolkata Direct Flight

Pranab Dhal Samanta

Exuding confetti

This round of assembly elections has provided Narendra Modi with significant strategic heft at a time when the leadership of most democracies are under stress and constrained by a restive, unpredictable, domestic polity. He is the only democratically elected leader to repeatedly win elections, each of which is no less significant than, say, the US midterms.

Donald Trump's ratings are at his lowest ahead of the midterms. Emmanuel Macron had a reversal in parliament soon after his re-election in 2022, then had to call for snap polls in 2024 to stabilise matters. Britain has its sixth PM in office since Modi took charge, and Germany its third chancellor. The once politically-impregnable Viktor Orbán lost in Hungary after 16 yrs, causing political tremors across Europe.

In contrast, Modi, who saw his party's tally fall by over 60 seats in 2024 Lok Sabha polls, recovered within months to win Haryana and Maharashtra assembly elections. In fact, NDA has won 7 of the 11 assembly polls post-2024, which includes ousting Arvind Kejriwal's AAP from Delhi, and now effecting the most improbable of victories against a well-entrenched Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal.

This endorsement comes at a difficult time — India's handling of Trump, Pakistani terror challenge, Operation Sindoor and the ongoing West Asia crisis. Since all these have had domestic repercussions, they can't be kept out of the electoral context.

Bihar, Bengal and Odisha account for 100-plus LS seats. Of these, two are new territories, providing extra political cushion to ensure there's no sudden drop in Modi's heft

Modi now has far more domestic political flexibility and latitude to shape India's approach in his strategic imagination. Which is why India can now proactively work on ambitious strategic deals — be it on trade, energy or defence — with more certainty than other countries.

The next big strategic gain from these polls is West Bengal itself. Modi will be the first PM in almost 50 yrs since 1977 to have his party's government in West Bengal. This marks not just an end of a political hiatus but reframing of the Delhi-Kolkata strategic continuum, a gap that has troubled many governments at the Centre, particularly because of the state's national security significance.

Just last month, Calcutta High Court pulled up the West Bengal government for not complying with its earlier order to transfer land for 127 km fencing to BSF. The court had set a March 31 deadline after it ascertained that the Centre had already paid land compensation to the state. But, to its surprise, it observed on April 22 that only land for 8 km fencing had been released.

The slugfest with the party in power at the Centre has been critical to the political identity of parties governing West Bengal. Even when the Left extended support from the outside to the UPA 1 government, it aggressively sought to dictate policy, including in strategic and foreign affairs.

But this fight had started to take larger ramifications with the Banerjee government. She asserted a sort of political autonomy that conveyed a perception that Bengal was not bound by the Union, including showing affront by impeding dialogue through bureaucratic institutions.

Modi will be the first PM since 1977 when Siddharth Shankar Ray was CM and Indira Gandhi PM to have GoI's party governing in West Bengal. This marks end of a political hiatus, and reframing of the Delhi-Kolkata strategic continuum

The Centre had to intervene and take over maintenance of the West Bengal stretch of the strategically important NH-10, Sikkim's lifeline, from the state PWD because it did not prioritise its upkeep. Similarly, strategic projects to build redundancies in and about the Siliguri Corridor have been running slow due to this fight.

This can now change. The big plan to have at least two roads connecting Siliguri with Gangtok and Guwahati, with interconnections between them plus a tunnel through the 'Chicken's Neck' itself, can get much-needed strategic urgency. This is also the first time the same party is in power in Assam and West Bengal, which will further smoothen coordination.

There's also a newly elected government in Bangladesh, which lays the ground for a fresh dynamic across three spheres: India-Bangladesh (Tripura is also BJP-governed), Bhutan-India-Bangladesh, and the larger connect with India's northeast and Myanmar.

There's now no scope for an autonomous Dhaka-Kolkata channel the way Banerjee often liked to play it with Sheikh Hasina. For Dhaka, Delhi and Kolkata are now the same, seamless diplomatic channel. This clarity to the Tarique Rahman government in Dhaka is vital at a time when a new equation is to be rebuilt.

What the results have also done is put BJP for the first time in power in four states — Maharashtra, UP, Bihar and West Bengal — with 40 or more seats in Lok Sabha. This East-West axis accounts for 210 Lok Sabha seats, of which NDA fell short of 100 in 2024, but in 2 yrs, has shored itself up by winning 3 of the 4 states. (UP goes to polls next year.) It's the state elections that have re-powered the Modi 3.0.

Finally, the West Bengal win has provided an important political backup to UP for NDA. Together, Bihar, Bengal and Odisha account for 100-plus Lok Sabha seats. Of these, two states are new territories, providing additional political cushion, if needed, to ensure there's no sudden drop in Modi's heft.

The die couldn't have been better cast for Modi to execute his strategic agenda within and outside India's borders over the next few years. There are now added tiers to Modi government's political base, conveying stability and predictability in an unstable and unpredictable global environment. It's this positioning that provides the opportunity to leverage the maximum for economic growth at a time when others fight for political survival.

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Mea Culpa, I Need to Eat Crow

Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

I need to eat crow. I predicted that Mamata Banerjee would win in West Bengal despite exit polls saying otherwise. But BJP won by a landslide, with 206 seats to TMC's 81. Banerjee herself lost by over 15,000 votes. BJP's consolidation of the Hindu vote was stunning, overwhelming all other political currents. Hindutva rules India, like it or not.

BJP has now captured the whole of eastern India. For long, strong local leaders governed in the east — Nitish Kumar in Bihar, Naveen Patnaik in Odisha, and Banerjee in West Bengal. All three are gone now, replaced by BJP.

BJP was part of the coalition re-elected to power in Puducherry. It won 3 seats for the first time in Kerala. No wonder PM Modi is smiling.

Banerjee came to power in Bengal in 2011 promising 'poriborton', or change. After 15 yrs of her government, Modi says that true poriborton has come with her departure. She ousted the Left Front that had earlier governed for 30 yrs, and that was certainly a change. But she simply did not produce enough poriborton to win a fourth time. A sluggish economy and high unemployment eroded her image. Above all, she was hit by relentless BJP accusations that she was protecting illegal Muslim migrants from Bangladesh.

She increased the Lakshmir Bhandar Yojana grant by `500 a month before the election, to `1,500 for most women and `1,700 for SC/ST women. Clearly, freebies don't guarantee re-election. Banerjee's freebies were far smaller than those showered on women before Maharashtra and Bihar state elections. But BJP's sheer sweep suggests that Hindutva beats freebies hands down.

According to provisional figures, BJP vote share rose from 38% in 2021 to 45.5% this time, while TMC's fell from 48% to about 42%. From the state's 70-71% Hindu electorate, TMC got 28-30% of Hindu votes against BJP's 65-67%. That was a phenomenal achievement in consolidating the Hindu vote that one had not anticipated. I had estimated that other parties would get 15% of the vote. They got barely 10%, with BJP gobbling their vote share too.

Nine million voters had their names struck off in SIR of the voter's roll in the state. Many will now say that this revision affected Muslims disproportionately and helped BJP win. But TMC's Mahua Moitra had said categorically during the campaign that SIR was going to be irrelevant to the outcome. Psephologist Yogendra Yadav, a declared foe of BJP, also opined that SIR did not disproportionately go against Muslim voters.

Granted, you're G.O.A.T.

In Tamil Nadu, film star Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) won a spectacular victory with 107 of 234 seats, reducing DMK in government to a pathetic 60 seats. Chief minister M K Stalin lost his seat. Some compare Vijay with M G Ramachandran, Tamil Nadu's popular CM in the 70s-80s.

But MGR was a much bigger star. He was part of the Dravidian movement against brahminical rule that ousted Congress from power in 1967. That movement was led by writers, poets and film stars, who started rural libraries and employed folk theatre. It was a veritable cultural revolution never replicated by backward-caste movements in north India.

In recent decades, Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan have dabbled in politics without giving up their careers, and flopped. But Vijay has been building up TVK for a decade. His party won 115 of the 169 local body seats it contested in 2021. Vijay gave up acting 2 yrs ago to prepare for state elections, expanding his networks. That has borne fruit.

Some view him as another Arvind Kejriwal. Remember, Kejriwal, too, came up at a time when voters were tired of traditional parties and loved a fresh face with a zeal for eliminating corruption. Kejriwal lasted a decade. Vijay looks like lasting longer.

Some others compare Vijay's rise with the Gen Z revolt in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, all of which brought fresh new faces to power. There is something to this. But in Sri Lanka, the old parties are back in power. That may not be the case in Tamil Nadu. Vijay looks like becoming a permanent feature.

In Kerala, Congress-led UDF has thrashed LDF by 102 seats to 35. Congress will now rule in three states — Kerala, Karnataka and Telangana. Despite its greatly diminished stature, it remains the leading opposition force at the national level.

In Assam, BJP-led NDA alliance won 102 of the 126 seats, a comprehensive sweep. This was aided by gerrymandering the delimitation of constituencies. That reduced the number of Muslim-majority constituencies from 35 to 23. But Hindutva would have ensured a great victory anyway. That is the story of India overall, not just Assam.

Go Meet Shoppers Where They Are

Parul Bajaj

India is shopping online more than ever before, with 280-300 mn online shoppers in 2025 accounting for $120-140 bn in ecommerce spends. With ecommerce reshaping shopper behaviour, the $15-20 bn beauty and personal care (BPC) market is seeing significant shifts.

The February 2026 BCG report, '$300 Billion Connected Commerce', reveals that digital influence and digital purchase in BPC have both grown 3× since 2021. It also reveals a paradox: 53% of BPC shoppers are digitally influenced, 33% buy online, and 6% qualify as habitual online shoppers. As digital influence and commerce continue to transform shopping habits, beauty brands, platforms and channels need to meet shoppers where they are.

Default discovery engine **Digital influence has jumped from 16% to 53% since 2021, with social media cited as the topmost source by 71% of digitally influenced shoppers. 1 in 3 offline BPC shoppers go online for research before making the final purchase and switch seamlessly between screens and stores. But horizontal marketplaces dominate in rural areas (62%) and among lower-income groups (51%), while vertical marketplaces lead in metros (53%) and among elite shoppers (49%).**

Not all buy online **Of 53% digitally influenced shoppers, 33% have purchased online in the past year. This gap widens in rural and lower-income consumers, who may be influenced online, but trust offline channels to make a purchase because of transparency of payments and ability to touch and feel products.**

No single digital consumer **The consumer landscape comprises three distinct layers. New digital shoppers (20%) are typically rural or lower-income shoppers who buy online 2-3 out of 10 occasions. Regular shoppers (57%) are aspirants from tier-2 and -3 cities, who buy online 4-6 out of 10 occasions. They prefer convenience, variety and quick delivery. Since no single channel serves the gamut of their needs, they are active across channels.**

Digitally savvy shoppers (23%) are typically affluent metro residents who buy online 7-8 out of 10 occasions. They expect the latest products, curated selections and personalised recommendations.

No channel has won yet **Channel fragmentation is the defining feature of the market today. Among new shoppers, horizontal marketplaces make up almost 70% of ecommerce spends, due to the price and wide variety of products they offer.**

Kiranas, too, win on trust, ease and quality of products. As shoppers mature, vertical platforms (47%) become their top choice for curated shopping experiences and assured quality, while quick commerce (21%) is preferred for its trending products and quick delivery.

Spot online, pick up in stores

Since no channel delivers the full bundle of needs for consumers across the board, the use of multiple shopping channels is common, especially among regular shoppers.

Q-com's the wild card **It accounts for 25% of ecommerce spends among digitally savvy shoppers. With its speed, efficiency and access to trending products, q-com has the potential to disrupt channel hierarchies faster than brands anticipate.**

BPC brands and platforms can ride this momentum and unlock value by:

Omnichannel **Focus on building omnichannel journeys that bridge digital influence with conversion. A strong digital presence is needed for discovery. But shoppers must be given the opportunity to complete a purchase through the channel of their choice. Strategies must be tailored to the needs of each segment. Horizontal marketplaces can be leveraged to acquire new shoppers, while vertical platforms can help to retain evolved shoppers.**

Focus on non-metros **Platforms and channels must focus on converting digitally influenced consumers from tier-2 and -3 cities and rural areas, into buyers, while driving new and intermediate shoppers to buy more frequently. Most platforms have been unable to build loyalty among digitally savvy customers. Cracking this code will give players the edge to stay ahead.**

India's BPC market is at an inflection point. As this dynamic landscape evolves, brands, platforms and channels that close the gap between digital buzz and actual purchase, while building consumer loyalty, will define the next decade of BPC growth.

The writer is India leader, marketing, sales and pricing practice, BCG

THE SPEAKING TREE

Kindness Towards All

SANDHYA VASUDEV

Metta Bhavana is a Buddhist practice that promotes kindness and equanimity in individuals. Positive psychology, which differs from traditional psychology by tapping into a person's potential rather than asking what is wrong with them, has adopted this practice as an intervention. A person sits in a calm environment and sends a warm prayer to his friends, family and everyone in general, including those who may not be in a comfortable relationship with him. Messages of health, well-being and safety are reiterated, addressing target groups in a calm, meditative manner, and, finally, including oneself. When practised with sincerity of purpose, the gentle vibrations reach the person and cleanse the practitioner's mind.

Practising loving-kindness meditation promotes one's overall well-being and significantly reduces stress. Key areas of the brain are activated, positive emotions are naturally generated, and the person begins to view things from a better perspective and develops resilience to bear upsets and shortcomings in life. In a world fraught with hatred and war, a niche group of people generating positive vibrations towards everyone may certainly make some difference. It is like wishing 'sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu niraamayah, sarve bhadraani pashyantu, maa kaschid dukha-bhag-bhavet' — may all be happy, free from illness, witness auspicious moments, not suffer. Let's join in.

PEAS IN A PODCAST

Wine Trips Worth Taking

Wine Access Unfiltered — the official podcast and wine club of Wine Access — thrives on exactly what wine does best: stories, place, and a little bit of personality in every pour. Hosted by Napa insider Amanda McCrossin, it's less classroom, more conversation — where bottles come with context and a sense of occasion.

In Unveiling My Top 5 Exciting Wine Destinations (2026), Amanda goes solo, and

the energy shifts in a good way. It's candid, fast-moving. She frames travel as the ultimate wine education: 'there is no substitution' for walking vineyards, tasting locally and absorbing culture. That idea anchors everything that follows.

Her picks — Portugal, Germany (pic), Mendoza (Argentina), Paso Robles (California) and Britain — aren't just name-drops. Each comes with a perspective shift. Portugal isn't only about port — it's a playground of styles. Germany breaks out of its Riesling stereotype with serious Pinot Noir. Mendoza leans into altitude and immersive tourism. Paso Robles feels experimental and community-driven. And Britain? Quietly redefining cool-climate wine.

The takeaway is clear: if you want to understand wine, don't just study it — go live it.

Chat Room

Groan Economy to Grown Economy

Apropos 'Chappal Phaad Ke, What Cost TMC' by Ujjwal Katiyar (May 5), the key question is whether BJP's sweeping victory in West Bengal is the result of yet another anti-incumbency wave, or reflects a deeper shift in voter preference towards growth, development and good governance over endless doles and subsidies. Is the electorate in Indian states beginning to express preference for political systems that promote growth and enterprise, while being wary of those that foster stagnation and lack of opportunity? Once a centre of vibrant commercial and industrial activity, Bengal has slipped into relative obscurity over the last few decades, and its innovative and commercial potential caged behind restrictive policies. It is time for it to reclaim its place among fast-growing states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh.

Chander Shekhar Dogra
Jalandhar

THE ASIAN AGE

6 MAY 2026

At the helm, Vijay to face huge challenges

A tsunami arising from a political earthquake that was hardly felt or foretold saw actor Vijay vault towards the coveted seat in historic Fort St George, which he will soon be occupying. As he makes the transition from a cinematic dream of becoming the chief minister of Tamil Nadu being fulfilled in spectacular style in his party's maiden elections, the popular matinee star may have realised that the world of politics presents a different kind of reality altogether.

The machinations for a possible coalition government combining a few small parties which appear ready to break away from their pre-poll alliance moorings and support the cinema star, whose party TVK is 10 MLAs short of a working majority, have already begun. The fact is there are many options ahead of Mr Vijay's party, but he must choose wisely lest he compromise the principled way he campaigned for bringing about a change from the old ways of Dravidian rulers. Having come to power as the agent of promised change, he must ensure that positive change does take place.

Minority governments have had their own way of surviving the political storms that came their way like Narasimha Rao's central rule from Delhi in the 1990s or even a couple of M. Karunanidhi's terms in office when J. Jayalalithaa often derided his governments for their minority status in the Assembly. The catch is such governments have always had to compromise to survive. Mr Vijay would, of course, like nothing better than being in total control but he may have to be careful around inviting the right people who will help make his rule smooth.

The simpler option may have been to invite AIADMK's support, at least from outside. That, however, seems to have been ruled out even as a new combination is being worked out...

The simpler option may have been to invite AIADMK's support, at least from outside, as Mr Vijay had soft-pedalled questions regarding that party in his campaign lines. That, however, seems to have been ruled out even as a new combination is being worked out with the five Congress MLAs, who are waiting for word from Rahul Gandhi, possibly supporting his government from outside, along with others from parties with minor representation. It would be fair to say that it might prove easier to find the numbers to form the government than to get down to the brass tacks of changing the tilt of the administration which had been serving different kinds of masters.

In having managed his fan clubs, which became more than just an adulatory association of fans of the hero of the film world as he shaped them into connecting with the grassroots, Mr Vijay has had some experience of running an organisation that did social work in the field and in emergencies. It is just that he must find a balance now in directing Tamil Nadu's weighty bureaucracy. If Ms Jayalalithaa had treated the administrative and police officers with an imperial touch, with not a word allowed or even attempted in opposition to her ideas and orders, Stalin may have given the bureaucrats a free run thus contributing to their becoming a behemoth prone to some excesses.

There is, however, considerable administrative expertise in running an industrial state like Tamil Nadu whose constraints are more to do with finances, which are already stretched, if not stressed. Delivering on his poll promises like support for women, unemployed graduates and farmers is going to cost the exchequer. Mr Vijay will not be found lacking the will to follow his instincts to be a chief minister who will not lose that touch with the people who have voted for him in the hope of obtaining a better future.

Shah's master plan won WB

The scale of the BJP's breakthrough in West Bengal is not just about an electoral victory. It's the culmination of a long, methodical political project crafted painstakingly by the saffron outfit's "Shah of strategy", Amit Shah. For a party that once struggled to find a foothold in Bengal's political culture, this moment signifies a strategic triumph built on persistence, realignment and micro-level control.

What set the Bengal campaign apart was Mr Shah's decision to virtually camp in the state, transforming the election into a hands-on, command-driven operation. To break the impregnable bastion of Mamata Banerjee's TMC, Mr Shah not only reviewed booth-level-data, but also held marathon meetings with district leaders and constantly fine-tuned saffron tactics based on feedback and ground reports. Not a single constituency was treated as peripheral; every seat became a battleground with tailored strategies.

Mr Shah's painstaking investment in booth committees paid off, as cadres were trained, monitored and mobilised with military precision. His emphasis on accountability, where local leaders were directly answerable for performance created an organisational sharpness, never seen before in Bengal. As the TMC became entangled in the SIR mess, Mr Shah silently crafted a social coalition by tapping into the discontent among SCs, tribals and a section of the OBCs. By doing so, the BJP expanded its reach beyond its traditional base. The outreach was mapped constituency by constituency with messaging focusing on local issues and grievances.

Everything Mr Shah did was data-driven micro planning. Polarisation was unleashed with strategic clarity. By zeroing in on ideological contrasts and foregrounding issues of identity, governance and corruption, the BJP consolidated large segments of the Hindu vote and capitalised on divisions and disenchantments within the Opposition's support bases. The narrative that "Bengal's demography was threatened" by large-scale illegal immigration of Bangladeshis was reinforced through a tightly-coordinated campaign machinery. He also countered the "outsider" tag pinned on the BJP by Mamata's Trinamul Congress. Regional faces were elevated, cultural symbols were invoked and a rhetoric was crafted to match Bengal's sensibilities. The Union home minister strategically leveraged the deployment of Central armed forces to shape the electoral environment. Mr Shah's model of camping on the ground, going through details, synchronising organisation with narrative and the selection of candidates demonstrates how modern elections are won by mastering every layer of planning and execution.

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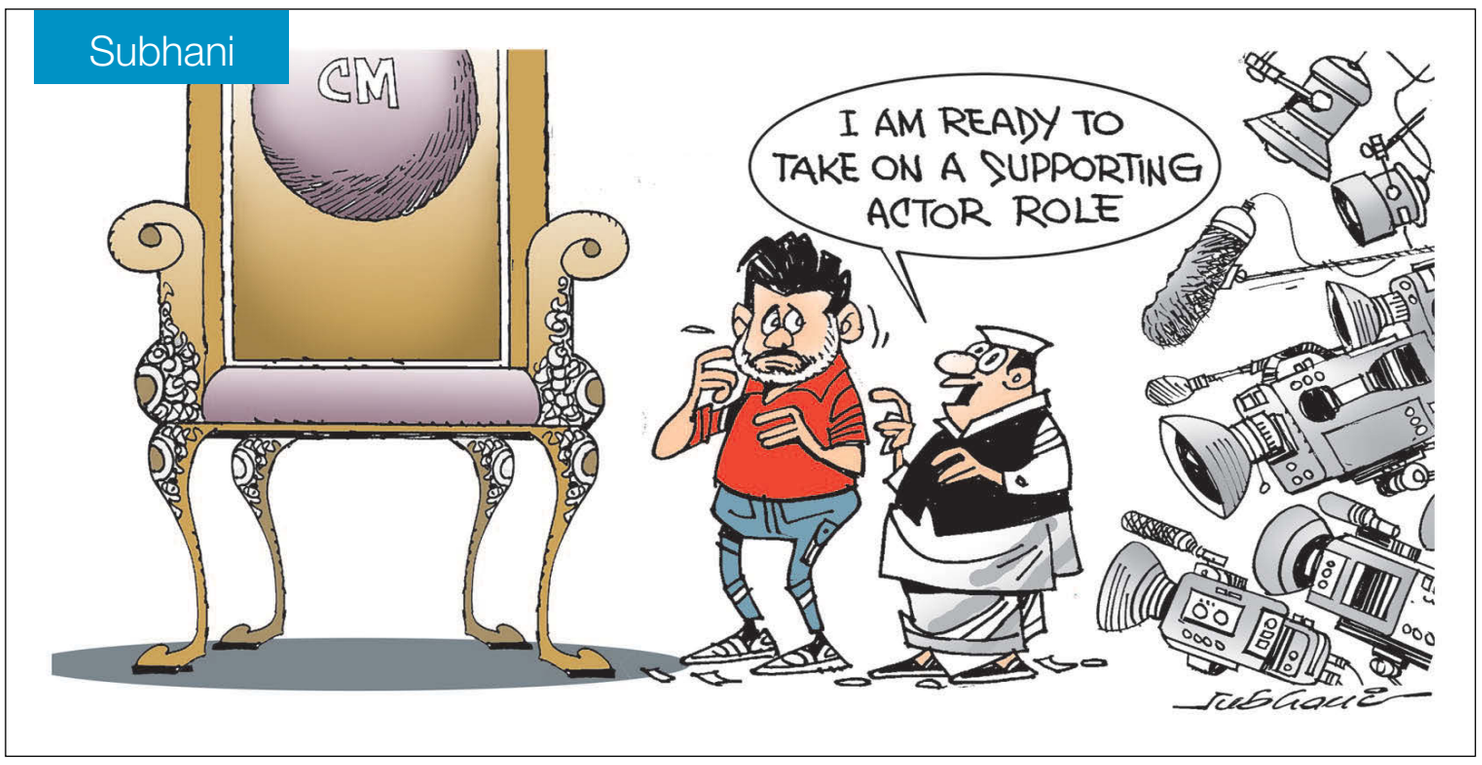
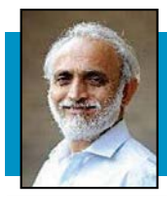


A vote for change, but with plenty of caveats



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

The pattern appears to be that wherever the BJP comes to power, whether it is in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and now in Assam, it has dodged defeat, and not always in a fair manner

The Assembly elections in the East (West Bengal and Assam) and in the South (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry) have shown a clear pattern. Some ruling parties have been displaced: the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal, the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front in Kerala, and the DMK in Tamil Nadu. Assam is the only state and Puducherry the only UT where the ruling BJP or its NDA allies retained power. Assam can be seen as an anomaly, but it is not.

The Congress failed to be an alternative. In West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, there was a visible and assertive alternative: the BJP in West Bengal, the Congress-led United Democratic Front in Kerala, and matinee idol Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) in Tamil Nadu. If there had been no Vijay on the scene, the DMK would have returned to power because the AIADMK had reduced itself to an appendage of the right-wing BJP. The question remains open whether Vijay's votes would have gone to the AIADMK or DMK? Where there was a visible and substantive option, people had unhesitatingly chosen the alternative. And this is what democratic politics is all about.

The BJP's victory in West Bengal is sullied. Whether it is the case or not, the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls, and the 2.7 lakh deletions, and the presence of 70,000 Central paramilitary forces, with armoured vehicles to boot, has make the BJP's victory quite distasteful. All that the BJP folk can say, echoing Maradona's "Hand of God", is that neither the large-scale deletions from the electoral rolls nor the presence of the Cenytral forces played any role in the party's victory. They will have a hard time convincing themselves and convincing others too that this victory was entirely due to their own efforts. The BJP's historic electoral triumph in West Bengal is not flawless, to say the least.

There is little doubt that Mamata Banerjee had to lose because she had a long enough innings at the helm. Even if there was no serious discontent, the people had every right to choose change. Apparently, the people of West Bengal had learnt that it is not good to have a party in power for too long. They did not want to commit the mistake they had made with the CPI(M)-led Left front government which had lasted for 34 years. Ms Banerjee made the mistake that most popular leaders do -- relying too heavily on her own charisma, and her virtues of a street-fighter. The TMC remained a brittle organisation because she was the sole anchor of the party. Everyone else in the party, whatever their abilities, chanted her name almost relentlessly. The incantation lost its spell due to sheer repetition.

The BJP's triumph in West Bengal poses a major democratic challenge. The pattern appears to be that wherever the BJP comes to power, whether it is in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and now in Assam, it has dodged defeat, and not always in a fair manner. Of course, Rajasthan is an exception. The BJP's persistence to hold on to power once it gets to win an election is a disturbing phenomenon. It shows manipulative tactics on the BJP's part to elude electoral defeat. The means it adopts aren't above suspicion. The BJP's totalitarian tactics often cast a long shadow over its democratic credentials.

The BJP can always argue that it is unreasonable to expect that it should lose an election once in a while to refurbish its democratic credentials. It can argue that similar objections were not brought up against the Left Front for its unusually long stay in office. Perhaps it would have been better both for West Bengal and for the Left Front if the coalition had lost an election or two. But it cannot be made a precondition for the credibility of the democratic system. It should not come as a surprise if the BJP were to stay on in power in West Bengal as it has done for a decade and more.

As a legitimate victor, the BJP would be justified in spreading its toxic ideology of intolerance, and the suppression of dissent, which forms part of its inherent ideology. Here too the counter-argument would be made that is indeed what the Left Front had done in the state during its 34 years in power. The saving grace of the Left, the TMC, and of the Congress in general is that they did not subvert the system in the manner that the BJP usually does. It is far too evident that the Election Commission's SIR exercise is a nod to the BJP government at the Centre. The EC did not make any effort to make it appear fair and objective. The extensive use of Central forces was done as an intimidatory tactic by the Narendra Modi government rather than as a precautionary measure to ensure peaceful voting.

In Kerala, the CPI(M)'s chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan was always on unsteady ground. His victory in 2021, rare for any party in Kerala, was not a stamp of political immortality. Even though the Congress in the state was not as united as it should have been, its presence was enough for the people to have brought it in. There will be enough inner-party squabbles in the Congress in Kerala because that is what the Congress is. It is constantly displaying the symptoms of feuds, in power and out of power, as can be seen in Karnataka. Among the results of the four major states, the people's verdict in Kerala is the most rational one.

The irrational element in Tamil Nadu is much too evident. The people have taken the risk of choosing an untested Vijay and his TVK. The choice may turn out well, but it remains an unknown factor as it was in the run-up to the elections. But Tamil Nadu's voters are not as irrational as they appear to be. They trust their leaders, and what the TVK's victory reveals is their trust in Vijay. It is not based on mere adulation, but is based on a clear assessment of Vijay's character and his potential as a leader. They trusted MGR and Jayalalithaa in a similar manner.

And they did not hesitate to defeat Jayalalithaa when they felt the need to do so. So, Vijay cannot take his electoral victory and the people's trust behind it at face value. He must prove himself in office. The electoral victory is an opportunity, not a reward for his popularity.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

INDIA NEEDS LEFT

For the first time since 1977, there shan't be a Communist party government nationwide in any state. Kerala was the last fort of the Left which they lost. There may be so many reasons for the defeat like poor strategy, a gold scam in a temple and dissidents in the CPI(M) but the relevance of Left philosophy in Indian politics holds good to this day. None can deny the contributions made by the first Leftist CM E.M.S. Namboodiripad in Kerala in the fields of education, land reforms and social justice. Or the Jyoti Basu government's Operation Barga or even V.S. Achyutanandan's steadfast leadership. The Left is the voice of workers, farmers, and the common man and woman must, therefore, reinvent themselves for the good of Indian politics.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

'NEW BENGAL'

THE RECENT sweeping victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party in West Bengal marks a significant turning point in the state's political landscape. For decades, West Bengal has been associated with strong regional and ideological loyalties, making such a decisive shift both remarkable and worthy of deeper reflection. This outcome reflects a combination of factors—voter aspirations for change, effective campaigning, and the ability of the party to expand its grassroots presence in a state where it once had limited influence. It also underscores the evolving nature of Indian democracy, where electoral outcomes are increasingly shaped by development narratives, governance expectations, and national political currents.

Jubel D'Cruz
Mumbai

WALKOVER IN '29?

THE RESULTS of the five state elections have significantly bolstered the BJP's political standing across India. With commanding victories in West Bengal, Assam and Puducherry, the party has demonstrated its growing national reach and electoral strength. The INDIA bloc has suffered a major setback, managing to secure a win only in Kerala. The defeats of key allies TMC and DMK have weakened the bloc's effectiveness, as they were among its strongest voices.

N. Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

After losing its last bastion, can Left script revival story?

K.J. Jacob

The exit of the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front government in Kerala after the 16th Assembly election ushers in an era when for the first time in a little over six-and-a-half decades the Communists are not in power in any of India's UTs and states. The questions now being asked are: What went wrong for the LDF? Has Kerala, which elected the first Communist government in the world, shown the comrades the door for good?

The LDF ended the revolving door policy in Kerala when its government under chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan returned to power for a second consecutive time in 2021. It was hoping to score a hat-trick victory in 2026 under him on the strength of development, welfare programmes, massive infrastructure projects completed and work in the health and education sectors accomplished in the last 10 years. The projects did in fact change the life of the average Keralite.

One of the strengths of Leftists all over the world has been to set a narrative of their engagement. The LDF, however, failed to weave one around the need to continue with the work of the previous two governments. The campaign slogan of the LDF asked "Who else, but us?", but named only completed projects, not ongoing ones and it also did not suggest new ones that required an LDF government at the helm.

The UDF, on the other hand, displayed unusual deftness going about its election campaign. It dismissed the LDF development story, making it look very usual and only to be expected. It rejected advances in fiscal management made by LDF despite strangulation by the Union government, complaining of empty government coffers even with no data to back its claims. Even the remarkable upgrade of the healthcare sector was tarnished by calling attention to the occasional slip in the massive system.

Having thus pulled apart its performance, UDF leaders talked up their own agenda. As chairman of UDF, Opposition leader and frontrunner to the CM's post V.D. Satheesan successfully sold people ideas to generate revenue and projects to "rebuild the state" though he presented no cohesive plan for these.

The UDF, however, had its ear to the ground and launched a propaganda campaign based on the shortcomings of the leaders of the LDF. There was deep disenchantment among a large section of party workers about Mr Vijayan's purportedly arrogant style of functioning. The controversy over payments his daughter received for alleged services rendered to a controversial mineral sand processing company in Kerala was also something many could not accept. More so, because neither Mr Vijayan nor his daughter provided any explanation for her actions. The ill-conceived high-speed rail project connecting the northern and southern parts of the state was yet another sore point. Allegation of favouritism by senior leaders in the party hierarchy was another.

The UDF was smart enough to cash in on each of these allegations. It sold the horror story of the party's decimation in West Bengal to the partymen themselves. The narrative was that the party was moving in the same direction and would meet the same fate should it be allowed to continue in government. And Mr Satheesan publicly announced a year ago that he had started enlisting fellow-travellers from among them for a pro-UDF movement. He got the right people to endorse this theory.

Poet and long-time fellow traveller K. Sachidanandan, at present president of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, was the first to fire a salvo saying he would prefer the LDF to sit in the Opposition. It reverberated across Left circles. Mr Satheesan added a cloak of respectability to the rebels, saying he had advised UDF workers to be nice to "good Communists" for they will vote for the UDF. And this good Communist vs bad Communist narrative actually worked, razing several fortresses the CPI(M) held for long. The Left failed to counter this drift by convincing leaders that an India with no Communist government was less than ideal.

The UDF also used to the hilt the alleged role of a CPI(M) leader in the theft of gold at Sabarimala while president of the Travancore Devaswom Board, highlighting the failure of the party to take action against him. The LDF inadvertently fed this narrative. Can it deny the fact that it got the TDB to organise an Ayyappa conference ostensibly to draw investment for development of the hill temple but it turned out to be a bid to build a bridge with the Hindu community?

Even signing the PM-SHRI project in a clandestine manner after opposing it for long compromised LDF. The CM's open endorsement of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam general secretary Vellappally Natesan did no good either, for as head of the organisation of the powerful Ezhava community, Mr Natesan had earned notoriety for his hate speeches against the Muslims and Christians. It was indeed an attempt to pander to the Hindu vote by the LDF. But it presented the UDF with enough ingredients about a narrative around a CPM-BJP deal in Kerala. It ended up undermining the growing support for the Leftists among Muslims.

The West Bengal spectre now stares the Left in the eye in Kerala. It will take a meaningful soul search and course correction for the party to not go down the same road in the state.

LIVE RICH
FINANCIAL Chronicle
NEW DELHI | WEDNESDAY | 6 MAY 2026

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	77,017.79	-0.33
Nifty 50	24,032.80	-0.36
S&P 500*	7,249.89	0.68
Dollar (₹)	94.85	-0.06
Pound Sterling (₹)	128.91	-0.09
Euro (₹)	111.27	0.26
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	150,335▲996	0.67
Brent crude ($/bbl)*	110.38	-3.55
IN 10-Yr bond yield	7.016	-0.10
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.426	-0.02

* As of 8:30 PM IST

M&M posts 48% jump in Q4 net to ₹5,259.9 cr

Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M) on Tuesday reported a 48.5 per cent jump in consolidated profit after tax at ₹5,259.91 crore of fourth quarter of FY26 from ₹3,541.85 crore in same period of previous fiscal year, primarily driven by its auto and farm sectors. Consolidated revenue from operations in the fourth quarter stood at ₹54,891.55 crore, as against ₹42,585.67 crore in the year-ago period, it added.

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Indian pharma majors plan to invest big in US

Remains biggest market for Indian generic drug products by sales

S. UMAMAHESHWAR
NATIONAL HARBOR, (US), MAY 5

GLOBAL PLAY

- Lupin, Aurobindo Pharma, Sun Pharma, Dr Reddy's, others derive 30% of their revenue from US.
- Hyderabad-based Divi's Laboratories supplies active pharma ingredients to major American pharma companies.
- Last week, Sun Pharma announced a $12-bn deal to acquire New Jersey-based Organon & Co.
- In last one year, Indian pharma companies expanded their footprint in US either through acquisition or by constructing new mfg facilities.

Total stock of FDI from India to US was $16.4 bn, which supported about 70,800 jobs, $313 mn in R&D spending and $1.5 billion worth of exports.
— BRANDON REMINGTON, US deputy undersecretary, Department of commerce

Top Indian pharmaceutical companies, including at least three from Hyderabad, are all set to announce major investments to set up new facilities in the United States during the 2026 SelectUSA Investment Summit here on Tuesday.

According to sources, 12 Indian companies are going to announce their investment plans in the United States during the Investment Summit. Of these, eight are from the top 15 pharma companies in India.

The United States is the biggest market for Indian generic drug products by sales. Lupin, Aurobindo Pharma, Sun Pharma, and Dr Reddy's Laboratories are top players, with some deriving over 30 per cent of their revenue from the US. Hyderabad-based Divi's Laboratories supplies active pharma ingredients to major American pharma companies. Last week, Sun Pharmaceutical Industries had announced a $12-billion deal to acquire New Jersey-based Organon & Co.

In the last one year, Indian pharma companies such as Zydus Lifesciences, Syngene International, Thirumalai Chemicals, Stallion Lab have expanded their footprint in the US either through acquisition or by constructing new manufacturing facilities.

Several US governors, meanwhile, pitched their respective states for investment from Indian entrepreneurs during an India Reception hosted by the Confederation of Indian Industries at the SelectUSA Investment Summit.

While Delaware governor Matt Meyer emphasised on business-friendly ecosystems in his state, Maryland Governor Aruna Miller focused on her state's diversity, with a special reference to a large Indian diaspora.

According to Brandon Remington, US deputy undersecretary (policy and international trade administration) in the department of commerce, the total stock of foreign direct investment from India to the United States was approximately $16.4 billion, which supported about 70,800 jobs, $313 million in research and development spending and $1.5 billion worth of exports.

Biocon founder Kiran picks niece Claire as successor

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MAY 5

BIOCON founder Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw will continue to chair till Claire assumes.

CLAIRE, 37, serves as founder and CEO of Bicara Therapeutics, a biotech company incubated by Biocon.

- Claire first getting inducted into directorship, then vice chair before assuming the chair.
- SBiocon plans to invest in Biocon Biologics (BBL) by way of purchase of equity shares of the BBL.
- Company shares close 2.36% up at ₹368.90 with m-cap of ₹59,795 cr.

Biopharmaceutical company Biocon's shares gained more than 2 per cent on Tuesday coinciding with reports that founder Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw has picked niece Claire Mazumdar as her successor.

Claire, 37, serves as founder and chief executive of Bicara Therapeutics, a biotech company incubated by Biocon. Bicara was listed on Nasdaq in 2024and valued at approximately $1.47 billion.

Claire holds a degree in Biological Engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an MBA from Stanford Graduate School of Business, and a PhD in cancer biology from Stanford School of Medicine.

According to reports the transition will be gradual and Biocon founder Kiran Mazumdar- Shaw will not be hanging her boots soon, with Claire first getting inducted into directorship, then vice chair before assuming the chair.

Biocon is a global biopharmaceutical company transforming access to healthcare through affordable innovation with focus on three core therapeutic areas - diabetes, oncology and immunology.

Meanwhile, Biocon informed stock exchanges of scheduled meeting on May 7 to consider investment in Biocon Biologics (BBL), an unlisted material subsidiary, by way of purchase or acquisition of equity shares of BBL through issuance and allotment of fully paid-up equity shares.

VI appoints Birla as non-executive chair

New Delhi, May 5: Aditya Birla group chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla will now steer the debt-ridden Vodafone Idea as its new non-executive chairman, the company said on Tuesday.

He will replace Ravinder Takkar, who has stepped down from the position but will continue to assist Birla as non-executive vice-chairman, according to a regulatory filing.

The board has also approved the appointment of Takkar as the non-executive vice chairman.

Birla had, on several occasions, given up hope of continuing the operations of Vodafone Idea following the Supreme Court order in 2019 on the company's adjusted gross revenue (AGR) dues.

The AGR dues of around ₹53,000 crore were on top of the debt that company had accrued by then. However, the telecom company received relief from the apex court last year. — *PTI*

Cabinet gives nod to ₹18,100-cr creditline for MSMEs, airlines

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, MAY 5

Amid mounting economic pressures linked to the ongoing West Asia conflict, the Union Cabinet on Tuesday cleared a revamped Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) with an outlay of ₹18,100 cr to facilitate additional credit flow of up to ₹2.55 lakh crore to stressed sectors without requiring fresh collateral.

Briefing the media, IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said sectors such as MSMEs and airlines have been affected by disruptions linked to West Asia crisis, including higher operational costs and supply chain uncertainties.

The Cabinet also approved two new semiconductor manufacturing projects under the India Semiconductor Mission, with an investment of over ₹3,936 cr to reduce dependence on imports.

The two projects are expected to generate employment for around 2,230 people. With these approvals, the number of projects under India Semiconductor Mission rises to 12, with cumulative proposed investments reaching approximately ₹1.64 lakh crore.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES

PRO-EU PM OF ROMANIA LOSES NO-TRUST VOTE

Bucharest, May 5: Romania's Parliament on Tuesday voted to oust liberal Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan in a motion of no confidence initiated by the Social Democrats and the far right, deepening political turmoil in the EU and Nato country bordering Ukraine.

The move by the left wing Social Democrats (PSD), Romania's biggest party, to join with the far right to file the motion drew criticism that they were legitimising a surging far right. The motion received 281 votes in the 464-seat Parliament.

EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS IN MALI CONCERN FOR UN

Geneva, May 5: The United Nations voiced grave concern Tuesday over reports of extrajudicial killings allegedly conducted by the security forces in Mali, now plunged into crisis.

The April 25-26 attacks by Tuareg separatists and Al-Qaeda-linked jihadists saw the groups capture the key northern town of Kidal.

Defence minister Sadio Camara was killed by a car bomb at his residence.

"We are deeply troubled by the worsening human rights situation across Mali", UN human rights office spokesman Seif Magango told reporters in Geneva.

DRONE ATTACK: SUDAN, ETHIOPIA TRADE BARBS

Khartoum, May 5: Sudan and Ethiopia traded accusations after a drone attack on the war-torn nation's capital, Khartoum, that's ratcheted up tensions between the African neighbours.

The army-aligned Sudanese government will recall its ambassador to Ethiopia for consultations, foreign minister Mohieddin Salem said.

He said the move followed a raid on Khartoum's international airport he alleged originated from Ethiopia.

US says Iran truce holds despite exchange of fire

Trump says Iran 'should wave the white flag of surrender'

ISRAEL COURT EXTENDS GAZA FLOTILLA ACTIVISTS' DETENTION BY SIX DAYS
An Israeli court on Tuesday extended the detention of two foreign activists taken from a Gaza-bound flotilla by six days, a lawyer representing them said. Spanish national Saif Abu Keshek and Brazilian Thiago Avila appeared before a court in Ashkelon for their second hearing.

POLICE PROBE ARSON ATTACK AT FORMER LONDON SYNAGOGUE
London police said Tuesday they were investigating a new arson incident targeting the Jewish community after a blaze at a former synagogue. The news came as Prime Minister Keir Starmer gathered public figures for talks on a response to what he called a "crisis" after a series of antisemitic attacks.

FIRST RUSSIAN OIL ARRIVES IN JAPAN SINCE IRAN WAR: MEDIA
Japan has taken delivery of its first shipment of oil from Russia since global supplies were choked off by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz at the start of the Iran war, reports said Tuesday. A tanker carrying crude that was produced as part of a Sakhalin-2 natural gas development project reached the coast of Imabari in western Japan and started offloading to a refinery on Tuesday.

Iranians walk past a huge billboard carrying the image of the late Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, assassinated in a military attack by the US and Israel on Iran, in a street in Tehran on Tuesday. — *AFP*

Washington, Cairo,, May 5: The United Arab Emirates said it was under attack from Iranian missiles and drones on Tuesday, even as Washington said a shaky ceasefire was intact despite an exchange of fire the previous day as US forces attempted to force open the Strait of Hormuz.

The US military said it had destroyed six Iranian small boats, as well as cruise missiles and drones, after President Donald Trump sent the navy to escort stranded tankers through the strait in a campaign he called "Project Freedom".

US defense secretary Pete Hegseth said the operation to protect commercial ships was temporary and the four-week-old truce was not over. "We're not looking for a fight," he told a press conference. "Right now the ceasefire certainly holds, but we're going to be watching very, very closely."

Iran fired missiles at US ships on Monday and attacked the UAE, a key regional ally of Washington, with missiles and drones.

Shortly after Hegseth spoke on Tuesday, the UAE's defence ministry said its air defences were again dealing with missile and drone attacks coming from Iran.

President Donald Trump on Tuesday dismissed Iran's military capability and said Tehran "should wave the white flag of surrender" but added that it is too proud to do so.

Trump told reporters in the Oval Office that Iran's military has been reduced to firing "peashooters" and that Tehran privately wants to make a deal despite its public sabre-rattling.

"They play games, but let me just tell you, they want to make a deal. And who wouldn't, when your military is totally gone?" he said.

The Gulf Arab state's foreign ministry said in a statement that the attacks were a serious escalation and posed a direct threat to the country's security, adding that the UAE reserved its "full and legitimate right" to respond.

There was no immediate comment on that from Iran. — *Reuters*

UK PM warns Iran over Jews

London, May 5: Prime Minister Keir Starmer warned Iran against encouraging antisemitism in Britain, saying UK authorities are investigating whether a foreign state was behind some of the recent attacks on the country's Jewish community.

Starmer issued his warning at a meeting on Tuesday with community leaders about the threat of antisemitism, just after counter-terrorism police said they were investigating an arson incident at a former synagogue in east London.

Britain's 3,00,000 Jews have faced a spike in antisemitic violence since the Oct. 7, 2023 attacks on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, and concern flared anew last week after the stabbing of two men in North London, which police declared a terrorist incident.

"One of the lines of inquiry is whether a foreign state has been behind some of these incidents. Our message to Iran or to any other country that might seek to foment violence, hatred or division in society, is that it will not be tolerated," he said. — *Bloomberg*

Scientist transformed genetics' understanding

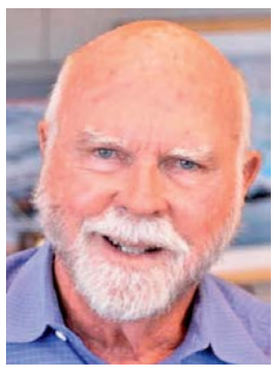
Venter, decoder of human genome, dies

Washington, May 5: J. Craig Venter, the scientist who mapped the first draft of the human genome and transformed our understanding of genetics, passed away on April 30, 2026, at the age of 79. The J. Craig Venter Institute announced that he died in San Diego after being hospitalised due to complications from recent cancer treatment.

During the 1990s, Venter challenged the pace of the publicly funded Human Genome Project. Instead, he introduced a faster sequencing method through his company, Celera Genomics.

As a result, in 2000, both teams jointly announced that they had decoded the 3.1 billion DNA base pairs that form the blueprint of human life. Subsequently, the project declared the genome complete in 2003.

At the time, Venter emphasised that decoding the genome would not diminish humanity. Rather, it would deepen scientific curiosity and uncover new biological mysteries.



John Craig Venter

Indeed, his work opened new frontiers in medicine. Scientists began identifying genetic links to rare diseases as well as common conditions such as heart disease and cancer.

His research helped uncover how genetic mutations influence disease risk, paving the way for more precise diagnostics and treatments.

Earlier in life, Venter served in the US Navy during the Vietnam War. This experience profoundly shaped his perspective, sparking a lifelong curiosity about the complexity and fragility of human life. Consequently, he pursued research into how cells function collectively to sustain life.

As reported by *The Hindu*, Venter also contributed significantly during his time at the National Institutes of Health, where he helped develop rapid gene identification techniques.

Later, he became the first individual to publish his own genome sequence, enabling researchers to explore inherited traits and disease risks more closely.

He advanced the field of synthetic biology by leading a team that created a bacterial cell controlled by laboratory-synthesised DNA. — *Agencies*

2 HANTAVIRUS CASES CERTAIN, CONFIRMS WHO

Geneva, May 5: Two hantavirus cases have been confirmed and five others are suspected among people on a cruise ship stuck off Cape Verde, including three who have died, the WHO said Tuesday.

The World Health Organisation said it was trying to contact passengers on an April 25 flight between Saint Helena and Johannesburg, taken by one of the sickened cruise ship passengers, who died the next day. "As of 4 May 2026, seven cases (two laboratory confirmed cases of hantavirus and five suspected cases) have been identified." including three deaths, one critically ill patient and three individuals reporting mild symptoms," the United Nations health agency said. — *AFP*

US prepared for China visa curbs

Washington, May 5: China is slowing its efforts to repatriate Chinese nationals who are in the US illegally, a senior Trump administration official told *Reuters*, warning that Washington was prepared to increase travel restrictions on the country if Beijing didn't reverse course. The new US threat toward China comes just days before President Donald Trump's planned May 14-15 visit to Beijing, where, among other issues, he is expected to raise the deportation issue during meetings with his counterpart Xi Jinping.

The trip is an important one for Trump, who is hoping to win trade concessions from Beijing that he can present to voters ahead of November's midterm elections that polls suggest could deliver losses for the president's Republican party.

Since returning to the White House early last year, Trump has threatened tariffs and sanctions on numerous countries for failing to accept deportees, a central pillar of his campaign for the White House and hard-line immigration policies.

China for years has resisted US requests to take back tens of thousands of its citizens who have overstayed or illegally entered the country.

When Trump took office, China had suggested it was willing to repatriate "confirmed Chinese nationals". — *Reuters*

THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.
Samuel Beckett

Goa's draft AI policy: Promising on paper, but can it deliver?

The State government's draft AI Policy 2026 has been kept open for public scrutiny and suggestions. At first glance, this policy appears to be an ambitious attempt to integrate artificial intelligence into Goa's development narrative. It deserves credit for recognising the scale of the opportunity, and for trying to shape it early. However, ambition on paper is the easy part. The tougher question is whether the state can translate this vision into something that works on the ground, without losing sight of ethics or leaving people behind.

At the heart of the policy is the idea of turning Goa into a "Responsible AI and Applied Innovation Hub." It's a sensible goal, and the language around ethical, inclusive, citizen-first AI echoes global thinking on the subject. Interestingly, the policy doesn't treat AI as an abstract concept because it ties it to governance by promising tools that are transparent and multilingual. In a state as linguistically layered as Goa, that matters.

Chatbots in Konkani, Hindi, and English, along with AI-led grievance systems, aren't flashy ideas; they're the trends in modern-day communication, ones that can make everyday interactions with the system more efficient. The push to build an AI-ready workforce is another strong point.

Preparing 50,000 people and pushing for AI certification across all technical graduates by 2028 is a monumental task. Also interesting is the attention given to Konkani, especially the idea of building a dedicated language model. That choice feels great because the focus remains on identity while walking the path of new technology.

Another important aspect is the fact that the policy focuses on sectors that matter most like coastal systems, healthcare and tourism. Tools like AI-based fisheries advisories, more efficient tourism management and stronger environmental monitoring are relatable to the Goa ecosystem and could make a noticeable difference if they're carried forward properly.

That being said, there are gaps too that are hard to ignore. Many of the targets like attracting global AI companies within a tight timeframe, appear overambitious in Goa because without the right infrastructure, investment climate and sustained engagement with industry, they risk remaining more aspirational than achievable.

The ethical questions are even more pressing. The policy appears to have been within the framework of data protection laws, but that doesn't seem convincing because technology in areas like healthcare or environmental management brings real risks around privacy and misuse. As part of the safeguards, there have to be regular audits outlined with clear lines of responsibility and meaningful public scrutiny.

There's also the question of access. Digital inclusion is mentioned, but the reach becomes a suspect. For communities with limited digital literacy or access, AI-driven systems can become barriers. If the rollout isn't carefully managed, the policy could deepen divides instead of closing them.

Finally, much will depend on how the governance structure functions. A dedicated AI Advisory Council is a good start, but its effectiveness will hinge on whether it has real authority, adequate resources and the independence to question decisions when needed.

The blueprint of the Goa AI Policy 2026 is high on promise and makes interesting reading, but, as seen in the past, mere blueprints can't deliver results; execution does. The real measure of success will be whether these ideas translate into tangible improvements in people's lives, without any compromises. If that balance can be achieved, the State could set a shining example with this document. If not, the policy risks becoming another masterpiece that promised more than it delivered.

OPEN SPACE ››

Even after good rainfall, Goa still faces water shortage

We have entered the month of May with a quiet but serious warning sign of shrinking water levels in the reservoirs. With key dams like the Selaulim dam dipping below half capacity, the state faces a familiar pre-monsoon anxiety of whether taps will keep running until the rains arrive. Rapid urbanization, a surge in high-end housing projects are putting unprecedented pressure on Goa's resources. The expansion of gated communities and luxury villas, many with private pools and landscaped gardens, has significantly increased per-household consumption. One of the most effective solutions is mandatory rainwater harvesting. Every new housing project, especially large villas and apartment complexes should be required to install systems that capture and store monsoon rain. Goa receives heavy rainfall during the monsoon, yet much of it runs off into rivers and eventually the sea. Capturing even a fraction of this water could significantly ease summer shortages. Goa's landscape is dotted with wells, ponds, and springs that once served as reliable water sources. Restoration of these traditional systems can reduce dependence on government water supply. A strategy that combines conservation and responsible real estate development is the need of the hour.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

Religious pluralism: An ordained norm

The Decree of 1880 marked a decisive shift from ecclesiastical influence towards legal recognition of plural religious practices

›The writer is a Doctoral Researcher working under the Alliance of European Universities and has presented his research works at various Academic Conferences.

ADV MOSES PINTO

It has often been asserted in contemporary discourse that the legacy of Portuguese rule in Goa is inseparable from the historical experience of religious coercion associated with the Inquisition.

While such historical episodes cannot be ignored, it must equally be acknowledged that the trajectory of colonial governance in Goa witnessed a gradual legal transformation.

This transformation is most notably reflected in the Decree of 1880, formally known as the "Código de Usos e Costumes dos Hindus Gentios de Goa", which marked a decisive shift from ecclesiastical influence towards legal recognition of plural religious practices.

Recognition of custom

By virtue of the 1880 Decree, marriages solemnised according to Hindu religious rites were accorded full civil recognition. It was further provided that non-Christian communities were entitled to observe their usages and customs, subject only to considerations of public order and morality.

This legal framework did not merely tolerate religious diversity; it institutionalised it within the civil law system. It represented an acknowledgement by the colonial administration that personal laws and religious practices could not be subsumed entirely within a uniform ecclesiastical framework.

Canonisation and conduct

It must also be noted that the figure of Saint Francis Xavier occupies a position of profound historical and religious significance in Goa. His life is widely associated with missionary activity, education, and the propagation of faith through ecclesiastical institutions established during the sixteenth century.

Within the framework of Catholic theology, sainthood is not conferred on the basis of temporal authority or coercive power, but upon the recognition of virtuous life, devotion, and the performance of acts deemed exemplary within the faith.

The process of canonisation involves rigorous scrutiny by ecclesiastical authorities, including verification of miracles and the demonstration of sustained moral virtue.

It is therefore not doctrinally tenable to equate sainthood with the endorsement of violence.

The theological foundation of canonisation rests upon ideals of charity, sacrifice, and spiritual commitment, rather than coercion or force.

It is neither colonial authority nor historical narrative that governs Goa today, but the rule of law, which secures to every individual the freedom to believe, practise, and profess according to conscience

Any attribution of violence as a defining characteristic of sainthood would be inconsistent with the very criteria upon which such recognition is granted within the Catholic tradition.

This distinction assumes importance in the context of Goa's legal and social framework.

While historical debates may persist regarding the role of missionary activity during colonial rule, the present constitutional order does not derive legitimacy from such narratives.

Instead, it guarantees to all individuals the freedom to interpret, accept, or reject religious histories according to conscience, subject to the limits of public order.

Departure from past

The significance of the decree reflects a departure from earlier phases of governance, where religious conformity was actively encouraged.

The legal system, by 1880, had begun to move away from coercive structures and towards a model where law, rather than religious authority, governed civil relations. In that sense, the decree may be understood as a transitional instrument, one that bridged the gap between a theologically influenced regime and a civil law order.

The contemporary legal position in Goa must be viewed through the lens of this evolution. The Portuguese Civil Code of 1867, as continued by the Goa, Daman and Diu (Administration) Act, 1962, operates today as part of Indian law.

The Supreme Court in Jose Paulo Coutinho v. Maria Luiza Valentina Pereira (2019) clarified that these laws derive their authority from Indian sovereignty and must be applied within the constitutional framework.

Further, the Goa Succession, Special Notaries and Inventory Proceeding Act, 2012 demonstrates the continued adaptation of these principles into modern statutory form, preserving structured succession while aligning it with contemporary legal standards.

Freedom of choice

The State forms an integral part of India and is governed by the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion and conscience.

The High Court of Bombay at Goa has recently reiterated, in Blinston Savio Fernandes v. Leandra Marie Fernandes (2026), that Goa is fully subject to Indian constitutional principles, thereby reinforcing the idea that legal uniformity does not negate individual liberty.

The choice of religion, therefore, is neither dictated by colonial legacy nor by statutory imposition, but is a matter of individual autonomy protected by constitutional guarantees.

In recent times, public statements have been made which appear to overlook this legal and historical evolution. Assertions premised on selective historical narratives, without regard to the legal developments that followed, risk distorting the understanding of Goan society.

It is not the role of the law to validate historical grievances through present conflict.

Rather, it seeks to ensure that diversity is accommodated within a structured legal order.

The Decree of 1880 stands as evidence that even within colonial governance, a recognition emerged that religious practices could not be suppressed indefinitely and required legal protection.

Legal reality today

The legal position today is unambiguous. Goa is governed by: The Constitution of India; A uniform civil framework derived from the Portuguese Civil Code, 1867 and the Civil Procedure Code, 1939; Statutory enactments such as the Goa Succession, Special Notaries and Inventory Proceedings Act, 2012.

Within this structure, no citizen is compelled to adhere to any religious practice, nor can any individual be penalised for professing or practising a religion of choice, subject only to public order.

It must therefore be recognised that the legal history of Goa is not static, but evolutionary.

The movement from coercion to codification, and from codification to constitutionalism, reflects a gradual alignment of law with liberty. The Decree of 1880 may be viewed as an early legal acknowledgment of pluralism. That acknowledgment has since been absorbed and strengthened within the Indian constitutional framework.

In the final analysis, it is neither colonial authority nor historical narrative that governs Goa today, but the rule of law, which secures to every individual the freedom to believe, practise, and profess according to conscience.

THE INBOX ››

Deletions of voters during SIR puts blot on WB results

The Bharatiya Janata Party has achieved a significant political milestone by making its first major entry into power in West Bengal, while also retaining Assam and maintaining its position in Puducherry as part of a wider electoral success across multiple States. However, the West Bengal outcome raises concerns. Reports of large-scale deletions of voters, particularly from minority communities, during the so-called 'SIR' exercise just before the elections have led many to question the fairness of the process. Such developments appear to have weakened the chances of the Mamata Banerjee-led government, which had governed the State for nearly 15 years since 2011. In contrast, voters in Kerala and Tamil Nadu have once again placed their trust in secular political traditions. Their decision reflects a preference for inclusive governance and stability. As the BJP assumes power in West Bengal, it carries the responsibility of fulfilling its promise of development for all sections of society. It is crucial that governance remains focused on progress, harmony, and unity, avoiding divisive politics.

JERRY FERNANDES, *Saligao*

Democracy in serious decline at our peril

Today the BJP with its Hindutva ideology, allies, and others who bring it to absolute power through mass defections, has brought our democracy into serious decline. There is no level playing field with the ruling party led by the PM of India using every possible lever of power to operate formidably right from the Election Commission, practically free of model code of conduct restrictions, to enforcement agencies and the power of the central government that now is in total control of northern, eastern and western states while making serious inroads in the south. Although elections are held and there is great jubilation in the majority of "we the people" in development and material progress, open your eyes and expose your minds to the state of the world today. Notice that a person like Trump was elected US president who disregards all international and statutory laws with impunity, while the whole world watches and suffers? No one must have absolute power which democracy ensures. We the people must not only encourage Goan harmony but also emulate and protect minorities.

JOHN ERIC GOMES, *Porvorim*

Development not at the cost of extinction

The recent rise in deaths of wild cats is deeply disturbing. In many cases, investigations have pointed to poisoning as the primary cause. This tragedy, I believe, is rooted in how we perceive wildlife — as villains. This perception is shaped by the way human-animal conflicts are reported. Whenever a leopard or tiger is spotted near a human settlement, it triggers panic among residents, and the media reports only from that point of view. But what about the situation of the wild animal? Rarely does anyone report that the settlement itself is close to a shrinking forest, and that the forest is shrinking further. We have seen this pattern in Aravalli, Hasdeo, and Gachibowli, where forests are destroyed for real estate, mining, and infrastructure. Against 1.46 billion people, we have merely 3,682 tigers and 13,874 leopards. If poisoning becomes the default response to their desperation, those numbers will only fall. We need balanced reporting that highlights habitat loss as the root cause. We need stricter enforcement against poisoning and encroachments. Most of all, we need to accept that development cannot come at the cost of extinction.

ALWYN FERNANDES, *Benaulim*

Positive step towards people-centric politics

A well-known film star turned politician has achieved a remarkable victory contesting under the TVK party, winning by a large margin and earning the trust of the people. His journey from cinema to public service reflects his commitment to bringing change and addressing public concerns. The name "Vijay" itself means victory, symbolizing hope and progress. His success represents the aspirations of many citizens who seek honest and development-oriented leadership. At this crucial time, other political parties in Tamil Nadu should rise above differences and extend their support for the greater benefit of the state. By welcoming him warmly and setting aside divisive or negative politics, leaders can work together for the welfare of the people. This victory should mark the beginning of constructive governance focused on unity, growth, and public welfare.

RONNIE DSOUZA, *Chandor*

Democracy flawlessly 'executed' once again

Opposition parties, keep contesting elections, until each of you is decimated, one by one by one. What was done to Maharashtra has been done to Delhi, has now been done to West Bengal, and will most certainly be done to Punjab and the other states. The 'successful' West Bengal template shall be applied to all elections in future by the BJP, it is now truly invincible. The lines between the 'government' and 'party' have blurred, infact vanished. The Central government is the party and all constitutional authorities are subservient organs of the party. But keep contesting, I say.We must preserve the grand illusion of the "mother of democracy". All the hype, controversies, rallies and exit polls are to convince you that there is still a contest infact when there is none. Democracy has been flawlessly 'executed' once again. These state elections have extinguished the weak flickering flame of democracy for all times to come. Congratulations, Election Commission of India!

VINAY DWIVEDI, *Benaulim*

Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

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The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Post-poll rancour

Defiant Mamata rejects Bengal verdict

THE acrimony witnessed during the West Bengal Assembly elections has intensified following the declaration of results. The aftermath is not unfolding as a routine democratic transition — outgoing Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has refused to accept the verdict, describing it as a "conspiracy" rather than a popular mandate. Ruling out her resignation, she has reiterated that the Election Commission of India worked for the BJP all along in the state. It's apparent that her agitational politics will keep the new government on its toes right from the word go. Mamata's shift towards strengthening the Opposition's INDIA bloc suggests a strategic recalibration, prompted by her party's defeat. Her outreach to the Congress is replete with irony, considering the friction between the two parties in recent years. Political expediency might persist unless genuine efforts are made to rebuild the fragile alliance.

Even as Mamata strives to keep her flock together, post-poll violence has again reared its head in Bengal. Ransacking of TMC offices and attacks on party workers have reignited concerns about the entrenched culture of political retribution in the state. Mamata's party has squarely blamed BJP supporters, while the saffron party has hinted at factionalism within the TMC or isolated acts by miscreants. Notably, state BJP president Samik Bhattacharya has condemned the incidents of vandalism and warned of strict action against those involved. The call for restraint following the BJP's sweeping victory is laudable.

The responsibility now lies with both the incoming government and law enforcement agencies. Swift, impartial action against those responsible — irrespective of their political affiliation — will be vital for restoring public confidence. Also, the political leadership should go beyond rhetoric and actively discourage a culture where violence becomes synonymous with electoral rivalry.

Punjab counts

Success tied to truthful addiction reporting

PUNJAB's decision to launch a statewide drug and socio-economic survey, covering nearly 65 lakh households, is a bold administrative step. Though long overdue, the move is fraught with challenges. For decades, the state's drug crisis has been debated in political rhetoric and media narratives, often without a reliable, evidence-based foundation. This survey seeks to change that by mapping the scale, patterns and socio-economic linkages of substance abuse. At one level, the initiative reflects an acknowledgment that the problem cannot be tackled through policing alone. By integrating socio-economic indicators, the government appears to recognise the deeper roots of addiction. Prominent among them are unemployment, distress in agrarian economies and social dislocation. If executed well, the exercise could enable targeted interventions, including rehabilitation programmes and livelihood support.

However, the credibility of the exercise will hinge on its methodology and implementation. Deploying around 28,000 personnel, many of them teachers, raises concerns about administrative overreach and diversion from core duties. More critically, drug use is a sensitive subject. Underreporting due to stigma, fear of legal consequences or social pressure could distort findings. Without strong safeguards for confidentiality and trust-building at the grassroots, data accuracy may suffer. There is also the question of what follows. Punjab has seen numerous committees and reports on drugs, but policy continuity and execution have often lagged. Data collection, however extensive, is only the first step. The real test lies in translating insights into sustained action, such as strengthening deaddiction infrastructure, disrupting supply chains and addressing the socio-economic vulnerabilities that fuel demand.

The survey, therefore, must not become another statistical exercise. It should mark the beginning of a transparent, accountable and long-term strategy. Punjab does not lack awareness of its drug problem; it has lacked decisive, data-driven follow-through.

Dent in Muslim vote bank hurt TMC

Some Muslims in Bengal seem convinced that voting for 'secular' parties will not protect them

AUNINDYO CHAKRAVARTY
SENIOR JOURNALIST

'VOTE CUTTER' : Supporters of the fledgling AJUP (Aam Janata Unnayan Party) celebrate in Murshidabad on May 4. The party, formed by Trinamool Congress rebel Humayun Kabir, won two Assembly seats. PTI

WHEN Mamata Banerjee returned to power in 2021, with over 48.5% votes for the Trinamool Congress (TMC), it was clear that she had ridden a wave of support from West Bengal's Muslim voters. The BJP had garnered a vote share of 38%, almost all of which would have come from the state's 70% Hindu population. It meant that the TMC would have, at best, got 30% of its votes from Hindus and the remaining 18.5% from Muslims. This suggested that nearly 70% of the Muslim voters backed Mamata in 2021.

This time, when the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls disenfranchised 27 lakh living, breathing voters in West Bengal, the TMC alleged that this was meant to target its supporters. The evidence indicated that Muslims might have been disproportionately affected in the final exercise, and it is highly likely that these people would have voted for the TMC in previous elections.

Despite SIR removing dead and living voters, the actual turnout was much higher than in 2021. Nearly 35 lakh more people voted in 2026. Both the BJP and TMC saw this as a sign of their impending victory. The BJP argued that the Election Commission of India (ECI) had made voting safe and people had come out in larger numbers to defeat the incumbent. The TMC claimed that the high turnout was because voters, especially Muslims, wanted to defeat the partisan SIR process.

Some of the highest turnouts were recorded in the very seats most affected by SIR deletions. One reason for this was that the number of voters had fallen, reducing the denominator. But several political pundits, and reporters on the ground, argued that Muslims had come out to vote in larger numbers because they were scared that a BJP victory would endanger their very existence as citizens of India.

The general consensus was that the TMC's share of Muslim votes would rise further, as Muslims had consolidated behind the party, most likely to keep the BJP out of Bengal. Some West Bengal watchers calculated that if another 15-16% of Muslims were to vote for Mamata, her overall vote share would rise by 5 percentage points, counteracting any potential slide in Hindu votes.

As it turned out, the TMC's vote share slipped by 7.5 percentage points. If one assumes a Muslim consolidation behind Mamata, then it would follow that there was a drop of 10-11 percentage points in Hindu votes for the TMC.

> West Bengal is witnessing an unfortunate descent into ghettoisation that it had evaded till now.

But a closer look at the voting pattern in the seats with high Muslim population punctures this picture. There are at least 32 seats in Bengal where Muslims account for more than 50% of the electorate. The estimate by pollsters is higher — 38-42 seats — but these 32 are on most lists. The TMC had won all 32 in 2021, and got an unassailable 57.7% vote share. This time, its vote share in these constituencies dropped to 41.4% — a massive decline of 16.3 percentage points.

Was this because of the deletion of Muslim voters during the SIR process? That didn't affect the final turnout in these seats, which was 4.9 lakh — 7.6% higher than in 2021. Neither did the TMC lose its votes entirely to the BJP. In fact, the BJP's vote share in these seats rose by only 4.6 percentage points, from 22.1% in 2021 to 26.7%. If we assume that most of these were Hindus who had voted for the TMC last time, then there's still another 11-12% of the TMC's votes — mostly Muslim — which went to others.

The largest chunk moved to the Congress and the Left-ISF (Indian Secular Front) combine. These three parties had fought together in 2021 and polled 15.9% of the votes in these 32 seats. This time, their combined vote share — although they fought separately — rose to 23.3%. That's a gain of 7.4 percentage points, and most of this would have been Muslim votes that switched from the TMC. This points to a growing acceptance among Muslims, in these seats, of the ISF led by Pirzada Naushad Siddiqui of the Furfura Sharif shrine.

The TMC also lost votes to Humayun Kabir's Aam Janata Unnayan Party (AJUP). Kabir was part of the Trinamool till last December, when he was suspended for planning to build a 'Babri Masjid' in Bengal. Back then, the TMC had accused him of trying to cause communal polarisation in cahoots with the BJP. Indeed, Kabir had joined the BJP in 2018 and even fought the 2019 Lok Sabha elections from Murshidabad on the BJP ticket.

This time, he contested the elections as his own party's candidate. Just a few weeks before voting, the TMC alleged that it had caught Kabir in a sting operation, asking for money to get Muslim voters to back him. Although Kabir denied it, many believed that this was enough to defang the AJUP factor. The reality turned out to be very different. The AJUP won two of these 32 seats, and took away 3-4% of the TMC's Muslim votes.

It is tempting to put this down to Muslims being fed up of 'appeasement' and 'vote bank' politics. The truth could be much more worrying. Even though Siddiqui and Sharif claim to represent everyone, the thrust of their rhetoric is sectarian. Their success suggests that a section of Muslims have moved towards parties which focus only on their concerns as Muslims. That is where they feel safe, at a time when they are being threatened not just with disenfranchisement but also losing their citizenship.

Even when they know that parties like the AJUP and the ISF cannot fight the BJP at the state level, they are willing to vote for them in places where Muslims are in majority.

This is an unexpected collateral damage of the SIR process. A section of Muslims in Bengal appears to be convinced that voting for the so-called 'secular' parties will not protect them — they have to organise through overtly 'Muslim' parties. This is an unfortunate descent into ghettoisation that West Bengal had evaded till now.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

No eligible voter's name will be removed from the electoral rolls in West Bengal. — Gyanesh Kumar

The tree with a life of its own

RANA PREET GILL

I gaze at the tree first thing in the morning when I open the curtains in my rented accommodation. After years of abuse and being gaslighted in my unhappy marital home, I found the courage to escape and make a fresh start. Since this life-changing move, I have befriended the tree that stands right outside the window.

It is as bare as some lives are without shelter and protection of loved ones. And though the city is peopled with acquaintances, I have reposed trust in this tree with whom I have started sharing stories of my troubled past. Relieving myself of the emotional burden has been like walking on eggshells, but the stolid tree has given me some grounding.

There are no nests on this tree. It does not harbour life in a way that others do. There are no little ones hatching from eggs; it is not a witness to the incessant cycle of life and death. It's only a temporary shelter for those seeking respite from long journeys, those who have traversed difficult paths and need a breather. And thus I have spotted hornbills, mynahs and kites perched on it. The tree must have communicated with them.

While spring blessed *Kusum*, *Pilkhan*, *Chakrasia* and *Jarul* trees, this nameless tree initially did not sprout leaves, making me feel sad for its fate. Was it dying or already dead, I thought, with only the façade of life sustaining a hollow trunk with gnarled branches? Perhaps like a fake family being there only for the photo ops while severing all the nourishment to the loved one.

This tree has become a reminder of my past and yet I do not delude myself into believing that life is bereft of love. It is a symbol of someone who has been deserted and in turn has detached oneself from the cycle of life. No wonder I was amazed when a tiny leaf sprouted recently. This, indeed, is not a tree of spring; it's one which lives on its own terms. And since then, more foliage has appeared on branches — soft and light-green leaves. A harvest after a long spell of drought.

The tree might not have a thick and dense canopy like the others in the locality, but it's alive in its own way — telling me that resilience is the perennial bloom, not the outward manifestations. Akin to hope, leaves will appear in seasons benign. Standing tall amidst the vagaries of life, resolute in the face of indifference, the tree outside the window has finally heralded its own spring.

The writer is a Hoshiarpur-based veterinary officer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From poll success to dominance

Refer to 'BJP cuts Opposition down to size'; the article captures sharply the changing contours of Indian politics where the BJP has moved from electoral success to structural dominance. The BJP's strength lies in its cohesive leadership, discipline and ability to connect a national narrative with local aspirations. In contrast, the Opposition appears fragmented, reactive and lacks a unified vision, thereby steadily shrinking its political space. This imbalance has altered the very nature of electoral competition, with the BJP setting the agenda, while others merely respond.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), BY MAIL

Combination of many strategies

Refer to 'Saffron surge'; the BJP's victory is an outcome of several strategic measures to baffle its opponents. The women's reservation Bill, UGC regulation for SC/ST communities, the Seventh Pay Commission, the Uniform Civil Code and Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls are the prominent ones. Mamata and other political parties kept fighting against SIR. Additionally, grassroots cadres effectively sold their populist toys to outwit their rivals. Machiavellian politics played an important role to yield a rich harvest. However, hoisting of the secular flag in Tamil Nadu and Keralam are silver linings in the current political landscape.

ABHYAM SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Mamata responsible for defeat

Refer to 'Bengal's historic Trinamool shift'; anarchy prevailed in Bengal under Mamata where even constitutional bodies like the ECI and judiciary were disrespected. TMC workers stormed the Calcutta High Court, disturbed proceedings and gheraoed judicial officers who were working on the directions of the Supreme Court. The President and Prime Minister were disrespected during their official visits to the state. The rape murder case of an intern in the Kar medical college was mishandled. Muslims were appeased at the cost of Hindus. These are some of the causes of the TMC's defeat. It is time for introspection for Mamata and not lay the blame at the BJP's door.

ASHOK KUMAR, BY MAIL

Seeing beyond Vijay's star power

By voting for TVK, people rescued Tamil Nadu from the clutches of the DMK only to hand it over to Vijay and his delirious fans. The Tamil Nadu Express, which just emerged out of a dark tunnel, will shortly enter a darker and longer tunnel. Vijay achieved this by only riding the crests of two waves — one was anti-DMK wave and the other was people's craze for the silver screen's hollow heroes. Tamil Nadu, which so far faced corruption, should now brace itself for a term of non-performance and poor governance. Vijay was indeed a crowd-puller. It is doubtful if he can control his fans who are already running amok.

MR ANAND, CHENNAI

AAP's political overdrive

Apropos of 'Free textbooks for children in CM-branded bags stir up row'; it is ironic that the Punjab government has started distributing free textbooks packed in biodegradable carry bags bearing CM Bhagwant Mann's photo. Bags are printed in AAP's signature blue and yellow colours. Earlier, Mann government had painted government buses in the same colours. The AAP is crossing all limits of propriety by using taxpayers' hard-earned money for political motives.

VIJAYA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Civic sense sign of cultured society

Refer to 'Let's respect each other's space'; a society progresses only when individuals act responsibly for the collective good. Whether it is improper parking, blocking roads, creating unhygienic surroundings or showing disregard for others' convenience, such behaviour reflects an alarming decline in social responsibility. Public spaces are meant for everybody's use, and respecting sentiments is not merely about following rules but about showing empathy for fellow citizens. Unfortunately, many people prioritise personal comfort over public discipline. This selfish attitude creates unnecessary inconvenience and disrupts social harmony. Civic sense is the foundation of a cultured society, and its absence weakens community spirit.

DS KAPOOR, CHANDIGARH

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@tribunemail.com**

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, THURSDAY, MAY 6, 1926

Music before mosques

OF late the question whether the members of a procession accompanied by music have an unrestricted right to take the procession along a highway, even when they pass a mosque or temple, has assumed tremendous importance. While on the one hand it has been claimed that the right of the processionists to continue uninterrupted their religious observances when they pass a mosque or a temple cannot be questioned by the worshippers in the mosque or temple; on the other hand, it is contended that the worshippers in a mosque or a temple ought not to be interrupted in their prayers by permitting a religious procession accompanied by music to pass the place of worship. The question has recently become a live issue between Hindus and Mussalmans, and has given rise to disorder at more than one place during the last few months. The recent disturbance at Rewari was due to the fact that certain Mussalmans, who were offering their prayers in a mosque, object to the passing of a marriage procession in front of the mosque. The much more serious disorder at Calcutta also originated in a similar dispute between the members of an Arya Samaj procession and worshippers at a mosque. The question has been the cause of trouble for a very long time; nor is it purely a Hindu-Muslim question, there having been in the past numerous disputes between Shias and Sunnis as well as between Hindus of one sect and another on this subject, which have often led to breaches of the public peace. The question has also come up before civil and criminal courts on several occasions and there is a volume of judicial pronouncements on the subject.

The curious case of INDU

SANJAYA BARU
SENIOR JOURNALIST

I RECEIVED a call recently from a young research scholar who said she was writing a paper on the institutions engaged in the conceptualisation and implementation of strategic policy in India. The question addressed to me was specific.

Why did I think it had taken such a long time for the implementation by the government of an idea mooted as far back as 1965? The reason for her call was that I had been associated with the reiteration of that idea in 2002. Her reference was to the committee constituted in 2001 to examine the establishment of a National Defence University (NDU).

The committee was chaired by the late K Subrahmanyam, the eminent strategic policy guru. It included retired service chiefs, heads of educational and business organisations, experts in the fields of national security, defence research and public policy. I was included in the committee as a member of that last category.

The proposal for such an institution was first mooted by the Chief of Staff Committee in 1967, following the India-Pakistan war, and the need for it was reiterated on several occasions by other defence policy administrators. It was finally in 2000, after the Kargil war, that the then Defence Minister, Jaswant Singh, and his adviser Arun Singh constituted the NDU committee.

Our terms of reference were explicit. We were asked specifically to examine the working of the NDU in the United States and China and, after studying all aspects of the establishment of such an institution, to "examine the recruitment to subsume/incorporate existing institutions funded by the MoD into the proposed NDU and also to evaluate the requirements of new institutions within the NDU ambit."

The Subrahmanyam Committee submitted its report to the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government in May 2002. It took a decade before the Manmohan Singh government finally approved the idea and procured land for the establishment of the institution. The only change that the Singh government made to the Subrahmanyam report was to rename the NDU as the Indian National Defence University (INDU). Someone in the system wanted to pay tribute to India's famous 'Indu'.

Prime Minister Singh laid the foundation stone for INDU in 2013. A 200-acre campus lies vacant in Haryana,

NOWHERE : The question is whether the idea of the defence varsity has been 'killed'or merely buried. FILE

save for the foundation stone and a roof over a guard's head. Meanwhile, the Narendra Modi government quietly renamed INDU as IDU, for obvious reasons, and set up another committee under the chairmanship of Anil Kakodkar, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, to further examine the proposal and define the remit for such an institution.

I confessed to the young scholar that I had not kept track of the progress of INDU or IDU. Her enquiry prompted me to study the matter. Google led me to an article by Lt Gen Prakash Katoch, titled cryptically 'Who Killed INDU?' published in the *Indian Defence Review* in 2021. My research revealed that as recently as February 2025, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament had asked the ministry of defence to explain why there had been an 'inordinate delay in the setting up of Indian National Defence University'.

> Fifty-seven years after it was first mooted, the defence university has still not been established.

The PAC observed that "the entire process of setting up the Indian National Defence University has been beset by delays owing to extensive deliberations for several years without any concrete results." In its 'action taken report', the defence ministry said that the delay was on account of a review meant to "broaden the mandate of IDU as an institution of Excellence to study various areas of emerging challenges such as modern warfare, our neighbourhood environment, space, seas, cyber and other areas."

The PAC, however, expressed disappointment at the fact that "fifty-seven years after it was first mooted, and over seven years after the Indian National Defence University (INDU) Bill, 2015 was made available for public consultation, the University has still not been established."

The 2021 article by Katoch points to an interesting development that may explain why the INDU/IDU idea remains in limbo. Katoch draws attention to the fact that the Raksha Shakti University (RSU) established in 2009 at Gandhinagar, by the Gujarat state government, as an internal security institute, has since been taken over by the Union Home Ministry and renamed Rashtriya Raksha University (RRU), through an Act of Parliament. Some believe it will play the role assigned to IDU.

This is because RRU's stated mission echoes that of IDU: "To identify, prepare and sustain statecraft of national strategic and security culture through continuous enhancement and development of educational, research and training cadres from the military and civilian society."

While the original mandate of RSU and RRU was to focus on internal security, it is now increasingly focussing on national security, including defence policy. Many retired armed forces brass have been employed by RRU.

When I began asking people in the know what the status of IDU was, now that there was an RRU, I was told by one person, "RRU is the IDU." But RRU has been placed in the charge of the Union Home Ministry while IDU was to be under the charge of the Defence Ministry. Has the Defence Minister yielded ground to the Home Minister? What happens to the 200 acres and the foundation stone in Haryana? As in the case of so many institutions and industries, has IDU too been usurped by Gujarat, taken away from Haryana?

The question for IDU is whether it has been 'killed', as Katoch's essay suggests, or merely buried and can be exhumed, as some armed forces leaders hope.

The fact is that the recommendations of the Subrahmanyam committee were based on a study of the NDUs in Washington DC and Beijing and both are institutions of excellence under the leadership of the armed forces. The case for INDU/IDU still stands.

The author was a member of the INDU Committee and the National Security Advisory Board in 2001

The soft power of Buddha's relics coming to Ladakh

KAVERI GILL
CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN HIMALAYAN STUDIES, SHIV NADAR UNIVERSITY, NCR

THE past few days in Leh have been momentous. The Buddha's relics from Piprahwa (Uttar Pradesh) were brought from Delhi to Ladakh on April 29 to a rapturous reception by the local population. Residents lined the route from the airport to the Shiwatsel Teaching Ground, which backs on to the Dalai Lama's residence in Leh, carrying *khatas*, incense and the beautiful Aryan peoples' flower offerings. They had good reason to, as the last time the Buddha's relics came to Ladakh was in 1950, when it was organised by Bakula Rinpoche.

On May 1, Buddha Purnima — the 2,570th anniversary of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinirvana* — the 'Sacred Exposition of the Holy Relics of the Tathagatha: Peace Beyond Borders' was inaugurated in Leh. The event was opened by Home Minister Amit Shah at the Shiwatsel Teaching Ground.

This two-week event, organised jointly by the UT of Ladakh, the Ministry of Culture, Government of India and the International Buddhist Confederation, features exhibitions and conferences in Leh (including on 'The Contribution of Himalayan Buddhism to the Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of India and Beyond'), as well as the travel of the relics to Zanskar (villages in other areas have been assigned specific days when residents may see the relics in Leh).

In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra,* the Buddha emphasised the significance of his physical remains as a source of great inspiration and merit-gathering for all who came into their presence and honoured his relics.

Along with the dharma or the Buddha's teachings as well as the *vinaya* or monastic discipline, each symbolised his continued presence in its own way for later disciples who did not have the good fortune to live in his time. It therefore carries profound significance for Buddhists to be able to not just see the relics, but have them bless their place of stay, in this case the UT of Ladakh.

Against the backdrop of a prolonged standoff over Ladakh's demand for statehood, constitutional safeguards and environmental protection, this event assumes added significance, both internally and externally.

VINAYA : Buddha emphasised the significance of his physical remains as a source of inspiration. ISTOCK

It is especially so following the release of Sonam Wangchuk only in mid-March and right after the notification of five new districts in the UT of Ladakh on April 28, with the reorganisation resulting in five Buddhist-majority districts (Sham, Changthang, Nubra, Leh and Zanskar) and two Muslim-majority districts (Kargil and Drass).

As per the 2011 Census, 46.4% of Ladakh's population is Muslim, while 39.65% of its population is Buddhist. Both the creation of the new districts and the cultural and spiritual diplomatic masterstroke of bringing the Buddha's relics to Ladakh after 76 years signal strong support to the Buddhist population of the union territory.

> The real epicentre of the Buddha's life and legacy lies in and with India.

The crowds patiently queuing to pay their homage to the Piprahwa relics as well as the rapturous reception by the Ladakh Buddhist Association and tremendous signage and hoardings across Leh suggest that this event is one of the most meaningful in recent times for them.

Most interestingly, Amit Shah's inaugural speech sent a strong message to China. He began by noting that His Holiness the Dalai Lama, whenever he visits and speaks of Ladakh, does so not merely as a geographic location, but also as a place of great spiritual significance.

Tremendous practitioners of wisdom and dependent origination as well as compassion and *mahakaruna* have been born here. He went on to explicitly reference Tibet, in the context of the Silk Road, which was especially poignant as the podium faced the Dalai Lama's Shiwatsel Palace Choglamsar residence a stone's throw away, hidden behind sentinel poplar trees.

The Home Minister also referred to *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* traditions, as well as the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism — Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug. This was a clear acknowledgement of the Dalai Lama's influence in revitalising Buddhism across the Himalayan region since 1959, as also the origin of the Buddhism of the Himalayas in Nalanda University, preserved in Tibet after Nalanda's decline for the last 1,300 years.

In this regard, in his speech, the Home Minister also mentioned the great 11th century dharma translator — or lotsawa, as the Tibetans call them — Rinchen Zangpo, who is associated with the most famous monasteries of Alchi, Sumda and Mangyur dotted around Leh.

With the Mongolian Ambassador to India, Ganbold Dambajav, in attendance for the inaugural ceremony of the Buddha's relics, there could not be stronger signalling to China that as much as it lays claim to the Buddha and Buddhism as a soft power tool, the real epicentre of the great being's life and legacy lies in and with India.

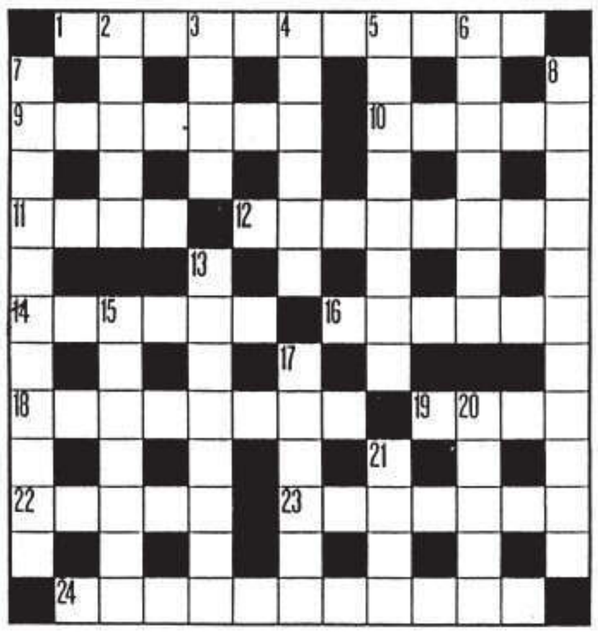
This is true not only as historical fact and heritage, but also as indicated by the Home Minister's remarkably direct and forthcoming speech, as a living tradition of India, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia and all the Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan region, wherein people, ideas, religion, goods, animals, nomads and much more flowed freely beyond borders not so long ago.

Today, monastics from across the Himalayas, including Ladakh and Mongolia, make up to 60% of the student body of Tibetan monasteries and nunneries set up in exile in India.

Bakula Rinpoche's own life is testimony to such a beautiful tightly-woven tapestry. He was born in Ladakh, travelled to study in the Drepung Loseling Monastery in Lhasa, Tibet, and later served as Ambassador for 12 years in Mongolia, where he is venerated to this day as one of the 16 Arhats or foremost disciples of the Buddha.

There was a powerful exhibition on the great Indian Buddhist *mahasiddha*, Guru Padmasambhava, presented in the Bhoti language so that locals could engage with it, and organised by the Ladakhi Gompa Association. His life — marked by journeys across these regions, or even flight, as legend has it — underscores a larger truth: the Buddha's legacy cannot be claimed by any one nation-state as a cynical instrument of power and geopolitics.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Thirteen (6,5)
9 Initiate (7)
10 In that respect (5)
11 Peak of perfection (4)
12 Novice (8)
14 Horse's fastest pace (6)
16 Hot-tasting pod of capsicum (6)
18 Hard silvery metal (8)
19 Undisguised (4)
22 Treat with contempt (5)
23 Purposeful procedure (7)
24 Up for sale (2,3,6)

DOWN

2 An established principle (5)
3 Advantage (4)
4 Appraise (6)
5 Absolute (8)
6 Seemingly endless (7)
7 Immediately (8,3)
8 Testify (4,7)
13 Of the highest quality (3-5)
15 Disappoint (3,4)
17 Business patronage (6)
20 Composure (5)
21 Permanent mark left by wound (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Come by, 4 Off guard, 9 Upturn, 10 Covenant, 12 Lurk, 13 Booty, 14 Mute, 17 Shamefacedly, 20 Middle ground, 23 Laud, 24 Scare, 25 Will, 28 Criminal, 29 Foment, 30 Doggerel, 31 Classy.

Down: 1 Churlish, 2 Material, 3 Bare, 5 From the heart, 6 Glee, 7 Abacus, 8 Dither, 11 Bow and scrape, 15 Merit, 16 Glare, 18 Business, 19 Idolatry, 21 Placid, 22 Ruling, 26 Dire, 27 Toil.

SU DO KU

EASY

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

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 6, 2026, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Vaisakh Shaka 16
- Vaisakh Parvishte 23
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 4, up to 7:52 am
- Siddha Yoga up to 1:12 am
- Moola Nakshatra up to 3:54 pm
- Moon in Sagittarius sign
- Gandmoola up to 3:54 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET: WEDNESDAY 19:02 HRS
SUNRISE: THURSDAY 05:36 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	21
New Delhi	35	21
Amritsar	33	20
Bathinda	36	18
Jalandhar	33	20
Ludhiana	35	20
Bhiwani	36	22
Hisar	34	22
Sirsa	36	21
Dharamsala	26	15
Manali	20	08
Shimla	23	12
Srinagar	27	09
Jammu	33	18
Kargil	—	—
Leh	16	05
Dehradun	31	18
Mussoorie	21	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C

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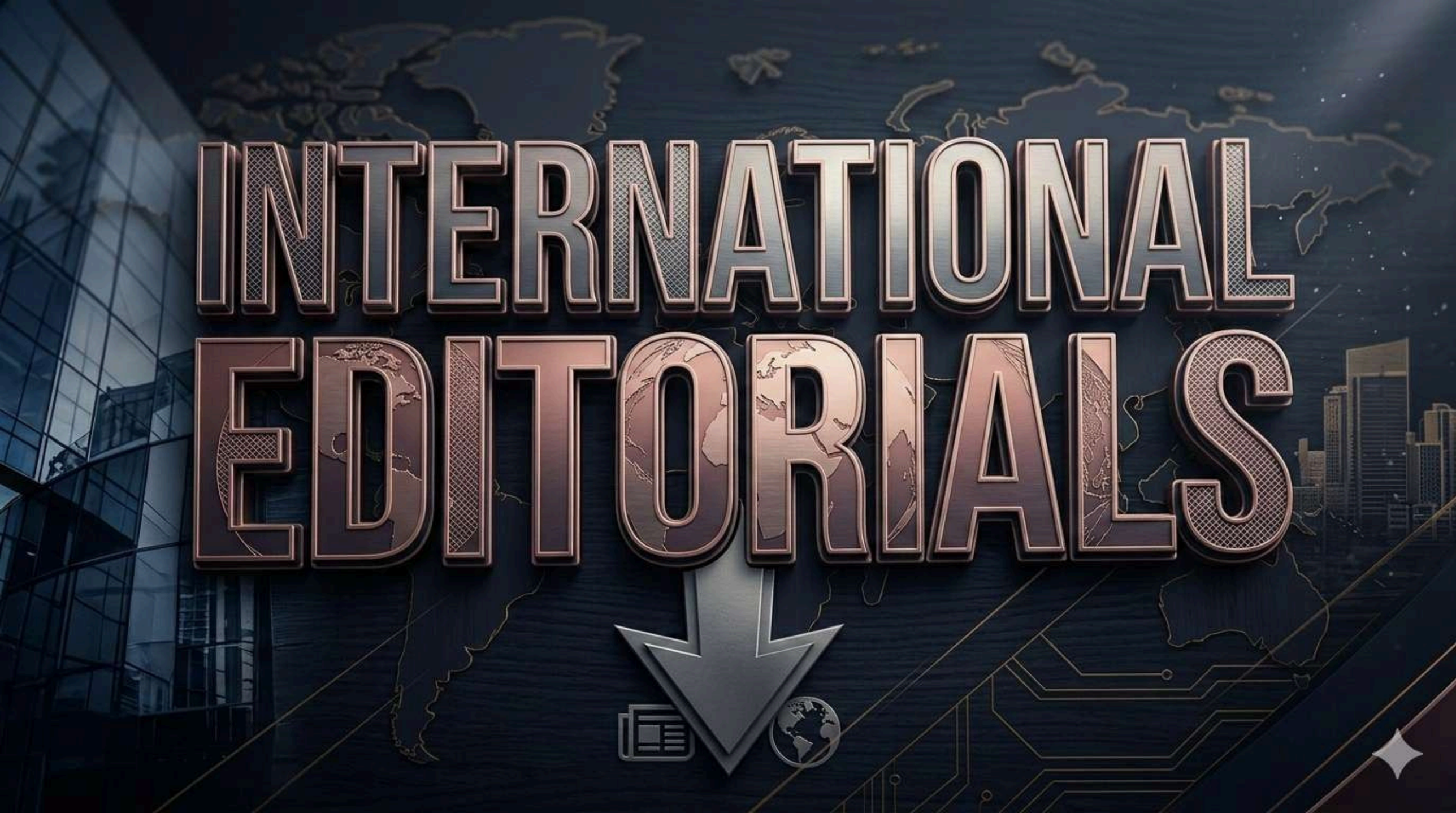
INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

إذا أكرمك الناسُ لمالٍ أو سلطانٍ فلا يُعجبكَ ذلك، فإنّ زوالَ الكرامة بزوالِهما. ولكن يُعجبكَ إن أكرموكَ لأدبٍ أو علمٍ أو دين

(عبدالله بن المقفع)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

If people honor you for wealth or power, let that not impress you, for when they vanish, so does the honor. But let it impress you if they honor you for your manners, your knowledge or your faith.

Abdullah bin Al-Muqaffa

(8th-century Persian thinker)

Opinion

Why peace talks with Israel pose a threat to Hezbollah

NADIM SHEHADI

Let us be clear, the greatest fallacy is that Hezbollah objects to talks with Israel. What it really opposes is the Lebanese government conducting the talks. Hezbollah needs to be the interlocutor in order to maintain its control over the country. The militant group's declared aim is the liberation of Jerusalem but its real one is the continued occupation of Lebanon. The formula is that Iran negotiates with the US over the region, while its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps proxies each remain in charge of the territory they control.

In fact, Hezbollah itself engaged in talks with Israel to coordinate the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000. Maybe, one day, historians will judge it a mistake for Israel to have empowered Hezbollah and not to have dealt with the Lebanese state. In any case, Israel is making the same mistake now by negotiating with Hamas instead of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The current bold move by the Lebanese state to initiate direct talks with Israel under US auspices breaks many taboos and challenges Hezbollah's authority.

To understand the significance of this, one has to go back to the last time such direct talks happened, also with US backing, in 1983, which led to what became known as the May 17 Agreement for Israel to withdraw from south Lebanon after its invasion the previous year — an incursion that resulted in the PLO being driven out of the country.

Now, 42 years after what amounted to a takeover, Hezbollah is being challenged openly, with the Lebanese government initiating direct talks with Israel. The last time the group was challenged was when its status as a resistance movement was questioned following the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. This eventually led to a series of assassinations from 2004, a war with Israel in 2006 that helped restore its resistance credentials, an occupation of the capital, government paralysis, a 2011 coup — and so on until Hezbollah achieved almost total control of the country.

Intense debate surrounds the subject of peace talks with Israel and why they should or should not happen. Many hint at previous violence or the threat of civil war if full internal consensus is not achieved for the talks. This is an indirect way of giving Hezbollah the power of veto, though it did not require such a consensus to drag the country into war after war.

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Another myth is that the Lebanese delegation to the talks should include a comprehensive representation of all the political parties. This is another attempt to give Hezbollah the power to paralyze the Lebanese team. In 1983, the Lebanese negotiating team was composed of professionals who consulted with various parties between sessions of talks. This empowered the negotiators in relation to their Israeli counterparts because they asked for the best concessions.

There is the argument that any talk of peace with Israel is impossible given the current government and its wars in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran. In fact, it could be argued that relations between Israel and the Arab world have never been better. There are treaties with Egypt and Jordan and the Abraham Accords with the UAE and four other states.

There is a convoluted story that normalization will be imposed on Lebanon and that this will create a rift with regional countries, since it abandons the Palestinian cause and will result in Israeli hegemony and economic control. These are exaggerations, however, and ignore the Lebanese government's objectives in these talks, which are to achieve Israel's withdrawal to the 1949 armistice line and to resolve border issues, allowing people to go back to their villages in the south and begin rebuilding their lives. Such an achievement would be a threat to Hezbollah's power over the community, which is where the real internal political battle will take place.

Finally, there are the claims that the Lebanese state is too weak, that it is going to the talks empty-handed, with no leverage, and will be forced to make concessions. This is all the more reason why these talks should happen now, while there is US and Arab support. The main threat remains from Hezbollah, but it will be at its weakest militarily and politically if the talks can deliver a return for the people of south Lebanon and allow them to live in peace for the first time in more than half a century.

Many hint at previous violence or the threat of civil war if full internal consensus is not achieved for the talks

COURTESY: AMJAD RASMI/ASHARQ AL-AWSAT

The security of the Strait of Hormuz cannot be contingent on concessions extracted under pressure

Arab interests must define resolution of Strait of Hormuz crisis

HANI HAZAIMEH

The Strait of Hormuz has once again become one of the most sensitive geopolitical flashpoints in the world. Yet the current escalation should not be read as an unavoidable consequence of regional tensions. It is, in fact, the result of a long-standing pattern, in which Iran has repeatedly leveraged its geographic position along this vital waterway to advance strategic and political objectives.

This strategy is inherently destabilizing. The Strait of Hormuz is not a national asset to be instrumentalized, it is an international maritime corridor upon which global energy security and trade depend. More importantly, the Arab Gulf states — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman — are not external observers to this crisis. They are the principal stakeholders whose economic stability and national security are directly affected by any disruption in these waters.

A recurring feature of Iran's regional behavior is the use of escalation as a bargaining mechanism. Such an approach raises a fundamental problem. No state can simultaneously threaten international commerce and endanger global energy security, then seek political reward for restoring the stability it undermined. The security of the Strait of Hormuz cannot be contingent on concessions extracted under pressure.

At a broader level, the critical question is not only how to manage immediate tensions but who is entitled to shape the long-term security architecture of the Gulf. Iran's apparent assumption that it can negotiate directly with global powers while imposing strategic realities on its Arab neighbors reflects a misreading of the regional balance of interests.

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Iran itself is not insulated from the consequences of escalation. Its economy remains deeply reliant on maritime access and energy exports. Any prolonged disruption in the Strait of Hormuz not only destabilizes regional trade but also intensifies Iran's own economic pressures, compounding existing sanctions and reducing its fiscal flexibility. In strategic terms, the use of the strait as leverage carries significant internal costs that cannot be ignored.

The path toward sustainable security in the Gulf cannot be built on threats or episodic escalation. It must rest on a framework grounded in international maritime law, mutual restraint and inclusive regional engagement that reflects the realities of all principal stakeholders. Above all, it must recognize that Gulf security is inseparable from Arab sovereignty and economic stability.

Iran, like any sovereign state, has legitimate national interests. However, pursuing those interests through the destabilization of a global economic artery carries consequences that extend far beyond the region.

Ultimately, this crisis is not only about maritime access. It is a test of whether regional security can be governed through balance and law or whether it will continue to be shaped by coercion.

A durable outcome will require a framework that places Arab interests at its center, acknowledges the interdependence of regional security and rejects the logic of strategic hostage-taking. Only through such an approach can the region move beyond recurring instability toward a more sustainable and balanced order.

Opinion

King's visit takes the edge off strained UK-US relationship

CHRIS DOYLE

To address the simmering tensions in the US-UK relationship in recent months, Britain deployed its weapon of last resort. King Charles and Queen Camilla were hastily dispatched across the Atlantic in what was Charles' first state visit as monarch. This was also the first to the US since his mother, the late Queen Elizabeth II, went in 2007.

When America declared its independence from Britain 250 years ago, it was a result of King George III's intemperate decisions and ill-considered actions. His five-time great-grandson, however, is of a different disposition.

The British government put the monarch into the most sensitive of diplomatic firestorms. President Donald Trump has been publicly angered at the position of Prime Minister Keir Starmer and his government over Iran, the UK's refusal to join the US airstrikes and only allowing American bases on British soil to be used for defensive purposes.

An unfortunate leak summed up the dilemma. A recording surfaced of the new UK ambassador to Washington claiming that the only country that has a "special relationship" with the US is "probably Israel." At a military and security level, this is probably correct, but nobody needed this truism out in the open.

Critics were anxious about the king engaging with a president who is far from popular in the UK and is blamed for the economic effects of the war on Iran. Trump's unpredictability added to the nerves.

King Charles' speech to Congress and address at a White House banquet were the highlights of the visit, upon which much was riding. Imagine the challenge of such high-profile orations. The content and tone had to be pitch perfect, including praise but never too much.

The cabal of speechwriters served up two five-star scripts that King Charles delivered to perfection

Well, the cabal of speechwriters served up two five-star scripts that the king delivered to perfection. The White House dinner speech, in particular, was a magnificent example of diplomatic humor, executed in the right fashion. King Charles quipped that he could not "help noticing the 'readjustments' to the East Wing … I am sorry to say that we British, of course, made our own attempt at real estate redevelopment of the White House in 1814." One assumes a laughing Trump knew that the Brits burned down both the White House and the Capitol in August of that year. The message was clear. This relationship started in acrimony but survived and thrived, and it will survive the current disturbance.

To show he was no sycophant, Charles slipped in references to the issues of strain, with references to NATO, Ukraine and environmental protection. To Congress, he cited the Magna Carta, noting that it contained "the foundation of the principle that executive power is subject to checks and balances," a nod and a wink to those who are concerned that executive overreach in the US has gone too far.

He mentioned both President John F. Kennedy and Henry Kissinger in highlighting an "Atlantic partnership based on twin pillars: Europe and America. That partnership, I believe Mr. Speaker, is more important today than it has ever been." This was a rebuke to those in the US administration who have denigrated Europe's role in the world.

One outcome was Trump announcing that all tariffs and restrictions on whisky imports would be removed

One outcome was Trump announcing that all tariffs and restrictions on whisky imports, previously at 10 percent, would be removed in honor of the king and queen. He said their visit "got me to do something that nobody else was able to do, without hardly even asking."

The royal family will also take heart from some positive coverage after a tough time handling the fallout from Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor's relationship with disgraced former financier Jeffrey Epstein. For King Charles, this served as a welcome boost to his own prestige.

Downing Street will hope the positive atmosphere transfers to the harder political plane. It might, to an extent, but as much as the "two kings," as Trump described them, may have bonded, this does not remove the tensions between Trump and Starmer. The visit may have just taken the edge off.

The president seemed thrilled. He loves pageantry and prefers to appear with kings and queens over mere prime ministers. He enthused: "He's a great king. The greatest king in my book." He was also fine with the content of the speeches: "He made a fantastic speech. I was very jealous."

What was once seen as a special relationship has rarely existed between the political leaderships. It is also deeper, at the economic, social and cultural levels, and here it remains strong, buttressed by more than $430 billion in annual trade. It will endure, but the bumps may just be a little rougher.

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A US-India partnership for the AI age

YLLI BAJRAKTARI AND DHRUVA JAISHANKAR

Artificial intelligence has moved from Silicon Valley to the center of global politics and economics. It is now the primary theater of 21st-century strategic competition, shaping everything from weapons systems to scientific discovery, while fundamentally restructuring labor markets. The country — or partnership — that scales up AI development and adoption will command the geopolitical high ground.

In this respect, no bilateral relationship is more consequential than the one between the US and India. After a tense episode last year, when tariffs and other slights rankled political leaders on both sides, the US and India announced an interim bilateral trade agreement this February. Both countries now have a major opportunity to cooperate more closely on AI. But they must move beyond the rhetoric of shared values to building shared infrastructure. Together, they can define the standards, supply chains and security protocols of the AI age before their adversaries do.

Together, they can define the standards, supply chains and security protocols of the AI age before their adversaries do

Technology has long been the connective tissue of the US-India relationship, though the nature of the bond has changed over time.

The US recognizes that to win the global AI adoption race, AI diplomacy must be a core instrument of its statecraft. In this context, India is not a junior partner but a strategic multiplier. Although the US maintains a decisive edge in frontier models and high-end compute, China has proven that its capacity for innovation is a force to be reckoned with. To counter this, the US needs the talent and dataset scaling that only India can provide.

India offers more than just a massive market. It provides population-scale datasets drawn from almost 1.5 billion people, making it a vital theater for testing AI in real-world environments. Moreover, with an AI talent pool projected to exceed 1.25 million by 2027, India provides the intellectual heft and human capital required to sustain a high-tempo innovation cycle.

With billions of dollars in committed investments from Google, Microsoft and Amazon to build AI hubs across India, the goal is clear: to ensure that US-designed technology forms the backbone of the Global South's largest economy. If the future of the digital world is built on US-Indian infrastructure, the world will remain open and secure. But if it is built on China's proprietary technology stack, the global order will fracture.

Potential, however, is not the same as proficiency. While India's talent pool is vast, much more must be done to match skills to specific AI tasks. Bridging this gap should be seen as a US imperative. Integrating Indian talent into US-led ecosystems is the only way for American firms to maintain their edge against a competitor that views technology as a tool of state control, rather than a means of individual empowerment.

Integrating Indian talent into US-led ecosystems is the only way for American firms to maintain their edge

To turn the current US-India momentum in AI into a permanent strategic advantage, both countries must focus on four priorities. First, they should develop joint AI applications that can help establish a firewall against digital dominance by malevolent powers. Linking India's burgeoning startup ecosystem with the technological tools and capital available in the US can create common solutions for an array of global challenges.

Second, the two countries can cooperate in constructing resilient infrastructure and supply chains. Their efforts should encompass not only critical minerals and semiconductors, but also undersea cables, open telecommunications networks and data centers.

Third, India and the US will need to collaborate on creating a seamless, high-skill ecosystem for talent. With rising anti-immigrant sentiments in the US and many other countries, this will require navigating potentially treacherous political territory.

Lastly, to enable all the above, India and the US must align their technological standards, intellectual property rights and cybersecurity policies far more than they do today. Translating shared values into common agendas is the only way to reduce bilateral friction and accelerate cooperation.

Deepening US-India cooperation on AI and other security matters is necessary but not inevitable. Strategic priorities may align in many areas but will invariably differ in emphasis. Still, the importance of the US-India AI partnership should not be underestimated. By combining American innovation with Indian scale, the two countries will not just participate in the AI age — they will define it.

Ylli Bajraktari, a former chief of staff to the US National Security Adviser and a former executive director of the US National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, is CEO of the Special Competitive Studies Project.

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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Manus-Meta deal veto shows moving too fast not best way in China

A poster hanging in the main office of artificial intelligence (AI) firm Manus in Beijing before it relocated to Singapore reportedly said, "Go big or die." Its ethos perfectly matched that of Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg's famous motto: "Move fast and break things." In December, when it was announced that the social media giant had bought the Chinese start-up for US$2 billion, many industry insiders embraced the deal despite a bitter tech war between China and the United States.

It was not to be. The aggressive ethos that suits Silicon Valley may not sit well in China after all.

Mainland regulators have vetoed the deal and demanded both sides unwind it. As China makes rapid advances in AI, robotics and a host of other tech fields, policymakers must protect their intellectual property. After all, most pioneering technologies almost all received government subsidies or support in one form or another. The US has long imposed curbs on chip exports and tech transfers, not only within its own territories but also through some allied countries. It can hardly complain as Beijing has tech to protect too.

In relocating to Singapore, Manus executives may have thought they could escape China's regulatory scrutiny. Some industry insiders have even taken to calling it the "Manus model", as a way for Chinese start-ups to attract foreign capital. Others have more unkindly called it "Singapore washing", something Lion City officials have not taken kindly to.

With the sale blocked, it has been claimed in some quarters that the Manus model is dead. That may be premature. Beijing has made it clear, through public statements and media editorials, that the nation is open for international business and investment, but sudden takeovers in strategic fields may face further official scrutiny.

While Manus shows impressive advances in AI agency, ranging from picking stocks to making sales pitches, these are not seen as core technology. But Chinese officials were reportedly alarmed by the manner and speed with which the buyout was made. It involved Manus moving its core assets to Singapore last year, a development which Beijing fears could be imitated by other Chinese tech start-ups.

China needs to closely watch transactions and transfers involving key domestic technology, data, talent and market access. It would be irresponsible not to. After all, Washington has long imposed stringent rules restricting American capital and tech transfers to prevent support for Chinese AI and semiconductor development. Chinese tech firms must learn to navigate the increasingly tricky boundaries between international business and national security. "Move fast and break things" is not the way to go, certainly not in China.

Better protect natural assets from tourists

Hong Kong's natural beauty, one of its greatest assets, is also ecologically vulnerable. Reminders of that abounded during the mainland's Labour Day "golden week" holiday. At Sharp Island, where thousands flocked to the city's Unesco global geopark, the authorities issued about 300 verbal warnings.

At Ham Tin Wan in Sai Kung East Country Park, the sheer number of visitors camping, some using hotpots, underscored the problem. On Saturday night, an estimated 500 tents at the campsite included unlicensed hiking tours. The site is categorised as "large" – meaning it can hold more than 50 four-person tents. The state of the washrooms, where the sink was blocked with food scraps, showed the site was not intended for so many campers. These examples form a pattern that threatens fragile ecosystems.

Overcrowding damages soil, vegetation and water quality. Washrooms and plumbing systems in remote areas are strained to breaking point. The cumulative effect can be long-term ecological harm. Golden week may be an exceptional period, but the problem is not confined to holidays. Without stronger enforcement and deterrents, the balance between welcoming visitors and protecting nature will continue to tip in the wrong direction.

Issuance of hundreds of warnings in a single day is evidence that rules are not working. When penalties can be shrugged off, they fail to incentivise responsible behaviour. Stricter enforcement, clearer guidelines and preventive measures are needed. Limiting visitors at sensitive sites would be a start.

Hong Kong rightly encourages residents and tourists to enjoy its outdoors. But that must not come at the expense of the environment itself. The city's beaches, islands and country parks are treasures that require diligent stewardship. Protecting them is not about restricting access; it is about ensuring access is sustainable.

Sharp Island and Ham Tin Wan are cautionary tales. They show what happens when rules are flouted and enforcement is lax. Without stronger measures, the city risks losing the natural heritage it seeks to showcase. Effective action now will ensure future generations enjoy these places in their intended state – unspoilt and resilient.

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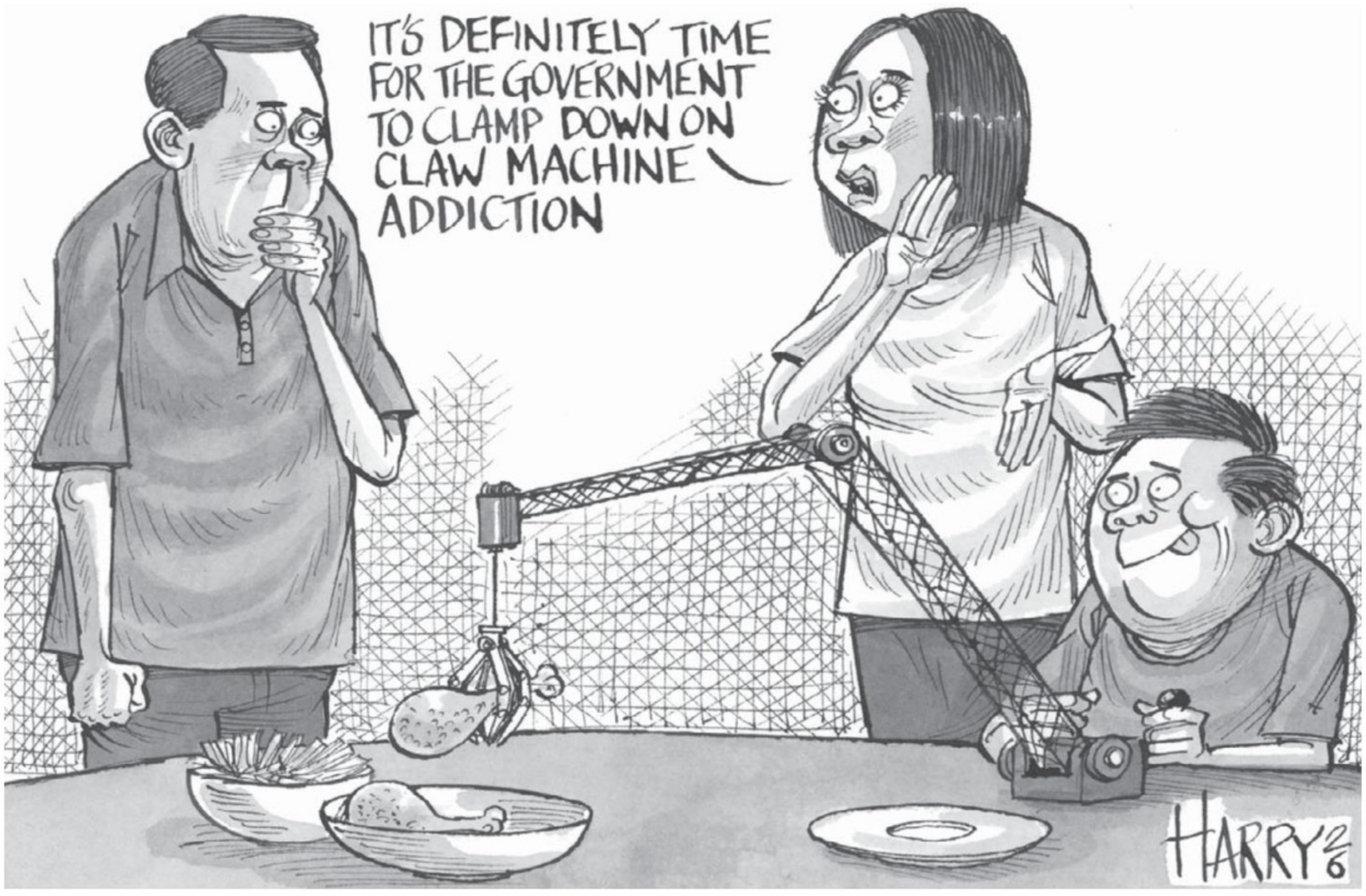

Power a bright spot

Nicholas Spiro says China's relative resilience to the energy shock and its cheap and abundant electricity supply are advantages in the AI race

Earlier this year, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang likened artificial intelligence (AI) to "a five-layer cake". At the top are applications, such as chatbots. The layer below is the software, which includes language models. Further down are infrastructure and memory chips.

The bottom layer is the most important. "At the foundation is energy," Huang said, noting that "energy is the first principle of AI infrastructure and the binding constraint on how much intelligence the system can produce".

Driving the AI boom is the US-China battle for technological supremacy. At the heart of the race is the buildout of data centres. According to Bank of America, AI-related capital expenditure globally is expected to triple over the next five years to US$1.2 trillion. While the US accounts for the bulk of the investment, China's share is forecast to reach 27 per cent by 2030.

Before the "DeepSeek moment" in January last year, China's AI ambitions were perceived to be constrained by US export restrictions that made it hard for companies to buy or build the advanced memory chips AI models rely on. In a July report, Morgan Stanley said the availability of advanced chips had been "the biggest risk" to the Chinese data centre/AI growth engine.

Yet since the energy crisis triggered by the war in Iran erupted, the narrative around China's data centre market has shifted towards the strengths of the sector. The bottom layer of Huang's cake – the electricity vital to building digital infrastructure – has become even more critical to the outlook for data centres globally.

China's relative resilience to the energy shock, accentuated by the acute vulnerabilities of other Asian economies, has drawn attention to the country's abundant and cheap electricity. As Nomura noted in an April 2 report, the power sector "is almost self-sufficient on primary sources: it uses almost no natural gas and oil and relies heavily on coal, which is mainly mined in China". The report points to the "rapid progress" in incorporating renewable energy sources and to the sector being heavily regulated.

Moreover, China has increased its electricity production dramatically in the past two decades, building its power system at a scale and speed unheard of in the West.

"Wind and solar additions may enable China to meet its growing power demand from these two sources alone in the coming years," the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies said.

Not only is electricity in China 30-60 per cent cheaper than in the US and Europe, there are no power supply constraints on building data centres. In the US, the energy-hungry facilities are expected to face an electricity shortfall of 45 gigawatts (GW) by 2028.

In October, AI company OpenAI said the disparity in power generation between the US and China was putting US leadership in AI at risk. China's competitive edge in electricity generation is a boon to the data centre market, one of the best performing segments of the country's commercial property industry.

The results of CBRE's latest investor intentions survey for China showed that while respondents expected further declines in the prices of commercial real estate assets this year, they believed data centre capital values would rise or remain stable.

"This optimism is primarily driven by the explosive growth in demand for AI computing power, the scarcity of energy quotas and licensing resources in core cities, and the sector's appeal to investors through long-term leases and stable cash flows," CBRE said.

Part of the appeal of the sector is its sheer size. Beijing alone has more than 2GW of operational capacity, making it the world's second-largest data centre market after the US state of Virginia. Rystad Energy expects China's data centre capacity to nearly double by 2030 to 60GW, with AI-ready facilities accounting for nearly half of the installed capacity.

Moreover, no other leading data centre market enjoys stronger policy support. Beijing has made the development of data centres a strategic priority, "with a dual focus on efficiency and renewable integration", Rystad Energy said.

An "Eastern Data, Western Computing" strategy launched in 2022 called for channelling plentiful power resources in the country's western regions to process computing workload generated in the eastern parts to meet AI-driven demand, creating eight major computing hubs.

Data centre developers in China do not have to contend with the backlash against the growth of digital infrastructure in the US. Acceptance of AI is particularly high in China, according to the results of a KPMG survey last year.

"Unlike in the US where social resistance and grid congestion often stall projects, China treats data centres as critical new infrastructure, offering robust policy support and streamlined approval processes," said Ben Teh, senior director in the capital markets team for East China at JLL.

To be sure, there are significant risks. The biggest one is overbuilding. A data centre construction boom led to a misallocation of resources, resulting in some poorly managed and underperforming assets. However, this has been a catalyst for tighter regulation and scrutiny of new projects, contributing to a more efficient and mature market.

The US$4 billion sale last September by US private equity fund Bain Capital of its Chinese data centre portfolio to a local consortium involving institutional investors "reinforc[ed] the shift towards domestic institutional control", Savills said.

At a time when concerns about energy security and the impact of AI are rife, the underlying strengths of China's data centre market have become much more apparent.

Nicholas Spiro is a partner at Lauressa Advisory

HK should study how Singapore awards contracts

Ruiwang Yu says a system where the lowest bid wins encourages a race to the bottom, while rewarding offers close to the average promotes honest pricing

As Hong Kong prepares for another major push in public works, one question deserves far more attention than it has received: are we buying infrastructure in a way that is sustainable for the construction industry and the public as a whole?

In his February budget, Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-po announced that HK$150 billion will be transferred from the Exchange Fund to support the Northern Metropolis and other infrastructure projects in the coming two years. This major commitment of public resources signals that the government intends to keep the works programme moving despite financial pressure. That makes it even more important to ask whether our tender evaluation system is producing healthy competition.

At present, Hong Kong's tender price evaluation method for infrastructure projects generally gives the highest price score to the lowest bid. That score normally accounts for 60 per cent of the total, with the remaining 40 per cent based on technical attributes. As recent research from New Zealand pointed out, once price is given a weighting higher than 25-30 per cent, it is typically the deciding factor.

On the surface, the approach appears to protect taxpayers. In practice, it encourages underbidding, squeezes margins and creates unhealthy conditions across the industry's long supply chain. In recent years, we have seen several instances of construction firms failing to pay workers' wages on time.

Singapore offers a useful contrast. In many public procurements there, the bid closest to the average price receives the highest pricing score, with those that are significantly above or below the norm scoring less well. This is not a rejection of competition. It is a recognition that bids clustering around a realistic market price are often more credible than those driven to the bottom.

The difference between these two approaches is not merely technical. It shapes contractor behaviour. If the system primarily rewards the lowest price, firms have every incentive to cut deeper than their rivals. If the system rewards the bid closest to the average, firms are encouraged to price more honestly and realistically. One system pushes the market towards the floor; the other anchors it around a fair midpoint.

The consequences can be seen in the relationship between tender prices and general inflation. In Hong Kong, the civil engineering works tender price index (TPI) has, over the past 20 years, shown greater volatility than the consumer price index (CPI). While the CPI has moved in a relatively gradual and predictable manner, tender prices have swung sharply, surging in some periods then falling back steeply in others.

This is not what one would expect in a healthy market where prices broadly reflect changes in wages and material costs. Instead, it suggests repeated cycles of margin compression, followed by corrections.

By contrast, Singapore's TPI appears to move more smoothly and more closely aligns with its CPI. Stability is not only good for contractors; it is good for clients, consultants, subcontractors, suppliers, insurers, banks and workers. A steadier market allows firms to plan, invest and retain talent.

Some might argue that the "lowest bid wins" tendency simply reflects market discipline. This overlooks the structure of the construction sector. Main contractors do not operate in isolation. Every works contract sits atop a long chain of subcontractors, labour teams, equipment and testing providers, logistics companies and material suppliers.

When a main contractor wins with an abnormally low bid, the financial pressure is often transmitted downstream. Payments become tighter, variations more contentious and procurement decisions more defensive. Smaller firms at the end of the chain bear the heaviest strain.

This has wider consequences. It pushes firms to focus on survival rather than capability building. It also increases the risk of disputes, claims and delays as contractors seek to recover what they cannot earn through the tendered sum. In the worst case, it can lead to compromised workmanship, weakened resilience or even business failure. None of this serves the public interest.

This is why Singapore's method deserves serious study in Hong Kong.

A healthy industry is not built on suppressed margins. It is built on fair competition, predictable pipelines, competent delivery and sustainable pricing. Because infrastructure has such a long supply chain, the benefits of healthy procurement spread far beyond contractors. If we are to get the most from infrastructure spending, tender evaluation must evolve. Rewarding the lowest price might look prudent, but rewarding the most realistic price is the wiser course.

Ruiwang Yu is a doctoral student in the Department of Building and Real Estate at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and a chartered civil engineer

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OPINION

Locking out the world

Zhou Xiaoming says the Global South deserves better than a monopoly that builds tech walls

In global discourse, a script has been handed to us: the United States and China are locked in a "tech race". But this is really a misnomer. True competition requires a level playing field. When one runner trips the other to ensure victory, it's not a competition; it's cheating.

So, when Washington deploys an arsenal of sanctions, export controls and diplomatic strong-arming to hamstring China's technological ascent, it is not competing. It is an act of suppression.

This reflects a deliberate strategy to preserve American supremacy in the technologies of the future. Take 6G for example. Washington's intent is clear: by bundling development with "trusted" supply chains and alliance politics, it is working to build a new global regime centred on US-led standards and closed loops, rather than a universal, open-access model.

The US obsession with retaining its crown is not rooted in advancing humanity's collective interests; it is about preserving a monopoly. The US has used patent barriers, export bans and price gouging to act as the gatekeeper of modernisation.

As a result, the spread of technology is channelled through a system of sluice gates. This systematic hindrance builds a high wall, shutting out the Global South and locking developing nations permanently at the bottom of the global value chain.

The impact on the Global South is a daily reality of exclusion. Nowhere is this more visible than in agriculture.

American giants have weaponised intellectual property laws to monopolise seeds. This forces African farmers into a cycle of debt, buying seeds at inflated prices while being blocked from traditional replanting practices. In South Africa, many smallholders have been forced to the brink of bankruptcy through the planting of genetically modified seeds that are ill-suited to local weather and require patented chemical fertiliser and pesticides.

In Burkina Faso, after adopting Monsanto's genetically modified organism (GMO) seeds in 2008, farmers sank into debt because they had to consistently buy new seeds and pay royalties.

The information sector tells a similar story. From the 1970s to the 1980s, the Brazilian information sector experienced robust development. Local manufacturers accounted for 80 per cent of the domestic market. Cobra, a Brazilian computer manufacturer founded in 1974, was second only to IBM by 1984. It had the most microcomputers after the US and Japan.

Yet, Washington's actions crushed the thriving industry. In 1985, the Ronald Reagan administration launched a Section 301 investigation and waged a trade war that led to Brazil opening up its market to US firms.

US tech dominance also means exorbitant prices for some healthcare. American pharmaceutical giants have leveraged patents to monopolise raw materials like hyaluronic acid – used in cataract surgery – driving prices sky-high. As a result, poorer people in Africa and Southeast Asia have been deprived of surgery that could prevent them from going blind.

American technological supremacy also poses security risks. The weaponisation of surveillance tools undermines the digital sovereignty of the Global South. Whistleblower Edward Snowden's revelations exposed how the US National Security Agency spied on countries from Brazil to India. So when Washington puts restrictions on Huawei's 5G, the real concern is clear: if countries switch to Chinese telecoms, America loses its ability to snoop on their people and leaders.

Moreover, American military technological supremacy has emboldened Washington to wage wars with impunity: invading Iraq, on false pretences of Baghdad possessing weapons of mass destruction; kidnapping Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and his wife; assassinating Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (in a joint operation with Israel), as well as bombing Iranian bridges, hospitals, power plants and factories.

> **The US has used patent barriers, export bans and price gouging to act as the gatekeeper of modernisation**

Indeed, being a technological laggard is tantamount to letting Washington assert its dominance, leaving many countries in constant fear. Even allies such as Canada and Denmark have not been spared from attempted coercion.

In contrast, China offers a stark, refreshing alternative: a tech path that is open, inclusive and focused on lifting everyone up. Instead of hoarding tech, China shares it – turning once-unaffordable innovations into tools for shared progress.

In solar energy, China's large-scale production has sliced panel prices by over 90 per cent, making solar power cheaper than fossil fuels in sun-drenched regions worldwide. With 80 per cent of the global solar panel market, China isn't just selling affordable, high-quality products, it is also sharing its expertise with other countries.

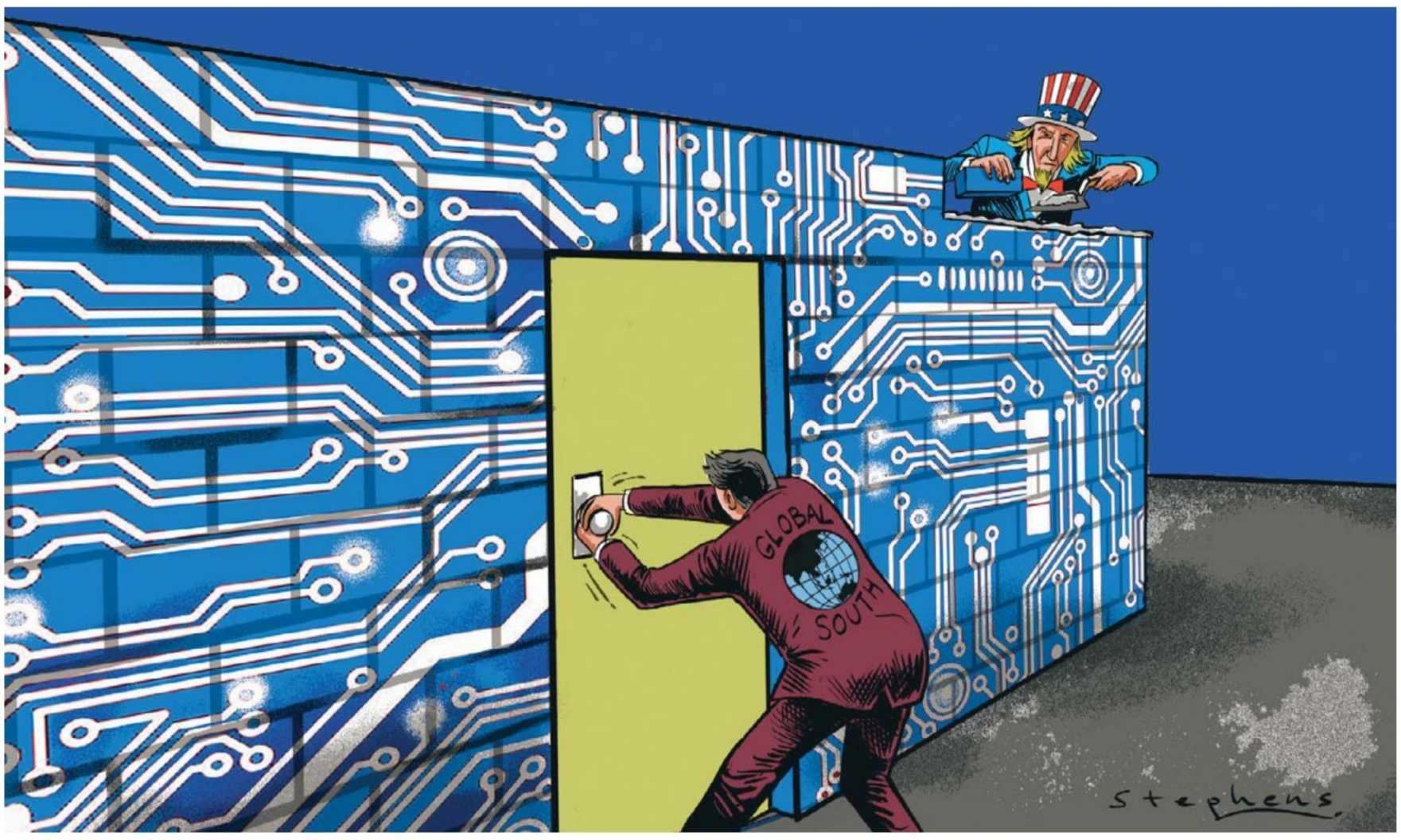
In Nigeria, for example, the transfer of complete solar panel production technology has enabled the construction of a local manufacturing plant that produces hundreds of thousands of panels yearly, enabling the country to power rural homes with locally made solar energy.

In agricultural technology, Chinese and Kenyan scientists have developed drought-resistant seeds that have boosted yields by 50 per cent for farmers, and trained a number of agronomists, as the East African country cuts dependency on agricultural imports.

In artificial intelligence, China embraces open-source methods as a pathway, with largely free commercial use, to democratise access.

Technology's value lies in diffusion, adaptation and shared progress. If Washington keeps weaponising technology, building walls and prioritising control, it will not only stifle global advancement but also isolate itself from future innovation. True leadership is not about hoarding power; it is about lifting others up. The world deserves better than a monopoly that leaves developing countries in the dust.

Zhou Xiaoming is a senior fellow at the Centre for China and Globalisation in Beijing and a former deputy representative of China's Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office in Geneva



'Made in Europe' law sets stage for showdown with China

Nikola Mikovic says Beijing has urged the EU to drop what it sees as a discriminatory initiative

Amid the trade war with the United States, the last thing China needs is an economic confrontation with the European Union – Beijing's major export destination. But with the EU seemingly determined to protect its market by introducing measures that many see as controversial, an economic stand-off appears inevitable.

When European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen blamed China last June for showing an "unwillingness to live within the constraints of the rules-based international system", it was an indication the bloc was dissatisfied with relations with Beijing. In 2024, the EU imposed tariffs of up to 35.3 per cent on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs), citing unfair state subsidies that allow China to position itself as a key player in the European car market.

Although Brussels and Beijing agreed in January to take steps towards resolving their dispute, things have not returned to normal. The European Commission is pushing a "Made in Europe" law – formally known as the Industrial Accelerator Act – designed to bolster local industries against competition from China. The legislation also aims to strengthen the EU's industrial base in response to rising global economic rivalry and a growing reliance on non-EU suppliers in key sectors.

China, however, sees Brussels' initiative as discrimination. It has urged the EU to remove what it sees as discriminatory requirements against foreign investors, local content requirements, mandatory intellectual property and technology transfer requirements, and public procurement restrictions from the legislation.

From a Chinese perspective, the EU's move can certainly be regarded as discrimination. But non-EU European countries may also have grounds to view it as unfair.

French liberal Christophe Grudler, a member of the European Parliament, will lead negotiations on the Made in Europe law. He argues that it should include closely integrated countries such as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. But what about the Balkan nations that have spent decades in the EU's "eternal waiting room", hoping to join the bloc? And why does Made in Europe not include countries such as Ukraine, Moldova or Belarus?

Although Europe is much broader than the EU, Brussels appears to be defining it in a more exclusive, narrow way. Such an approach leaves room for some non-EU nations to strengthen their economic relations with China. Serbia is an example.

Over the past decade, Serbia and China have developed a "steel friendship", with Beijing becoming one of Belgrade's top economic partners. Chinese companies are building manufacturing plants for car parts all over the Balkan country, transforming it into a key European production hub.

> **Although Europe is much broader than the EU, Brussels appears to be defining it in a more exclusive, narrow way**

Beijing's strategy is clear: as Brussels seeks to impose more tariffs on goods made in China, it is using Serbia as a base to access the EU market. The problem, however, is that if relations between Brussels and Beijing deteriorate further, Serbia – surrounded by EU states and candidate countries – is likely to come under pressure to limit its "steel friendship" with China.

Fully aware of this, the Chinese leadership appears to be seeking alternative strategies to address its trade issues with the EU. China is a world-leading supplier of a key strategic resource: rare earth metals. This gives it significant leverage over the EU, which is critically dependent on imported rare earths. China can therefore impose tariffs not only on these materials but also on finished goods such as batteries, electronics and other hi-tech products.

Beijing's warning of countermeasures against the EU's proposed "Made in Europe" policy signals that the rare earth card – whether in the form of another export suspension or tariff increases – is undoubtedly on the table. But if the EU continues to tighten restrictions on Chinese vehicles and potentially other goods, it could seriously hit China's car sector.

Chinese carmakers remain heavily dependent on external markets, especially Europe. Although they have secured a dominant position in the Russian market and increased EV sales in other regions, such as the Asia-Pacific and Latin America, Europe remains a crucial destination for growth.

According to the China Passenger Car Association, China has the potential to increase its EV exports to the EU by 20 per cent annually. Chinese plans to build an EV plant in Serbia are almost certainly part of a strategy to sustain and expand its access to the European market. The EU, however, does not seem willing to absorb such a volume of Chinese cars, as it aims to protect its own troubled automotive industry.

But that is easier said than done, especially without access to Russian energy. Over the decades, European economies have developed with the help of relatively cheap Russian oil and natural gas. That changed after the Ukraine war as the EU sought to "decouple" from Moscow in terms of energy. Now it is China that is a major buyer of Russian fossil fuels, often at discounted rates, which allows it to strengthen its automotive industry.

Aware of its competitive advantage over the EU, China is by no means interested in reining in its "no limits" partnership with Moscow, despite Brussels' repeated criticism of Beijing's approach to the Ukraine conflict. The EU's most recent inclusion of Chinese entities in its 20th round of sanctions against Russia is clearly yet another source of pressure on China's leadership.

Given that sanctions, tariffs and countermeasures in EU-China relations have become the norm, Brussels' latest move is unlikely to be the last and economic tensions are likely to intensify.

Nikola Mikovic is a freelance journalist, researcher and analyst based in Serbia

LETTERS

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Rules and bans are not enough to keep children safe online

The attitudes of children and parents on the use of mobile phones today call for dialogue. Photo: AFP

China has taken some of the most far-reaching steps globally to regulate children's digital lives. From regulations limiting how long children can play video games to the Cyberspace Administration of China's "minor mode" rolled out on mobile devices last year, policymakers have taken decisive, forward-thinking steps. Yet new global research suggests that Chinese families themselves remain divided on whether outright bans are the next step forward.

Preliminary findings from Family First, a Varkey Foundation initiative, reveal that while 64 per cent of Chinese parents support a social media ban for under-16s, only 50 per cent of their children agree. The data comes from the world's first global intergenerational study on under-16 social media bans, conducted across 15 countries, surveying children, parents, grandparents and Gen Z respondents.

China's figures sit in the middle of a striking global spectrum. Parental support is far higher in Malaysia (77 per cent), India (75 per cent) and France (74 per cent), and markedly lower in Japan (38 per cent) and Nigeria (39 per cent). Among children, China's 50 per cent supporting a ban ranks third globally, well above the 37 per cent global average. Perhaps most revealing is the Gen Z perspective. In China, 50 per cent of Gen Z respondents back a ban, virtually mirroring the global average of 51 per cent. That the first generation raised on social media is this ambivalent about its own digital habitat ought to give us all pause.

As a researcher in education and a parent, I see these numbers as a call for dialogue. China's existing regulatory architecture, from content classification rules and device-level controls to screen-time limits, has laid important groundwork that few nations can match. The opportunity now is to complement those protections with the conversations that need to happen within families and classrooms.

The generational divide this research exposes is fundamentally a communication gap. Parents perceive risk; children perceive autonomy and connection. Bridging that divide requires building on existing safeguards with sustained digital literacy education that equips young people to navigate online spaces critically and responsibly.

Chinese educators, parents and policymakers should pay close attention. The strongest digital protections are those shaped by an understanding of family dynamics, with policy and dialogue working hand in hand.

Marina Watt, doctoral student in education, University of Bristol

Leadership change is not the cure-all it is made out to be

I am amazed by how people think that individual leadership changes can solve big fundamental problems.

In football, big English clubs have been repeatedly firing their head coaches when players underperform or when conflicts arise. For instance, in recent years, we have seen Manchester United replace Erik ten Hag with Ruben Amorim, Tottenham Hotspur getting Thomas Frank after dismissing Ange Postecoglou, and Chelsea getting Liam Rosenior to replace Enzo Maresca. All of them ran into problems and were sacked or resigned.

In Washington, or Mar-a-Lago, US President Donald Trump thought that bringing regime change to Venezuela and Iran would make America great again. He ended up smashing decades of established international order, taking the world's geopolitics and economy into a new era of uncertainty.

Interestingly, even though supporters of the Democrats disagree with Trump on many areas, they seem to agree that a change in leadership will solve problems, pinning their hopes on the midterm elections this November and on the next presidential elections in 2028.

I do not think regime change can have much of a positive impact if political leaders and policymakers are more interested in politicking than undertaking deep and meaningful reforms.

The United States had Joe Biden as president for four years from 2021 to 2025, and eight years of leadership under Barack Obama from 2009 to 2017. How much did they do for the country? Four years of Biden's leadership were marred by an influx of illegal immigrants, inflation ticking up, and homelessness in major cities like San Francisco. There continued to be gun violence and school shootings, as well as the proliferation of illegal drugs, fuelling grievances and the rise of Trump.

If the Democrats return to power in 2028, the US may cease to be an aggressor of foreign countries. But could the Democrats avoid their past failures? Do they have what it takes to make the US truly great again, as a safe, welcoming and attractive destination for investors, immigrants and travellers from around the world?

Those committed to national prosperity and global stability should think deeper than leadership change.

Tony Cheung, Kennedy Town

Opinion

Trump is coming to a China that has moved on

The country no longer looks to an erratic America as a model to emulate, but more as a distraction to be managed.

Jacob Dreyer

SHANGHAI When I first moved to Shanghai from Virginia in 2008, China still looked up to America. Much of what China did, how it saw itself, what it strove for and its place in the world was measured against "Meiguo" — the "beautiful country" — as America is known in Chinese.

Fresh out of college, I had no work experience. But just being American was enough. I landed jobs at top high schools and universities where I taught classes such as Western culture. But there wasn't really a curriculum. All the schools and students seemed to want was simple proximity to a person who came from this country of wealth, cultural power and confidence. One school's annual highlight was its talent show. I sang R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly," and a friend of mine showed off a skateboarding trick — clumsy tutorials on how to navigate an unbuttoned American way that the students felt was their future.

Things are different now.

When President Trump arrives here in China in mid-May for a planned meeting with President Xi Jinping, there will be the usual expectations of potential trade deals or a reset of an often troubled relationship. But Mr. Trump may want to temper his expectations.

Deng Xiaoping, the former Chinese leader, once said: "If China wants to be rich and strong, it needs America." But this isn't the same country that once looked to a U.S. president's visit as a moment of global validation. It is a country where the realization has dawned that it may have learned all it can from America and has begun to chart its own course.

This was bound to happen as China grew stronger and richer. But Mr. Trump has accelerated this shift. China's people have watched with a mix of fascination and revulsion as the president — through his abortive tariff wars, the war with Iran and callow allegiance to financial markets — has completed America's transformation from a model to emulate to a troublesome distraction to be managed. With sinking approval ratings and potential losses awaiting in the midterm elections, Mr. Trump will arrive in Beijing a more diminished figure in Chinese eyes than perhaps any visiting U.S. president.

This matters, both for the visit itself and for the future of the relationship between the two countries. China's leaders, aware of Mr. Trump's weakness and perfidy, are unlikely to strike any meaningful bargains with him. His actions strengthen China's Communist-ruled system at home by making it look superior by comparison.

Many Chinese people increasingly view the United States less as the lodestar it once was and more as a cautionary tale. Popular sentiment in China is of course state-managed, but it resonates because it mirrors what the Chinese see for themselves. I hear it in daily conversations: Chinese friends who return from America with tales of homelessness, dilapidation and political rancor, which contrast sharply with China's clean and safe cities, gleaming infrastructure and political stability.

I recently joined a gathering of a Shanghai book club whose members are predominantly young Chinese professionals from technology, finance and other fields. After debating a book about China's rise, the discussion slid into what ails America. Nearly all of the participants had studied or lived in the United States, spoke fluent English and could have stayed there, as millions of Chinese have over the last century. But they came home. Several of them said they sensed invisible barriers to what they could achieve in the United States. Others said Chinese government incentives made it easier to start their businesses. Women in the group said they felt unsafe in America. One member who travels regularly to Silicon Valley for business said the decline in living standards has become palpable. "You can feel that everyone has lost the sense of vitality and optimism that characterized the past," he said.

Contemplating a future in which the United States is no longer the unquestioned world leader is an unfamiliar, daunting feeling. Despite Beijing's often hostile rhetoric toward the United States over the years, many Chinese citizens still think of the United States fondly and take for granted that the postwar U.S.-led world order provided the peace and stability that China needed to prosper. They worry that China isn't ready to fill those shoes and lead a fracturing world.

China's leaders, aware of his weakness and perfidy, are unlikely to strike any meaningful bargains during a meeting this month.

China, after all, has its own problems. Economic growth has slowed over the years as the country transitions from a dirty, old industrial model to one oriented around artificial intelligence, green energy, robotics and other advanced technologies. Many ordinary Chinese aren't sure how they or their children will fit into that brave new world. There is gloom over things such as high youth unemployment and the sense that rural communities are being left behind. The uncertainty is causing many to shun marriage and having children, which is causing a population decline. A confident, dynamic America once served as a symbol that challenges like these could be overcome. Now, for many, that source of comfort is gone.

Still, there is a clear sense about the need to move past America. Mr. Trump will be gone in two years, but Mr. Xi can rule for as long as he wants and has laid out ambitious plans that are likely to survive him. Those plans include a China that is at the center of new types of energy, the use of data and technologies like artificial intelligence for urban management, the delivery of public services, cheaper health care and better access to education. Chinese people also see that the world is increasingly open to adopting Chinese technology, products, investment and other solutions, maybe even its governance ideas.

For Americans, it's a strange sensation to see a society that, in many ways, is passing us by. But just as Deng Xiaoping, after the chaotic decades of Mao Zedong's rule, looked to America to repair his country, perhaps America should now look more at what China is doing right. We don't need to take on its political system — China, of course, hasn't adopted ours. But when it comes to industrial focus, farsighted infrastructure investment and long-term national planning, there is now much that we can learn from China.

It's encouraging that Mr. Trump wants to work on the relationship. But maintaining a tense stability is about all he can hope for. When he lands in Beijing, it should be with the full recognition of the new dynamic that he, more than any previous president, has helped bring about: a China that is now just as likely to set the agenda, to show the way forward, as America once did.

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JACOB DREYER *is a writer and editor who has lived in Shanghai for most of the past 18 years.*

The U.S. will pay dearly for its energy arrogance

The idea that America is immune to the oil crisis is mistaken.

Gregory Brew

In January 1980, President Jimmy Carter made a bold promise: If any foreign power tried to dominate the Persian Gulf or the region's vast oil reserves, it would be met with American military force. By guaranteeing the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz over the next 45 years, America signaled to the rest of the world that oil from the Middle East, even with all its volatility, was a secure bet.

In just two months, the United States has transformed from a bulwark of the international energy system into its biggest source of insecurity. And while America may emerge relatively unscathed from the energy crisis it started by going to war with Iran, the long-term implications for its oil-based economy could be profoundly destabilizing.

The global oil economy is, in many ways, an American creation. In the early 20th century, major American companies discovered oil throughout Latin America and the Middle East and, for a time, dominated the oil industries in those regions. The United States was the world's largest oil producer and consumer throughout the first half of the century.

After the oil shocks of the 1970s, the United States led efforts to create the International Energy Agency, through which major industrial economies coordinated their energy policies. Washington also helped push for the formation of a global system of strategic oil reserves and other measures meant to improve the resilience of the global energy economy. By the time of the so-called Carter Doctrine, it was clear to the United States that its national security hinged on access to Persian Gulf energy, which then supplied 25 percent of U.S. imports.

This imperative to defend access to Middle East oil has been weakening, however. Since 2010, a boom in U.S. oil and gas production has reduced the nation's dependence on imports. By 2020, Gulf oil met less than 10 percent of America's oil consumption, creating an understandable belief in some circles in Washington that the United States no longer needed to remain embroiled in Middle East affairs. Donald Trump took this idea further, introducing in his first administration the more dubious notion that the United States was now "energy independent," and immune to oil shocks.

From this belief came a dangerous new confidence: Far from depending on the global oil market, the United States could now shape it in ways that served its geopolitical interests. It deployed sanctions aggressively against opponents — Russia, Iran and Venezuela — to limit their ability to sell oil. The United States has also threatened to place harsh tariffs on Canada, which is today the single largest source of its oil imports.

From sanctions and tariffs, the Trump administration has moved to seizing tankers in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean, arresting the president of Venezuela and launching an air campaign against Iran aimed in part to, in Mr. Trump's words, "take the oil" by installing a more compliant regime.

The war against Iran has not proven as successful as the operation in Venezuela. And once the United States was apparently unwilling to keep protecting the passage of oil through the Strait of Hormuz, the global economy was thrown into turmoil.

FLO MEISSNER

For the United States, the short-term effects of the tightening of the world's oil supply may be manageable. With so much oil of its own, America won't face the same kinds of shortages and price spikes that affect other nations. But the idea that this country is immune is a mistaken one. The United States still imports roughly one-third of all the crude oil it consumes. The domestic price of oil products like gasoline is affected by changes in the global price, and the global market will be shaped for the rest of the year, if not longer, by the disruptive effects of this war.

More significantly, the collapse of the Carter Doctrine undermines the security of the global oil economy. Even if the Strait of Hormuz reopens, markets will remain on edge, waiting to see if Iran closes it once more. Oil coming out of the Gulf will be viewed as more risky — and likely more expensive as a result. Countries will almost certainly rethink their energy security plans and shift their economies away from dependence on imports, including of oil and natural gas.

This could prove to have the most profound consequences for the United States. Under President Trump, America has seemingly embraced its status as a petrostate, dropping incentives and programs to encourage the growth of renewable sources of energy like wind and solar. Right now, there's a market for our oil and gas, and for the short term that won't change, since uncertainty over the Gulf makes the United States a more attractive source of supply.

But in the medium to long term, this crisis will create greater uncertainty over the stability of these energy sources. More countries will pursue alternatives, including clean energy technologies where China has a decisive edge. The United States could see its export market diminish as demand for oil and gas slows, threatening a trillion-dollar domestic industry and the thousands of jobs it provides. American consumers could also be stuck with polluting fuels prone to price spikes while the rest of the world moves on.

The American preoccupation with producing, consuming and controlling oil may ultimately prove a misplaced priority: a scramble to control the energy resources of the 20th century, as the rest of the world embraces the cleaner technologies that will power the 21st century. And while the relevance of the Carter Doctrine may have declined, the stability it represented will be sorely missed.

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The fascinating stories of dying global tongues

John McWhorter

One good book can lead to another.

My latest literary journey began when I followed Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's expedition to the Pacific in Craig Fehrman's "This Vast Enterprise: A New History of Lewis & Clark."

Lewis, Clark and several of the 30 men with them kept detailed journals, and Fehrman has drunk deeply from them as well as from recollections of the Native American leaders they encountered along the way. I felt like I was sharing the vistas, smells, discomforts, injuries, terrors (grizzly bears!) and occasional joys of an expedition now over 200 years back.

One of the men, York, was enslaved by Clark. Clark doesn't come off well: Fehrman vividly depicts his unquestioning sense of York as less than human despite the fact that York displays the same, if not more, smarts, mettle and bravery as the white men. Fehrman is especially good at recreating the state of mind of Sacagawea, the Native American woman they brought along as an interpreter and sometime guide, who gave birth to her son along the way, nursing and caring for an infant the rest of their journey.

Language issues tantalize me. Because historical sources on Black English before the late 19th century are sparse, it is unfortunate that there is no way of knowing how York spoke. But we get a better sense of the Native Americans' use of language. Sacagawea spoke no English. For nearly two years, she and the men usually communicated silently, with the Plains Sign Language used between many Native American tribes as well as by whites who needed to communicate with them.

On finding new horizons and saving a disappearing language.

Sacagawea's native language was Shoshone. Fewer people speak the language now, and efforts are being made to keep it alive through classes and printed materials. Language revitalizations like this are the subject of the journalist Sophia Smith Galer's "How to Kill a Language: Power, Resistance and the Race to Save Our Words." Once a language is no longer being passed on to children, it is increasingly likely to go extinct. Galer visits and reports on nine languages that are in, or are threatened with, this situation.

Galer casts a bright light on the massive linguistic diversity that the world seems set to lose, with about 3,000 of the world's 7,000 languages unlikely to see the next century. Often people don't even know that the languages are, well, languages. Galer starts with her mother and grandmother, Italian immigrants raising her in England and speaking among themselves both Italian and what they call "the dialect." They know no other name for it, but it is actually more like French, and Galer at first finds no information on it in print or online sources. In her grandmother's home village in northern Italy, she learns that it is Piacentino, no more like standard Italian than Spanish. Like countless other "dialects" in Italy and beyond, it is not long for this world as a spoken language.

Every language that dies takes with it such fascinating stories. Galer notes that the Karuk language of Native Californians has at least 10 words for distinct varieties and uses of acorns and no one generic word "acorn." In Jibbali, a relative of Arabic and Hebrew spoken in Oman, often some consonants are not actually pronounced but the tongue is placed as if they had been and you need to see it to know which word is being uttered. Understanding Jibbali requires watching as well as listening.

I wish the people keeping Shoshone alive well. However, I'm sure they know that the version of their language they bring back from the brink will be different from the original. Usually, a language that was down for the count but comes back is slimmed down from the journey. Kids can learn a language of fearsome complexity, but when adults are doing a lot of the learning, they tend to iron out the irregularities and take shortcuts around the more pitiless intricacies. This has happened with the kind of Irish most people speak today, and other languages. I hope Shoshone can hold on to as many of those nifty prefixes as possible.

Yet these new versions of a language are very much real language, vibrant and nuanced as human speech always is. One way to know is that Modern English began in a similar way. Viking invaders starting in the eighth century learned Old English as adults, and there were so many of them that their way of talking was a lot of what kids heard around them and took on. In a largely illiterate, oral society with schooling and media all but nonexistent, this Duolingo version of Old English became what English actually was. I am writing in what began as broken English. This is why, for example, English is unique among Indo-European languages in Europe in that it doesn't mark inanimate things with gender — too random for a busy Viking!

A beautiful demonstration of how streamlined language can still be nuanced and even sublime is, of all things, a Peanuts strip from 1969 in one of Fantagraphics' volumes of the whole run of the strip that I have been sampling lately. Linus is on a high from the last-minute victory in a football game he just saw on television: "The fans and the players were so happy they were rolling on the ground and hugging each other and dancing and everything! It was fantastic!" Charlie Brown asks, "How did the other team feel?"

The look Charles Schulz captures on Linus's face is so very real — the crinkly smile suggesting a surrendering kind of awe. Plus, he has his hands clasped over his belly as he holds the moment fast, facing forward away from Charlie Brown immersed in his inner reverie. Schulz captures demeanor and body language on a par with Vermeer or Velásquez here in a few strokes. That's what English can do despite not having as many bells and whistles as Shoshone.

And as to Charlie Brown's question, I now feel as if I know how the Lewis and Clark team felt, as well as how it feels to be one of the last speakers of a language. Fehrman and Galer both, like Schulz, scored a touchdown.

JOHN MCWHORTER *is an associate professor of linguistics at Columbia University.*

PABLO DELCAN

Lauren Sánchez Bezos and the fashion end times of 'The Devil Wears Prada 2'

Robin Givhan
Contributing Writer

When I look at photographs of Lauren Sánchez Bezos I see someone who loves fashion, although not at all in the way I do. My affection for it is rooted in respect for its beauty and creativity and in a fair amount of skepticism because of its stumbling acceptance of its social responsibilities. Her version of fashion exudes personal indulgence and broad disregard.

A plutocrat by marriage, she represents the industry's ultimate customer, with its ever-rising prices and shrinking sales. Fashion is pricing all but the most astoundingly wealthy out of the market.

In the just-opened film "The Devil Wears Prada 2" Justin Theroux plays a dastardly acquisitive tech titan named Benji Barnes, with clear echoes of her husband, the billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. The Barnes character happens to have a girlfriend who might remind you of Mrs. Sánchez Bezos. Their thirst for clout helps drive the film's plot.

On Monday, Mr. Bezos' real-life hundreds of billions of dollars propelled Mrs. Sánchez Bezos up the grand Fifth Avenue staircase of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, past a gantlet of photographers and into the Costume Institute Benefit, better known as the Met Gala, over which she and he were scheduled to preside as honorary co-chairs. The institute's exhibition this year, "Costume Art," is made possible by the Bezos largess. But the couple is so broadly unpopular in the fashion world and beyond that there were calls for a boycott of the gala.

Beyoncé is also supposed to be there, serving as an official co-chair, along with Nicole Kidman, Venus Williams and Condé Nast's chief content officer, Anna Wintour. But Mrs. Sánchez Bezos is the star of the Met Gala because she represents what fashion, buffeted by social and technological change, has surrendered to: economic inequality in human form, with pink, glossy lips, cinched up in a couture corset.

Taste is one more part of the culture for ruthless tech titans to attempt to optimize for their benefit. With Ms. Wintour's determined gatekeeping and the Costume Institute's intellectual concerns about human creativity, the Met Gala is the perfect laundromat for soulless tech money.

Both "The Devil Wears Prada" and its sequel stage fictional versions of the Met Gala for the cameras and star Meryl Streep as Miranda Priestly, a fictional version of Ms. Wintour. The first film captured the fabulousness of the fashion world. It also worked to give viewers the sense that its haughty, judgmental inhabitants were hard at work helping to make small lives feel bigger by the decisions they made huddled in a room going through "a pile of stuff."

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY MACALL POLAY/20TH CENTURY STUDIOS, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS, AND POOL PHOTO BY KENNY HOLSTON

I think about how the sharp-tongued Miranda might view Mrs. Sánchez Bezos: *A corset? In an evening gown? Groundbreaking.* The sequel depicts Miranda with her power and influence slipping. She's confronting the same tidal wave of financial challenges that the real-life fashion ecosystem is navigating.

The real-life Met Gala vs. the one onscreen.

Onscreen, the upheaval comes by way of data-driven technology, an awkward tycoon with no sense of style and the fashion-loving woman he aims to please. As Stanley Tucci's character, Nigel, says, he's reduced to creating "content that people scroll past as they pee." In real life, fashion magazines — and publications in general — are in trouble, and they're hoping the right billionaire will bail them out. (The Bezoses have been rumored to be considering buying Condé Nast, Vogue's parent company; when asked about it, Mrs. Sánchez Bezos told the writer Amy Chozick in The Times, "I wish!" and then, "No.")

With her donations, scholarships and grants, Mrs. Sánchez Bezos offers the industry some support beyond her expensive shopping habit. The Bezos Earth Fund awarded $34 million in grants to institutions developing environmentally neutral fabrics, and she directed $6.25 million from the Earth Fund to the Council of Fashion Designers of America to support innovation and education in sustainability. The industry readily grabs on. Some people are betting that she's the right billionaire.

According to Ms. Chozick's recent profile of her, Mrs. Sánchez Bezos just wants to be happy. And whenever she steps in front of cameras, dressed in a remarkable array of finery, she looks delighted. In an era of extreme economic inequality and financial instability, when California is looking to institute a billionaire tax and a tax on second homes in New York City is under consideration, Mrs. Sánchez Bezos moves about with ostentatious pleasure. She counts her 10-figure blessings, and wears her windfall on her back for all to see.

Her taste veers outside a palette of beige and gray cashmere — the approved sensibility of well-mannered, quiet money. She is willing to flash a wide smile or offer a pouty stare for the cameras rather than stare them down with an expression of bashful reserve or detached ennui, which is what serious women are supposed to do. She does not have the body of a 6-foot-tall 12-year-old boy, which is how high fashion still insists on defining an elegant female physique.

She defies these expectations — something that could be lauded. But she simply embraces a different cliché, an extreme version of femininity that's defined by a snatched waist and a cantilevered bosom.

She laments how little the public really knows about her. But provided the opportunity to tell her critics more, she refrains.

"I am not talking politics," she told The Times. "No, no, no, no, no. No way."

It's reasonable to believe that since she sat in a place of honor behind President Trump during his inauguration, she might have a few thoughts about the current administration. Mrs. Sánchez Bezos, who once worked in broadcast news, acknowledged the importance of journalism but offered no thoughts on her husband's drastic staff cuts at The Washington Post, which he owns (and where I used to work).

But she is willing to express her exasperation that the white lace bra readily visible under the Alexander McQueen suit she wore to Mr. Trump's swearing-in caused an online kerfuffle. She defines the problem as a scandal about lace, not her disregard for the dignity of an official function.

To draw the cameras, it helps that she has hired one of the best stylists money can buy, Law Roach, and collected an impressive array of very expensive stuff. She's done so from a feast of options. Costume not as art, but as merchandise. Perhaps she even scrolled past some of it while she was indisposed. As Miranda deftly shivved a would-be white knight, "You're not a visionary; you're a vendor."

Mrs. Sánchez Bezos' clothes don't demand that the public pay attention to *her* story. Or even the stories of the designers she wears. Or really, even fashion.

She has assembled a tote board of Bezos wealth. And if it tells any story at all, it's *his*.

ROBIN GIVHAN *is a Pulitzer Prize-winning fashion critic and a former senior critic at large for The Washington Post.*

America is officially an empire in decline

CALDWELL, FROM PAGE 1

attempt to join France and Israel in seizing the Suez Canal from Egypt in 1956, Britain did not try to hold territories it could no longer afford. It wound up on reasonably good terms with its former colonial possessions. Its disengagement was a success, though this can be hard to see because what was being managed was decline. Mr. Trump had a chance of pulling off something similar.

The assumption in Washington over the past decade has been that the world is engaged in a game of geostrategic musical chairs and the music is about to stop. China may soon overmatch us not just in military-industrial capacity but also in information technology. The world will harden into a new, less favorable geostrategic configuration. This is the last moment to reshape it in America's favor.

At first, Mr. Trump moved to oust China from its strongholds in the Western Hemisphere. Almost as soon as he returned to office, the United States pressured CK Hutchison, a Hong Kong-based multinational conglomerate with connections to China, to sell two ports in the Panama Canal Zone. Venezuela, dependent on China as a market for 80 percent of its oil exports, saw American troops abduct its leader Nicolás Maduro last winter. And Mr. Trump has warned that Cuba, a destination for Chinese investment, "is next." It will also be better, the thinking goes, if the United States has a more secure foothold near the North Pole (a foothold such as Greenland) when the time comes to divvy up the energy and mineral resources that global warming unlocks there. Whether or not this hemispheric policy is defensible, there is a coherence to it.

The attack on Iran was different. It was not a defensive consolidation; it was the assumption of a dangerous, open-ended responsibility. Yes, it might be better if the mullahs fell. But for the United States, an energy-independent country withdrawing to its own hemisphere, this is not a vital interest. War with Iran was not on the radar screen of anyone in the administration just a few months ago.

That is because the United States lacks the military means to impose its will on Iran in a long conflict. In 1991 a million soldiers from more than 40 countries were needed to reverse the invasion of Kuwait carried out by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, a country less sophisticated than Iran and a fraction of its size. When Iran and Iraq fought each other to a standstill in the 1980s, deaths ran into the hundreds of thousands on each side. The United States would have to send a significant portion of its armed forces — which total only 1.3 million troops — to stand a chance of subduing Iran, and that force, if successful, would have to stay for a long time.

It would be wrong to say the U.S. is trapped in the war it started. It has options.

The argument can be made that the United States no longer depends on mustering huge armies: It has sophisticated missiles and other standoff weapons. But those weapons are needed to defend allies and interests in other theaters, and the United States is depleting them. According to reporting in The Times, it has already used 1,100 of its long-range stealth cruise missiles, earmarked for potential conflicts in Asia, leaving just 1,500 in the stockpile, and fired an additional 1,000 Tomahawk cruise missiles, about 10 times as many as the military buys in an average year. American leaders have been scolding their European allies for years about the inadequacy of their fighting forces. But if one measures America's military might against our pretensions rather than our G.D.P., it is just as inadequate.

NAILA RUECHEL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

It would be wrong to say the United States is trapped in the war it started. It has options. But it is now going to pay a very steep price, no matter which of them it chooses. It can desist in Iran — having demonstrated, for no good reason, that its military is far less dominant than the world had assumed. Or it can draw resources from theaters that are of vital national interest, such as Europe and East Asia, to fund what the president refers to as his Iranian "excursion." Or it can resort to the extreme military options Mr. Trump darkly alluded to in social media posts starting in early April, which will redound to the everlasting shame of the country he leads. The United States stands to lose its reputation, its friends or its soul.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel urged this war on Mr. Trump because he, too, recognized the musical-chairs logic of the moment. Once the music stops, the United States may lack the firepower to protect Israel from its neighbors in the traditional manner and will probably lack the inclination. Ironically, the war's catastrophic outcome shows Mr. Netanyahu's basic understanding to have been sound: Israel's prospects for enlisting the United States in such anachronistic adventures were dwindling. Mr. Trump's gullibility provided Mr. Netanyahu with a last chance.

It is tempting to ask where in the process of imperial decline the United States now finds itself. It certainly has elements in common with Britain a century ago: deindustrializing, overcommitted, complacent. On the eve of World War I, Britain was dependent on Germany for industrial and even military technology — and unwilling to re-examine the free-trade system on which German supremacy had been built. By the eve of World War II, Britain was essentially bankrupt. There are parallels in America's dependence on China today.

The skepticism about American hegemony that led Americans to turn to Mr. Trump was a healthy one. If a globalist system built on free trade, democracy promotion and mass migration is so great, Trump voters asked, then why have we had to borrow $35 trillion since we took it up? That's a genuinely good question. Mr. Trump was the perfect candidate for Americans who suspected something had gone wrong with their elites. His argument, basically, was that American-led globalism was so beneficial to politicians that once in power, they would defend it even against their voters, no matter what they said while campaigning. Events, alas, have proved him right.

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EDITORIALS

Illinois changes the label on school absenteeism, not the reality

The Illinois State Board of Education has recommended swapping out "chronic absenteeism," a metric that tracks how many students miss 10% of school days, for "consistent attendance," the percent of students who have been present for 90% or more of the school year.

It's the flip side of the same coin, but it's a tad Orwellian and it's also paired with a change that matters far more: how much attendance actually counts.

For those of us, including parents and watchdogs, who pay attention to the Illinois Report Card, one of the finest tracking tools in state government, in our view, this means you'll be seeing a revised set of metrics. These are the tools we use to understand how our public schools — collectively and individually — are performing.

Words matter, and so we took note of this shift.

Accountability matters, too, and ISBE's decision not to include attendance — excuse us, "consistent attendance" — as a core indicator in determining school designations, the state's primary ratings of performance, strikes us as wrongheaded. Under the new system, strong attendance can boost a school's ranking. But weak attendance will no longer count against it, a significant shift in how performance is judged.

Students navigate the hallway at a Chicago Public Schools high school in 2024. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Nationally, chronic absenteeism has become a standard part of school accountability systems, with most states including it in how they evaluate school performance. Illinois' shift would move in a different direction, treating attendance as something that can help, but no longer hurt, a school's standing.

Here's the thing: A school can't educate students who don't show up, and to that end it is essential to weigh whether that's happening when considering the performance of any given school. Research consistently shows that attendance is directly tied to grades and test scores.

We get it. Kids get sick, they go on trips, families deal with bereavement.

There are lots of legitimate reasons not to be at school for a few days a year, and we have no intention of playing hall cop on this issue.

Those everyday absences don't come close to explaining the scale of the problem. In Chicago Public Schools, a chronically absent student misses about 18 days. And in that district, 40% of students fit that description, compared with an average of 25% statewide. That scale of absence isn't a marginal issue, but one that is central to whether schools are functioning as intended.

One reason to critique these changes is a sincere appreciation for the data ISBE makes public. The Illinois Report Card is one of the best tools we have to understand school performance, hold leaders accountable and make informed decisions. Often, it reinforces the strength of many of our public schools.

We understand the argument that school leaders have less influence than families in terms of getting kids to the building. Attendance often is shaped by forces well beyond a school's control, including transportation, health, housing stability and the daily logistics of family life.

But as we've argued before, treating attendance as something outside a school's influence misses a critical part of the picture. Students are more likely to show up when school feels safe, when relationships with teachers and peers are strong, and when the classroom feels worth their time. The likelihood of real consequences for skipping out are a factor, too.

The latest research from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research suggests that conclusion is too limited. Yes, material barriers matter, but so do relationships, and those are squarely within a school's reach. Students are significantly more likely to attend when they feel known by adults in the building, when they trust their teachers and when school feels like a place where they belong. The consortium's January 2026 report finds that connection and trust are not soft concepts; they are measurable drivers of attendance, even after accounting for outside challenges.

That doesn't mean schools can solve poverty or eliminate every obstacle families face. But it does mean attendance isn't simply a reflection of circumstances at home. It is also a reflection of whether students feel seen, supported and engaged once they arrive — and whether they believe it matters that they show up at all.

All of these things matter when assessing and understanding school performance, not as a way to shame the folks leading them but to evaluate what's going on and to identify solutions, as well as being honest with stakeholders — parents, grandparents, taxpayers and the students themselves.

At the end of the day, what we call it — chronic absenteeism or consistent attendance — matters far less than whether the state is taking the problem seriously. This new system is not exactly a clear step in that direction.

A neighborhood shows how to defang the teen takeover. Let's scale that up

The word was out. In mid-April, teenagers intended to amass in large numbers on 53rd Street in Hyde Park in what Chicagoans have learned to dread — the so-called teen takeover.

Hyde Park had been through this just two weeks before. On March 30, a mob of teens gathered in the same spot and ran wild for hours, jumping on cars and leaving multiple vehicles badly damaged and residents fuming.

Afterward, a group of parents asked their police district to alert them the next time. And that opportunity came quickly. On April 12, police alerted the parent group that another teen takeover in the area was planned for April 14.

This time, the community was prepared.

With the blessing of the Chicago Police Department, Karen Calloway, principal of Kenwood Academy High School in the neighborhood, along with school staffers and dozens of parents congregated along 53rd Street before the teens arrived. The teenagers did indeed show up, but this time a mob of adults was there to greet them and watch them to ensure trouble didn't get started.

And, lo and behold, trouble didn't. Start, that is.

One teenage boy, upon arriving, raised his fists and called out, "Parent takeover, parent takeover," according to the Hyde Park Herald. Another, stepping off the bus with a couple of friends, looked around and asked, "Where's the trend?"

Instead of teens marauding through the neighborhood and damaging property, groups of friends got ice cream and slushies and enjoyed an unseasonably warm spring evening in the neighborhood.

These teen takeovers can lead to outcomes far worse than dented cars, of course. People die. In late November, after the annual Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Millennium Park, 14-year-old Armani Floyd was shot multiple times and died during an out-of-control teen gathering downtown. On the same night, another seven teens were injured by gunfire right by the Chicago Theatre. A 17-year-old boy was charged in February with multiple counts of attempted murder, among other charges, in the Chicago Theatre shooting.

We met recently with CPD Superintendent Larry Snelling and had a chance to ask him about the so-called parent takeover in Hyde Park and whether similarly direct parent involvement could help police in other neighborhoods as well.

Snelling enthusiastically approved and surprised us with this counterintuitive observation.

"A lot of these young people don't necessarily fear the police," he said. "They're not concerned about the police. But I think a lot of them would be more concerned if they saw their parents or their teachers there who could identify them and what they're doing. ... Now you have people you're going to have to look at every day when you go home or every single day when you go to school."

When we thought about it, what Snelling said made perfect sense. Mobs give people, whether teens or adults, the power of anonymity and encourage some of them to act in ways they never would if someone they knew could see them. Particularly an authority figure.

We asked the chief if the Hyde Park parent takeover is something that can be replicated in other Chicago neighborhoods.

"Absolutely," he replied. "I would welcome it 100%."

So, Chicago parents, here's your chance to get involved and make your city safer. Those of you with an organizational skill or proclivity, don't be shy. But, also, make sure to coordinate with CPD. Take it upon yourself to reach out to Chicago police and be ready to mobilize to keep a teen takeover coming to your neighborhood from turning into another tragedy. Communicate with your neighbors and fellow parents.

CPD generally gets an alert a couple of days beforehand of a teen takeover that's planned. Teens use social media to get the word out.

With a little planning, coordination and effort, Chicagoans can make their city a bit more livable and ensure, too, that their kids are safe when they get together with friends. And, in a socially atomized world where neighbors sometimes don't know each other's names, they can strengthen the ties in their community in the process.

ON THIS DAY 6 YEARS AGO

AN AMENDMENT TO RAISE TAXES?

The General Assembly's deadline to put constitutional amendments on the November ballot came and went with no fanfare. Reform-minded voters who have clamored for independently drawn legislative maps, for term limits on politicians, for a pension amendment to relieve taxpayers, will have to wait.

Lawmakers are not in session due to the coronavirus pandemic, and Gov. J.B. Pritzker is not pushing to get them back to Springfield anytime soon.

But let's be real. Even if the legislature were in session, even if a COVID-19 pandemic had not slowed government activity, even if hell froze over, House Speaker Michael Madigan and complacent Democrats would have blocked or stalled votes on fair maps, term limits and pension relief. Want proof? We have years of it.

What Madigan and complacent Democrats were eager to rush to the ballot is a proposal to raise taxes. The Pritzker Tax, which would switch Illinois from a flat income tax to a graduated tax with rates set by lawmakers, cruised through the General Assembly last May in record time. As with that tax proposal, lawmakers could have put the other proposals for constitutional changes on the ballot themselves. They just didn't.

Don't forget, the Democrats blocked citizen-driven efforts too. From a February 2018 editorial on a 2016 statewide, grassroots effort for a fair redistricting process:

"Nearly 600,000 people signed petitions... Poll after poll after poll shows overwhelming voter support for an amendment that would take mapmaking out of the hands of politicians.

"Every election cycle... Virtually all of them earnestly profess to believe that voters should pick their representatives, not the other way around... They say they support independent, transparent, fair redistricting.

"Yet once they're elected, they don't lift a finger to make it happen... Then they look the other way while (Madigan's) attorney gets a judge to kill it.

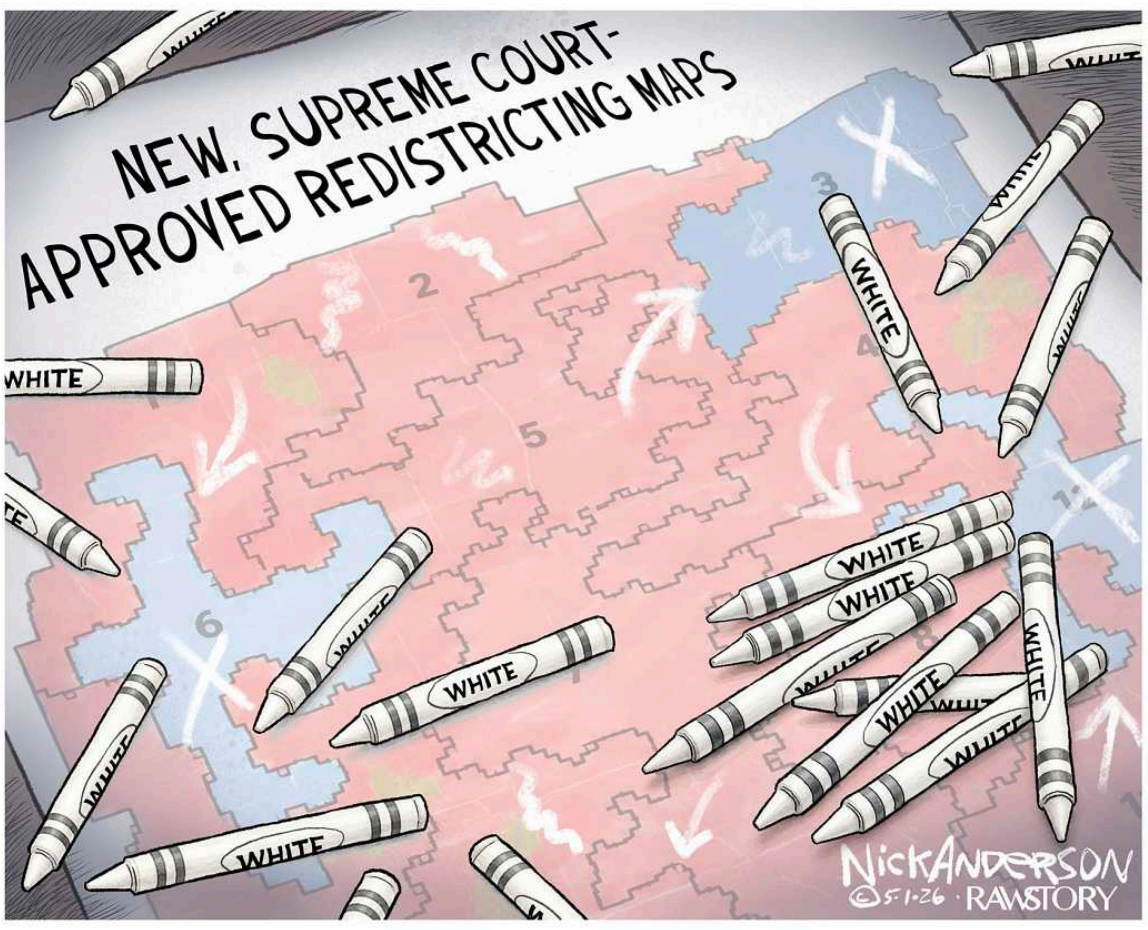
"Gerrymandering is bad for democracy, but it's good for Madigan... The state's legislative districts are so lopsided that most races field only one candidate. Voters have no choices... Their representatives don't answer to them — they answer to Madigan.

"And no, we're not suggesting Republicans wouldn't also rig the maps... Partisan mapmaking is a nationwide scandal..."

Once again, Illinois voters lost out on a chance to be heard on issues important to them... Next time? We're confident they'll come up with something.

Tribune editorial board, May 5, 2020

EDITORIAL CARTOON



NICK ANDERSON

OPINION

An EMV chip on a credit card is seen on April 13. **JENNY KANE/AP**

Illinois' credit card fee crackdown is a step toward fairness

By Rob Karr
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

A federal judge earlier this year upheld a historic Illinois law that takes aim at one of the sneakiest — and most burdensome — costs baked into everyday purchases. The law prevents the nation's largest banks and credit card networks from charging processing fees on sales taxes and the tips portions of a transaction.

It's a major win for Illinois retailers and consumers who for too long have been squeezed by the very institutions that handle their payments. But the fight is far from over.

The credit card industry continues to throw false claims at the wall, hoping everyone gets fooled. Now, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, an independent bureau of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, is injecting additional legal uncertainty into the situation by issuing an order to exempt national banks.

As the case maneuvers through the courts, no one should be swayed by these scare tactics.

Every time a customer uses a credit card to make a purchase, the card's processing network and issuing bank charge what's called a swipe fee, typically between 2% and 4% of the total ring-up price. It doesn't matter if it's the latest bestseller, a caffeinated beverage or even a new pair of sneakers. These fees hit every retailer the same.

Instead of limiting the application of swipe fees to the price of goods or services, however, credit card giants extend them to taxes and tips as well. That distinction matters. Why? Because that means a business is on the hook to pay fees on both the sales tax retailers collect for state and local governments and the gratuities that go entirely to staff.

In 2024, Illinois lawmakers recognized this unfairness and passed the Interchange Fee Prohibition Act. The law ensures that swipe fees apply only to actual sales — not to tax obligations or tips. The results are straightforward. Lower costs for businesses and hard-working Illinois families.

Rather than accepting reasonable reform, major banks responded with a familiar playbook: wild claims of chaos hoping lawmakers and judges would be confused. On closer inspection, every one of their claims falls apart.

For starters, major payment networks argue Illinois' law will undermine rewards programs and transaction security. It's a familiar refrain from Visa and Mastercard, which make the same argument any time reforms are proposed. Yet rewards have never been as plentiful or generous.

If rewards programs change, competitors such as NYCE, Pulse and Shazam are well positioned to step in. That's how the free market is intended to function.

Another false claim is that merchants would have to split transactions — forcing customers to pay for taxes, tips and the underlying purchase separately or with cash. That's not how modern payments work, and it's not what the law requires. Consumers will continue to swipe their credit or debit card once, just as they always have. The only change is behind the scenes, where fees would be applied to a different line in the transaction.

Payment networks already adapt to a patchwork of local tax laws and regulations both in the United States and around the world. Visa's own operating documents admit this fact.

As legal challenges against Illinois' Interchange Fee Prohibition Act continue, courts should recognize these claims for what they are — an effort to preserve an uncompetitive and nontransparent practice that quietly siphons billions from businesses and consumers. The payments system won't collapse because banks can no longer take a cut of taxes and tips.

But for small businesses and families across Illinois, the relief will be real.

Rob Karr is president and CEO of the Illinois Retail Merchants Association.

Springfield's interchange fee ban takes a costly swipe at consumers

By Steve Swedberg
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

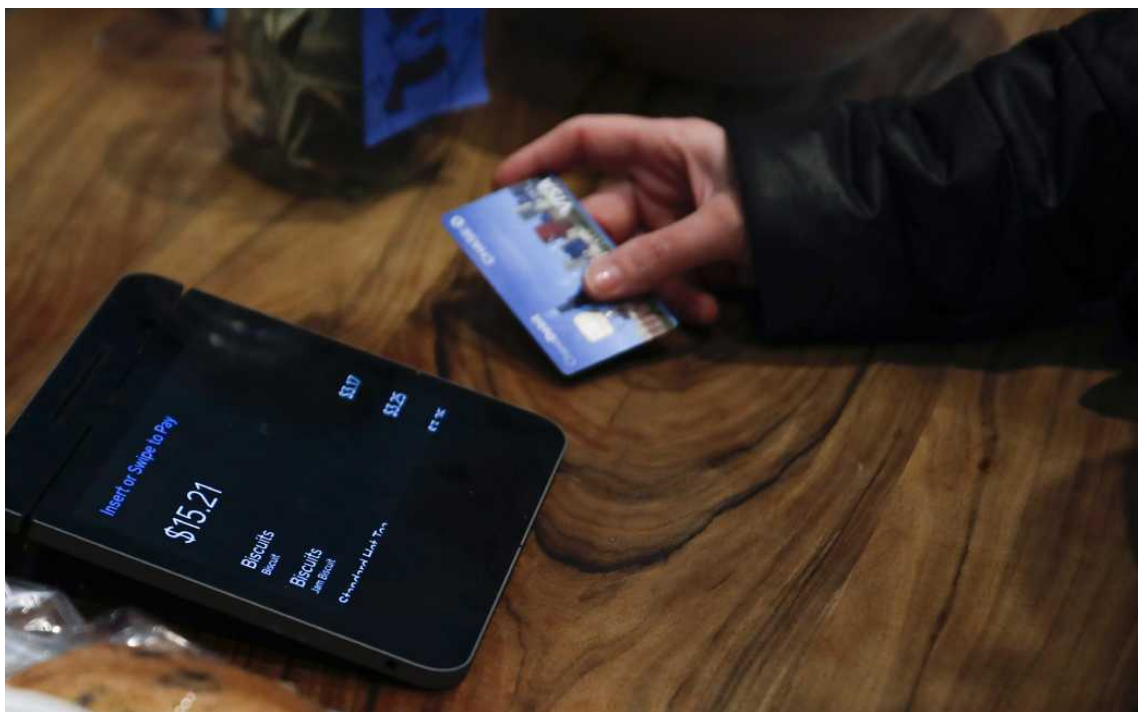
I have many fond memories of growing up in the Chicago suburbs, including eating out at Lou Malnati's, visiting Chicago museums on weekends and tagging along with my mom for grocery runs at Jewel-Osco. Back then, paying was simple: Swipe your card and move on. That same simplicity defines how consumers use cards today. But that everyday convenience is at risk for Illinois families because of a new law set to take effect on July 1.

The Illinois Interchange Fee Prohibition Act (IFPA) is a law that will change how fees are paid by merchants to accept cards in the state. Those fees are charged by banks to merchants every time a consumer uses a credit card. Called "interchange fees," they make routine debit and credit card use possible.

Every time a consumer taps or swipes, that fee helps fund fraud protection, transaction processing and the convenience of using a card almost anywhere. Every card transaction connects a consumer's bank and a merchant's bank.

But merchants dislike having to pay the fee. And state lawmakers made it so the transaction will exclude taxes and tips from the swipe fee calculation. That may sound like a targeted solution, but in reality, it's a bad one that will backfire.

Past efforts to limit interchange fees have come with unintended consequences. When Congress capped debit card interchange fees in 2010 under the Durbin Amendment, the expectation was that merchants would pass savings on to consumers through lower prices. The real-world results did not match that theory because, surprise, surprise, the merchants pocketed the savings.



A payment card is used at Dollop coffee in Streeterville on Nov. 29, 2018. **JOSÉ M. OSORIO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

A report from the Progressive Policy Institute found no meaningful evidence that these changes translated into lower prices for consumers. The promised benefits at the checkout line by and large failed to appear.

Banks, however, had to make up the lost income. Research from Penn State demonstrated that in the aftermath of the Durbin Amendment, banks reduced access to free checking accounts by roughly 40 percentage points and nearly doubled monthly account maintenance fees.

A George Mason University study showed similar adjustments, including tripled minimum balance requirements for fee-free accounts and doubled fees on standard checking products in the years after the policy took effect. Debit card rewards programs simply disappeared.

The lesson is straightforward. Consumers lose out twice — they don't get the promised savings, and their banking costs go up.

That history matters for Illinois. While the IFPA takes a narrower approach by targeting interchange fees on taxes and tips, the underlying mechanism is the same. When interchange revenue is reduced, financial institutions respond by shifting costs elsewhere instead of absorbing them.

Illinois consumers may not see differences at the register, but the consequences will manifest elsewhere — including fewer rewards and benefits, higher banking fees, tighter credit access and less favorable account terms.

And because the national payments system isn't currently set up to separate out taxes and tips, there will be a cost to rejiggering it — and the consumer will pay. To comply with the IFPA, banks will likely have to go back and adjust transactions after they are processed, instead of at the point of sale.

That structural gap matters because the IFPA imposes a $1,000 penalty per noncompliant transaction. Even small processing errors can create repeated compliance exposure, particularly for smaller banks and credit unions with thinner margins and limited compliance infrastructure.

The Woodstock Institute cautioned that this dynamic would likely cause "small, community credit unions and banks to exit payment processing entirely." That would mean fewer credit cards from small financial institutions. For some households, the problem would shift from higher costs to less access.

The Illinois law predicament will raise a familiar question about whether people can keep their bank, similar to earlier assurances about keeping existing coverage under the Affordable Care Act that were ultimately named PolitiFact's 2013 "Lie of the Year." That experience is a reminder that policy assurances do not always survive real-world implementation, and Illinois is not immune to that dynamic.

Although I currently live near Washington, D.C., Illinois is still home. I care about its economic future. Unfortunately, good intentions cannot be a substitute for sound policy. The IFPA risks higher costs, fewer financial options and reduced access to banking services for Illinois families. Those outcomes are what will matter once the debate fades in Springfield.

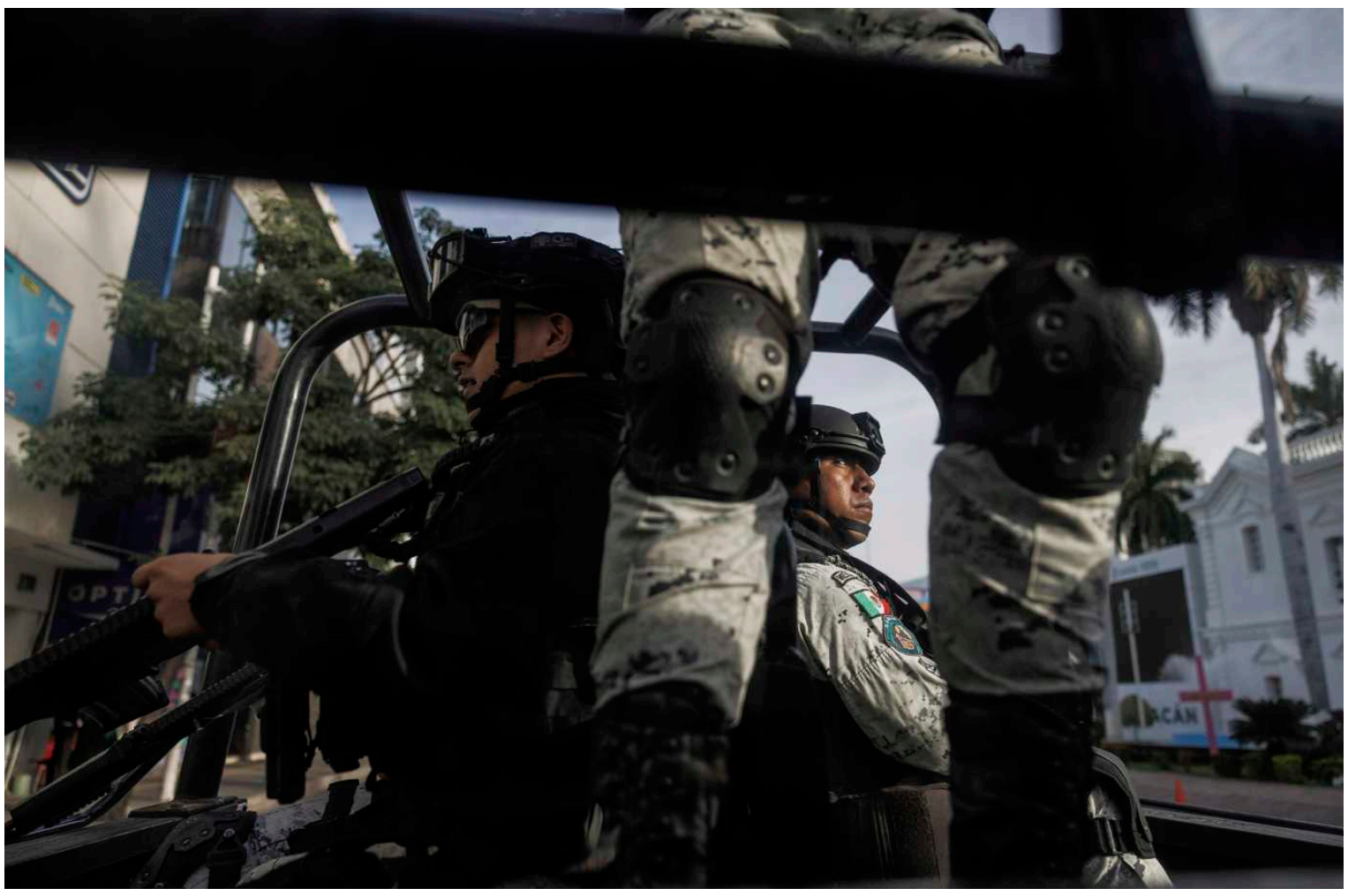
In the real world, there is no such thing as a cost-free policy experiment. Government restrictions mean tradeoffs and costs, and the question is who will get stuck paying for them. With the IFPA, the answer is clear: It will be everyday Illinoisans who bear the heaviest burden.

Steve Swedberg is a policy analyst with the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a free-market public policy organization based in Washington, D.C.

OPINION

An indictment of Sinaloa's governor could roil US-Mexico ties

Daniel DePetris



Mexican National Guard soldiers patrol in Culiacán, in Mexico's Sinaloa state on Feb. 4. The U.S. has indicted Sinaloa's governor, Rubén Rocha Moya, and nine other officials. **ADRIANA ZEHBRAUSKAS/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

As all eyes remain on the U.S. war in Iran, another international development may throw a wrench into one of America's most valuable foreign relationships.

On April 29, the U.S. Justice Department unsealed indictments against 10 current and former Mexican politicians and officials charging them with colluding with the very drug cartels they're supposed to be combating. One of the men, Rubén Rocha Moya, is the governor of the Mexican state of Sinaloa infamous for the drug-infused violence that many Americans associate with Mexico. The allegations against Moya are especially damning. According to the document, the senior Mexican politician met frequently with the children of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, known as "El Chapo," when he was running for governor in 2021 and came to an arrangement: In exchange for the Sinaloa Cartel stealing votes on his behalf and cowing the political opposition into silence, Moya would essentially allow the cartel to operate with impunity.

Of course, Mexican officialdom working with criminals is not exactly a new phenomenon. Before Mexico turned into a multiparty democracy at the turn of the century, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which dominated the country's politics for seven decades, struck deals with Mexican cartels to keep the peace and ensure that criminal organizations weren't fighting each other for turf. Turning a blind eye in exchange for bribes was the cost of doing business. And it still is; the poster child for such corruption is Genaro García Luna, who during his stint as Mexico's top law enforcement official got rich collaborating with the same cartels he was responsible for eradicating. García Luna was arrested and sent to the United States for trial, where he was sentenced to nearly 40 years.

However, the difference this time is that the U.S.-Mexico relationship, particularly on counternarcotics issues, is better than many analysts would have expected during the Trump administration. President Donald Trump gets along fairly well with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, which may come as a shock given Trump's propensity to threaten unilateral U.S. military action on Mexican soil. Cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico, especially when it comes to nabbing high-profile cartel kingpins, has for the most part been seamless. Consider the takedown in February of Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, otherwise known as El Mencho, the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, Mexico's biggest criminal organization. El Mencho's death was supported by U.S. surveillance assets, which provided Mexican forces with the precise information they needed to flush him out. The capture of Audias Flores Silva, one of El Mencho's lieutenants, on April 27 was another case of Washington and Mexico City coming together in pursuit of a common objective.

The Trump administration's decision to charge Moya, though, has the potential to bring this cooperation to a slower ebb. Even if the allegations outlined by the Justice Department are true, the publicity surrounding the indictment will complicate how the Sheinbaum administration navigates the case. For a president whose approval ratings are starting to come back down to earth with the Mexican economy shrinking, a controversial case affecting the Mexican political system is the last thing Sheinbaum needs.

Ever since Trump ascended to the presidency for a second time, Sheinbaum has been quite clever in handling him. Unlike predecessor Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Sheinbaum isn't outwardly bombastic, isn't known to shoot rhetorical arrows and has been characterized more as a pragmatist than a dyed-in-the-wool Morena party ideologue. Although she cares about Mexican sovereignty like all of her predecessors, she also realizes that she can't eschew all offers of cooperation from the Americans or ignore the demands of a man like Trump, who is known to allow personal grievances to affect how he approaches a country.

Sheinbaum has navigated those turbulent waters brilliantly thus far. On the one hand, she has proved far more eager in taking advantage of the intelligence Washington gives her — so much so that she permitted the CIA to beef up aerial surveillance flights over areas such as Sinaloa. She was responsive early on to Trump's obsessions with illegal immigration, dispatching 10,000 Mexican troops closer to the U.S.-Mexico border to deter illegal crossings. Not to be outdone, Sheinbaum also allowed the transfer of more than 90 Mexican narcotraffickers to the United States for prosecution on national security grounds, a decision some Mexican commentators have claimed was outside the bounds of Mexican law.

Yet the problem with Trump is that satiating his cravings only grows his appetite. For the Trump administration, extraditing kingpins, acting on U.S. intelligence and stanching the flow of fentanyl into the United States are things that previous Mexican governments should already have been doing. Viewed in this light, Sheinbaum's actions shouldn't be celebrated, only accelerated and expanded. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has consistently pressed Mexican officials to go after politicians in league with drug trafficking organizations. Last week's action by Washington is therefore a shot across the bow. The message to Mexico: Do better and do it faster. Or face the consequences.

Sheinbaum may not admit it during her daily morning press conferences, but the Trump administration has manufactured one of her trickiest tasks to date. She can acquiesce to Trump's orders to the detriment of party unity, resulting in more complaints from the left-wing base of the Morena movement, which is highly skeptical of Washington in general. Or she can try to slow-roll the affair by announcing her own investigation into Moya, one of her political allies, hoping this keeps the party onside and mollifies Trump just enough to buy time. Either one holds costs. And the U.S.-Mexico relationship will suffer blemishes in the process.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

Voice of the People

Supreme Court ruling just

On April 29, a U.S. Supreme Court majority determined that a Louisiana congressional district map relied too heavily on race; the ruling affects the Voting Rights Act and greatly restricts the ability to create "majority-minority" congressional districts. Predictably, there is outrage at the elimination of one of the principle avenues to political power and representation for people of color via the act. Much of this outrage is from Democrats.

I live in Democratic-supermajority Illinois and close to Chicago, and this outrage is so much Kabuki theater. If you've never spent an evening perusing Illinois' oddly shaped legislative districts, you're missing some fun. These fancifully tortured shapes make the original "Gerrymander" of 1812 look like a model of rational contiguity. My own district was redrawn in 2021 and resembles a stylized bird with east and west wings narrowly attached to a central body. I live in one of the narrow connecting corridors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the political opinions of the folks in my corridor do not generally align with those in the rest of the district. I have become somewhat disenfranchised, politically given "the bird."

For those upset by the potential loss of political power because the court's decision threatens their district boundaries, I say, hey, get in line.

The ruling notes how much conditions in the U.S. have changed since 1965, reducing the need for legislative guardrails. (Although credit must be given to the act and other civil rights legislation.) Due to changes in fertility rates and population migration, the percentage of non-Hispanic white people in the U.S. has dropped from a little less than 90% to less than 60%. And reviews of opinions in racial groups show they are hardly monolithic, and treatment as such is dismissive stereotyping. Maybe it's time to let go the idea that people of color all speak with one voice, no more so than white people.

For those disappointed by the ruling, there is a path forward. If one can show that a congressional district has been created to ensure a majority of white people, or any other race, it is just as unconstitutional and subject to challenge. And if consideration of race is unconstitutional, why isn't any other group-specific consideration?

And that's the real potential gain of the ruling: people organizing to take action against gerrymandering itself, the carving up of our population into fiefdoms controlled by the politically entrenched.

Power to the people.

— *Eric Jebsen, Wheaton*

The case for gerrymandering

The Tribune Editorial Board has asked that we be fair to all voters in our state and create an independent commission to draw legislative maps. This is an incredibly admirable goal. My gut reaction was, "Yes, you are right. We should do what is fair, not what is politically advantageous for the Democratic Party."

But that didn't sway me completely to the board's side. We have a president who chided (if not threatened) the state of Texas and others to engage in partisan gerrymandering, from fear of losing Republican congressional seats in the upcoming midterm elections. We've seen the result of his actions — red states have capitulated to the president, and blue states are fighting back by engaging in the same, and also unfair, gerrymandering practices to counter an unequal playing field.

Is this right? Of course not! But current polls show that 80% of Republicans approve of this president's behavior. What that says to me is that a huge proportion of Republicans are just fine with partisan gerrymandering, provided the results are favorable to them. They clearly don't care that it is wrong.

And neither do the conservative justices on our Supreme Court. They now have gutted Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act — allowing partisan gerrymandering to counter, if not destroy, minority group representation in government.

So as much as I'd like to, I can't take the high road on this matter, even knowing that Illinois is a horribly gerrymandered state. Unless and until our feckless Congress passes federal legislation barring partisan gerrymandering nationwide, we can't foreclose that option for Illinois. Why? Because all of us not only deserve fair representation at the state level; we also deserve it at the federal level.

How will we ever achieve that if only one side continually taints the process?

— *Dianne Casuto, Lake Forest*

Stop the partisan charade

Gerrymandering is cheating, no matter which political side commits it. Gerrymandering disenfranchises voters. What could be considered more unfair? The seemingly logical solution is to legislate districting power to a nonpartisan commission. But not so fast. Such commissions have been voted for, only to be regretted because states not voting for fairness continued their partisanship. Ah, the Supreme Court would well mandate fairness. Oops, no luck there! Citing states' rights? OK, but not intended to be a license to cheat. Why can't gerrymandering be outlawed? Despite the complexity, no honest, responsible politician should disagree with fixing it. Stop the partisan charade.

Whether a state is red, blue or purple, it should be an accurate mirror of voter determination, not of the political party in power.

— *Richard Palzer, Clarendon Hills*

Rise of the new Jim Crow?

Clarence Page's May 4 column on the U.S. Supreme Court's weakening of the 1965 Voting Right Act got me to thinking ("Ruling will promote corrupt electoral maps"). I have been a registered voter here in Illinois for almost 60 years. During that time, I have never been blocked from voting. And, here in Illinois, all registered voters are able to vote. But the recent Supreme Court decision appears to be making it less likely for some voters in Republican-controlled states to have their voices heard or their votes to make a difference. I find that appalling.

But I got to thinking. Really, how is the Illinois voting map any different then that of Louisiana? Hasn't the Illinois voting map been gerrymandered to the benefit of the ruing Democratic Party, just like Republican-controlled states have done?

The only difference I can see, as Page points out, is that while Illinois gerrymanders politically without a racial tinge, other states appear to be disenfranchising Black voters. Is this the rise of a new Jim Crow?

— *Bernard Biernacki, Aurora*

Headline about court's ruling

The Tribune's April 30 front page carried an Associated Press story written by Mark Sherman regarding the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on the boundaries of Louisiana's 6th Congressional District. The headline reads: "Court diminishes Voting Rights Act."

Associate Justice Samuel Alito's majority opinion reveals that the VRA was neither diminished nor eviscerated. No part of Section 2 of the VRA was struck down or invalidated by the court. But even if the paper's headline writer was convinced that the VRA was diminished or eviscerated by the court, such opinions belong on the paper's editorial or opinion pages, not in front-page headlines.

— *Randy Harris, Campton Hills*

A stain on our democracy

Partisan gerrymandering has become an ugly stain on American democracy. The recent mad scramble for redrawing congressional districts to secure party majorities has resulted in increasing disenfranchisement of voters. The public does not want this chaos.

There are commonsense parameters that Americans can agree on that would create fair district boundaries that represent voters in a particular area. Some states have developed these parameters through independent commissions. It has become clear that a state-by-state solution will not work.

Both Democrats and Republicans must make independent commissions that use agreed-upon parameters a legislative priority in the next Congress. Otherwise, we will continue to erode our democracy and voters will lose faith in their elected representatives.

— *Joseph Zimmerman, Mokena, Illinois*

Note to readers: In honor of our "Chicago 2050" op-ed series, we'd like to hear from you about your hopes for what Chicago will be like in 25 years. (Sincere thoughts only.) Send a letter of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and your city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

OPINION

The Man Who Broke Russia

GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

Will Vladimir Putin be remembered as the man who broke Russia?

That once seemed unthinkable. For more than a decade, Mr. Putin outmaneuvered a series of clueless Western leaders. The Russian leader's penetrating and unsentimental understanding of his opponents let him inflict one humiliating setback after another on an overconfident West. Among those humiliations were the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 seizure of Crimea and much of the Donbas, and the revival of Russian power in the Middle East while President Obama walked away from his red line in Syria. The defense of Belarus's President Alexander Lukashenko against a tsunami of popular protests and the displacement of French power across much of France's former colonial empire in Africa also advanced Mr. Putin's goal of making Russia great again.

The stalemate with Ukraine isn't the only failure draining Moscow's resources.

But then the master of the Kremlin made a critical error. Ukraine wasn't a real country, he reasoned. Its people weren't nationalist. Its government was a hollow shell.

That turned out to be wrong. A critical mass of Ukrainians was willing to fight and die for the country Mr. Putin arrogantly dismissed. Their leader, President Volodymyr Zelensky, turned out to be a gifted politician and diplomat who kept his people united at home while patiently amassing international support.

The god of war is fickle, and Russia's spring and summer offensives could still push Ukraine into crisis. But even if Mr. Putin's stalemated army regains some momentum, the war has gone on so long, cost so much and weakened the sinews of Russian power so severely that any victory will be Pyrrhic. The more likely outcome, an agonizing stalemate that continues to chew up Russian manpower and economic resources, threatens Mr. Putin's grip on power and the future of Russia itself.

MIKHAIL METZEL/SPUTNIK/POOL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Vladimir Putin

Even as he struggles vainly in Ukraine, Mr. Putin has been forced to watch the decline of Russian influence in Europe. Viktor Orbán's defeat in Hungary deprived Russia of its closest European ally. Mr. Putin may now have to watch helplessly as Hungarian investigators aid their Western colleagues tracing the flows of Russian dark money into European business and political circles. Meanwhile, the Europeans, divided as they are and disoriented by the trans-Atlantic rift, have found the financial means to keep Ukraine in the war and can likely shore up Ukraine for the foreseeable future.

Mr. Putin has proved unable to stem the decline of Russian influence across the rest of the post-Soviet space. Armenia and Azerbaijan are actively cooperating with the West. Some Central Asian republics now have closer economic ties with China than with Russia. They welcome the expansion of pipeline routes to the West that bypass Russia and are attracting investment from Turkey and the European Union.

Farther afield, Mr. Putin's once-promising attempt to reinsert Russia into the Middle East has flagged. Longtime ally Bashar al-Assad fell from power. Russia has been unable to exert significant influence over military or diplomatic events in the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. Russia's African adventure isn't going well either. Military setbacks in Mali have undermined Russian power and prestige, worsening relations with disappointed African governments that expected more help against jihadist rebels than Russia's overstretched forces can provide.

Meanwhile, the Ukraine war is exacerbating Russia's demographic decline. Hundreds of thousands of military-age men have been killed in the war; hundreds of thousands more, including many of Russia's best-educated, fled the country to avoid being fed into the meat grinder. Even as Russia's Muslim minority populations grow, the Slavic Russian population seems fated to continue to decline at an accelerating rate.

These trends don't just mean trouble for Mr. Putin. They potentially spell a crisis for the Russian Federation as serious as the meltdown following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia's economy remains among the weakest of the great and near-great powers today. To the west it borders on a profoundly and bitterly estranged Europe. Its contested eastern border faces a predatory and ambitious China. At home, restless ethnic minorities seethe with discontent. If the ideology of Russian national revival that Mr. Putin has propounded is seen to have decisively failed, his successors may struggle to hold what remains of the empire together.

Under the circumstances, reports that Mr. Putin is tightening his security and spending more time in underground bunkers seem credible.

Russia's wily president shouldn't be written off. Whatever one thinks of his morals, Mr. Putin has frequently demonstrated uncanny daring and skill. But unless he can summon the energy and creativity to extricate himself from this predicament, he may be remembered by history as the leader on whose watch Russia's standing as a serious great power was finally and fatally lost.

Trump's War With the Pope

MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

No one would confuse Donald Trump and St. Augustine, even though the fifth-century bishop also enjoyed a ribald, Trump-like past before turning to God. Pope Leo XIV, meanwhile, is an Augustinian friar. He regards the war with Iran as an immoral exercise of American might and says so frequently.

The standoff between the pope and the president will be front and center this week as Secretary of State Marco Rubio visits the Vatican. The meeting is an attempt to patch up relations frayed by Mr. Trump's criticism of the pope, whom he's called "WEAK on crime, and terrible for Foreign Policy." He's "not a big fan of Pope Leo," the president says bluntly.

Pope Leo hasn't responded in kind, but he has responded sharply. The pope has called for people to reject war, "especially a war which many people have said is an unjust war." That was mild compared with his saying that God "does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war." The pope had to know the comment would be taken, as it was taken, as directed against Mr. Trump and not the murderous regime in Tehran.

The irony is that defenders of the president invoke just-war theory, which originates with St. Augustine's efforts to reconcile Christian teaching with the use of force, to justify the U.S. military intervention. This never wins the argument, though—and not because just-war theory has nothing to say. The problem is that while the church still believes in just-war theory in principle, many in the church have concluded that just wars simply aren't possible.

Take an area in which the unstated rejection of just-war theory has made it difficult to notice moral distinctions in how wars are fought. In the 20th century, as weapons of war became more powerful, a common question was: How many times over do you need to destroy the world? The assumption was the U.S. would keep building ever more destructive bombs.

Our weapons are more destructive today, but they are also more accurate. Instead of leveling whole cities, we can single out enemies and spare innocents. It isn't perfect, but it's more moral.

In April, Jews in Israel and beyond recently celebrated Yom HaZikaron, Israel's official day of remembrance. The chief rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues of South Africa, Warren Goldstein, was particularly exercised by Pope Leo's comment that God doesn't hear the prayers of those who wage war. The rabbi complained that the pope "makes no distinction between good and evil," adding that "only a religious leader who has lost his soul can say such a thing." Harsh, but that's the price of entering the public square.

Marco Rubio's visit to Rome Thursday is an effort to repair U.S.-Vatican relations.

Pope Leo XIV's war statements suggest he believes that just-war theory may have been valid in the days of armies clashing head to head, but the reach and destructive power of modern weaponry have rendered just-war limits moot. But he hasn't specifically endorsed this idea.

It's a respectable argument, even if it makes a moral defense of any war practically impossible. And if it represents the baseline belief of the church's views on the use of military force, the pope should say so.

Contrary to how it's mostly reported, the just-war tradition doesn't give the pope any special authority on whether a war is just or unjust. It prescribes questions to be asked to make that determination. It isn't an exclusively Catholic or even religious teaching, either. And different people have reached opposite conclusions applying its method to Iran. Also, Mr. Trump isn't the first president to run up against a pope's opposition to a U.S. military intervention. Just ask George W. Bush how Pope John Paul II regarded the war with Iraq.

But without a shared just-war criteria, we have the muddle we have now, in which the war in Iran can be just in theory, but never in practice. Which puts the U.S. and other nations at war in the position of trying to justify themselves on the basis of principles that are regarded as moot before the debate has even started—without the church ever really coming out and saying so.

The Catholic Church, moreover, claims its teachings are true for everyone, not just Catholics. If, however, Rome wishes its teachings to be so, then it should help people to understand exactly what it's saying. This is central to one thing the papacy is supposed to offer the world: clarity about the church's message.

Today the U.S. and the Vatican are, respectively, the greatest hard-power and the greatest soft-power sovereign entities. They share a common purpose, albeit with distinct responsibilities. The West can't survive without moral reflection. Nor can it survive without the exercise of power. Let's hope Mr. Rubio and Pope Leo remember that on Thursday.

Write to mcgurn@wsj.com.

A 92-Year-Old President?

By Paul Sracic

After the assassination attempt at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, Speaker Mike Johnson, who was there along with the president and vice president, pointed out that had the suspect succeeded, Sen. Chuck Grassley "would have been in charge after that."

Mr. Johnson was relying on the Presidential Succession Act of 1947, which places Mr. Grassley, 92 and the Senate's president pro tempore, third in line to the presidency. His holding this position at an advanced age isn't an anomaly. Senate tradition gives the president pro tem role to the majority-party member with the longest tenure in the chamber.

While the shooting suspect was likely a lone wolf rather than part of a plot by a foreign adversary, an international plot to wipe out top U.S. leaders is entirely conceivable. The Sept. 11 attacks included at least one hijacked plane aimed at Washington. That morning, the president pro tem was 83-year-old Robert Byrd of West Virginia. He held the title only because Vermont's Jim Jeffords recently had switched to the Democratic caucus, pushing the former president pro tem, 98-year-old Strom Thurmond, into the minority.

The succession law puts a superannuated senator third in line.

In an era defined by drones and asymmetrical warfare, a foreign power or terrorist group attempting to decapitate U.S. leadership is a threat we have to take seriously. Does it make sense to hand the reins of the country during what would be one of the worst crises in U.S. history to someone who is serving in a largely ministerial post, potentially in his 90s, and isn't even a member of the Gang of Eight—the group of lawmakers who receive regular classified intelligence briefings from the White House?

It is past time to update the 1947 statute. Fortunately, the framers left it up to Congress to decide who would succeed the president if the vice presidency is vacant, and lawmakers have adjusted the roster several times over the course of our history.

Targeted improvements are more feasible than major changes. A logical first step would be to have the Senate majority leader follow the House speaker in the line of succession. Unlike the president pro tem, the majority leader exercises significant legislative authority, sits on the Gang of Eight, and is often in his political prime.

Similarly, while it makes sense to include cabinet members in the line of succession, ranking them according to when their agency was created produces odd results. For instance, the secretary of education precedes the secretary of homeland security. A more rational ordering seems appropriate and fairly noncontroversial.

A practical and potentially bipartisan response to the recent assassination attempt against President Trump, beyond efforts to lower the temperature of political rhetoric, is reforming the Presidential Succession Act. In doing so, both sides of the political divide should keep in mind that the most serious threats to our country ultimately lie beyond our shores.

Mr. Sracic is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

BOOKSHELF | By Fergus M. Bordewich

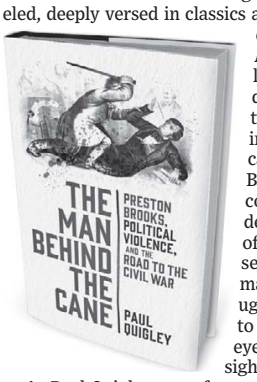
A Prelude To Brutality

The Man Behind the Cane

By Paul Quigley
Oxford, 256 pages, $34.99

On May 22, 1856, a furious South Carolina congressman named Preston Brooks stalked into the U.S. Senate's ornate chamber, surprised the seated Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, and beat him nearly to death with a cane. Brooks, a passionate defender of slavery, claimed that Sumner, the most eloquent of abolitionists, had insulted his kinsman Sen. Andrew Butler, the powerful chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. While 30 or so members of the Senate watched, some aghast and others approvingly, Brooks rained blows on Sumner, cutting his scalp to the bone and leaving him covered with blood. It seemed at first that Sumner might not survive his injuries, and he was unable to return to the Senate for many months. The attack was understood immediately as an event of national significance—another shocking way station on the steady march toward civil war.

Forty-five years old, tall and strikingly handsome, Sumner was the consummate New England intellectual: widely traveled, deeply versed in classics and the law, and staunchly committed to the cause of African-Americans. Days earlier, in a scorching speech decrying the violence perpetrated by pro-slavery settlers in Kansas, Sumner had caustically, if obliquely, denounced Butler—Brooks's father's cousin—as a hypocrite who had debased himself in the service of human bondage: "He has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the eyes of the world, is chaste in his sight—I mean the harlot, Slavery."



As Paul Quigley, a professor of history at Virginia Tech, tells us in "The Man Behind the Cane," Brooks was the scion of a wealthy slave-holding family that hailed from Edgefield, a South Carolina county known for its aristocratic mores, where martial manhood was measured by a hypersensitive standard of honor and a readiness to use violence. Brooks had rushed to enlist in the Mexican-American War (1846-48) but was sent home sick before he saw any fighting. The "ignominy" of missing action, we are told, remained a "badge of shame" that festered for the rest of his life, "driving him to seek reckless vindication" in confrontations with other men of his class.

Mr. Quigley details a long-running feud between Brooks and Louis Wigfall—another fire-breathing Edgefield contemporary—which in little more than a year "generated two duels, a fistfight, a gunfight, one death, and several serious injuries, as well as innumerable words, gushing forth from mouths and pens and printing presses." (Brooks did not consider Sumner an equal, and so would not have proposed a duel, nor would the pacifist senator have accepted such a proposal.) Ironically, Brooks was sometimes mocked as too moderate by his more bloodthirsty constituents because he opposed premature secession, although he foresaw and supported the eventual breakup of the Union.

Two months after his attack on Sumner, the House voted on an expulsion motion against Brooks, but it failed. Brooks decided to resign as a matter of honor, although he asserted that the House had no right to punish him since the caning had been a personal matter. "Why, sir, if I go to my home," he declared, "and find that one of my slaves has behaved badly in my absence, and I direct him to be flogged," no one could condemn him for what was a legal act. To him, the caning was in principle no different. For Mr. Quigley, Brooks's full-throated defense epitomized the larger "culture of violence" that characterized slaveholders' attitudes generally. Brooks was forthright: "I went to work very deliberately, and speculated somewhat as to whether I should employ a horsewhip or a cowhide." When he ran for the seat again later that year, he was easily re-elected.

Preston Brooks hailed from a South Carolina county where honor and manhood were judged by one's willingness to use violence.

The national debate that was inspired by the caning, Mr. Quigley writes, accelerated "a mutually reinforcing dynamic between slaveholders' efforts to repress antislavery speech by any means necessary, including violence, and the growing segment of northern public opinion that saw such repression as an existential threat to northern liberties." For decades, slavery's politically powerful defenders had squelched the freedoms of speech, assembly and the press when the exercise of these freedoms threatened the institution, and had compelled the federal government to bar the distribution of abolitionist writings through the postal service. The "cane, the revolver, the bowie-knife, the fist, and a composition of tar and feathers," Rep. William Damrell of Massachusetts declared, "these are the noble presiding geniuses of the political arena."

For countless Northerners, Brooks's assault on Sumner distilled the sense of entitlement held by the South's ruling elite, who had dominated the national government since its founding. The years that followed revealed a new Yankee militancy. "One of the lessons they learned," Mr. Quigley writes, "was that free speech must be actively fought for." In 1858, Rep. Galusha Grow of Pennsylvania knocked down Brooks's friend Laurence Keitt of South Carolina, prompting a melee that drew in some 30 members of the House. From December 1859 to February 1860, Mr. Quigley reports, no fewer than nine fights took place in and around Congress.

In the South, Brooks was hailed as a hero. He was deluged with new canes—scores, if not hundreds of them—to replace the one he had broken over Sumner's head. Wrote one well-wisher: "Yes Sir Kill the infamous Scoundrel and all such." Editorialized the North Carolina Standard: "Language has no effect on such men as Sumner. . . . They are lost to all sense of shame, and *feel* it only when they are caned or kicked."

Sumner would eventually recover and become one of the most prominent Radicals in the Civil War-era Senate and an adviser to Abraham Lincoln. Brooks wouldn't live to see the South's secession. In January 1857, he died from a sudden illness in a hotel room in Washington, D.C., at the age of 37. The brutality of his attack on Sumner would soon be dwarfed, and his memory overwhelmed, by a war that he helped to bring about and that would take as many as 750,000 American lives.

Mr. Bordewich is the author of "Centennial: The Great Fair of 1876 and the Invention of America's Future."

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Iran's Regime Ends the Cease-Fire

The cease-fire in the Persian Gulf has been broken, and the culprit is the regime in Iran. President Trump now faces a decision about how he plans to reopen the Strait of Hormuz: Give Iran's regime what it wants in negotiations or use the U.S. military to get ships through.

Trump can return fire and commit to opening the Strait by force.

On Sunday the President announced Project Freedom to guide commercial ships out of the Strait. Framed as a humanitarian mission to help ships and starving crews locked up in the Strait against their will, this was also a tactical move to break the Iranian blockade and restore energy flows. On Monday U.S. Central Command advised vessels to transit Hormuz on a route near Oman, away from Iran, explaining that it had "established an enhanced security area."

Centcom did so not by escorting vessels but by creating a defensive shield using nearby aircraft and warships. The U.S. military said two U.S.-flagged commercial vessels were guided through on Monday morning, followed later by U.S. destroyers. This demonstrated that U.S. forces had cleared a "free lane," Centcom Adm. Brad Cooper said, having removed mines over the past few weeks.

Iran responded with threats and force. Iran's media first claimed two hits on a U.S. warship, but after Centcom's denial the Iranians said they had fired only warning shots. The regime had more success firing on commercial ships, including an empty Emirati tanker struck by drones and a South Korean vessel that suffered an explosion and fire in the Strait.

Mr. Trump confirmed the latter hit and wrote, "Perhaps it's time for South Korea to come and join the mission." Adm. Cooper said the U.S. intercepted cruise missiles and drones and destroyed six Iranian small attack boats. Mr. Trump put the number at seven, adding that such boats are "all they have left."

The U.A.E. said it engaged 15 missiles from Iran, reportedly with help from Israeli Iron Dome air defenses, but the Gulf state also suffered a drone attack on its Fujairah Oil Industry Zone. Fujairah sits at the end of the pipeline the Emiratis use to bypass Hormuz and get oil to market.

The message Iran is sending here is that it can't afford to lose its main remaining leverage against the U.S., which is its blockade of oil and oil-product shipments from the Gulf states. This is the way it imposes more pain on the world economy and keeps the pressure on Mr. Trump to accede to Iranian control over the Strait and eventual nuclear enrichment. More pressing, it needs the U.S. blockade on Iranian ports to end.

Adm. Cooper said more commercial ships are "en route" to escape the Strait behind the U.S. shield. This will help America's Gulf allies and the customers of their exports. But the U.S. Navy may need to escort freighters directly, as even a small number of Iranian hits can chill traffic, defeating the operation's purpose.

Even then, sticking to defense is unlikely to be enough. Mr. Trump told Fox News the Iranians will be "blown off the face of the earth" if they attack U.S. vessels, and escalation is merited and necessary. The Emiratis don't want these latest Iranian attacks to go unanswered, and they should be encouraged to join with their capable air force.

But the U.S. and Israel will have to lead. The U.S. blockade of Iran's ports has been succeeding, and if Hormuz reopens, the regime will have been outmaneuvered. The U.S. can do more than wait for Iran to shut-in oil wells, while both sides suffer. Give the President credit for showing the resolve that others lacked to keep pushing.

Mr. Trump wields the military advantage, and he can use it to pry open Hormuz and strike to shorten the timeline to those oil-well shut-ins. The Iranians have fired the first shots to end the cease-fire, which is all the reason Mr. Trump needs to use the force to stop them from getting away with it again.

Making Public Unions More Accountable

The single biggest problem in state governance is the political dominance of public unions. These include the SEIU, Afscme and the teachers unions. Several states are now pressing reforms that curb their coercive hold over their members.

State reforms are giving more power to workers, not bosses.

Idaho Gov. Brad Little recently signed a bill that will end taxpayer support for teachers unions, notably the Idaho Education Association. The bill will prevent school districts from collecting dues directly from teachers paychecks and limit unions' ability to recruit members during school hours. It will also end the practice of giving teachers paid time off for "union activities" like supporting candidates for office, soliciting union membership or joining union protests or advocacy.

Public unions count on the ability to mobilize members for political causes while still on the public payroll. Teachers unions swing political weight because their political spending overwhelmingly favors Democrats and because the left knows unions can turn out their members for political causes on short notice. The new legislation will prevent school districts from sharing teachers' personal information unless the teacher authorizes the disclosure.

Arizona is working on similar guardrails for public unions with a proposed constitutional amendment that would prevent school districts from collecting union dues through a payroll deduction. The bill, which has to be adopted by the Legislature to get onto the November ballot, would ban teacher strikes and require unions to distribute communications off school property.

Bills working their way through the Oklahoma Legislature would let school employees cancel union membership anytime. Unions would be barred from limiting an employee's "right to terminate his or her membership only during certain dates or by using specific forms." The unions also may not force an employee to "disclose the reason for his or her membership termination."

Florida has also done good reform work with a bill that would require half of a union's members to participate in recertification elections and then a majority of the participants to vote in favor of recertifying. A report by the Freedom Foundation found Florida taxpayers are paying millions to support union advocacy by public employees. Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the bill on Friday.

The fiscal health of states can be measured in large part by the extent public unions control state capitals. These state reforms can prevent more states from going the way of Albany, Trenton, Springfield, Sacramento or Olympia.

GameStop, eBay and the Bet on Debt

Who said money is tight? It's hard to find any evidence in financial markets, and signs suggest the credit mania continues. Look no further than GameStop's $56 billion bid for eBay, which is the equivalent of a smelt swallowing a whale.

The $56 billion bid is another sign that the credit mania continues.

You almost have to admire GameStop CEO Ryan Cohen's audacity in saying he wants to turn his company into an Amazon competitor by acquiring a firm multiples of its size. The video game retailer (market cap: $11 billion) has offered eBay (cap: $46 billion) $125 a share in cash and stock, which amounts to a 20% premium to its closing price on Friday.

Mr. Cohen says TD Bank has committed up to $20 billion in debt to finance the deal. If eBay doesn't bite, he said he may take his offer directly to shareholders. The company has already acquired a 5% stake in eBay. But these days GameStop resembles a leveraged hedge fund more than retailer. The 42-year-old company's brick-and-mortar video-game business is in decline. Sales have slid over the last decade as more gamers play on the internet cloud rather than buy physical copies.

In early 2021, GameStop became the locus of a meme stock mania fueled by easy money. Day traders then bid up shares of speculative companies in an effort to squeeze short sellers. GameStop's shares surged to $483 from $5, only to plunge after the air came out of leveraged trades. Mr. Cohen, who became CEO in 2023, has since launched a turnaround by closing stores and focusing on collectibles, including trading cards. This and financial arbitrage have stanched its losses.

GameStop's annual earnings report for last year says it "opportunistically raised approximately $4.2 billion through the issuance of interest-free convertibles notes and generated more than $319 million in interest income through its disciplined treasury management activities." Interest payments from securities made up most of its income last year.

GameStop says it invested the money in Bitcoin and marketable securities and began accumulating eBay shares in February. In short, GameStop took advantage of ample financial liquidity and exuberant market conditions to borrow at a zero interest rate to fund investment bets. GameStop still has to repay the debt, though creditors may be paid in company shares instead.

That might turn out to be a good deal if GameStop's share price increases, and buying eBay could help the company reinvent its declining business. But loading up on tens of billions of dollars in more debt is risky business. Excessive debt is a main reason Saks Fifth Avenue failed after buying Neiman Marcus in 2024.

GameStop's earnings report warns that it has "incurred substantial indebtedness that may decrease our business flexibility" and "we may still incur substantially more debt, which may adversely affect our operations and financial results." Caveat, investors.

In today's risk-on, high-leverage markets, valuations are at record highs and spreads between junk-rated corporate debt and Treasurys are low. AI euphoria is in full bloom, and stocks are pricing that the war in Iran will soon end. Cracks have emerged in private credit, but investors are still dancing with debt. Enjoy the party, because it could get ugly when the music stops.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unruly Radicals' Reckless Rationalizations

Regarding Jonathan Alpert's op-ed "When Rationalization Turns Deadly" (April 28): I remember when many liberals, such as those at the New York Times, opposed the death penalty. Now, with their embrace of people like Hasan Piker and Jia Tolentino, we see them championing the death penalty—as long as it is carried out against people they deem unfit and it isn't subject to the pesky inconvenience of a trial by jury.

Mr. Piker has said "America deserved" the World Trade Center attacks which killed thousands, and Ms. Tolentino said that the murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson on a New York City street was "an effective act of political consciousness-raising."

It's astonishing that abolishing the rights of the accused and elevating violent vigilantism has become the liberal conception of human rights and social justice.

LYNN C. KOSS
Fayetteville, N.Y.

Mr. Alpert decries current spikes in the rationalization of shoplifting and political violence but this has been a mainstay of the left for a century. In the early 20th century, Saul Alinsky, author of "Rules for Radicals," taught his classmates how to scam free meals at the University of Chicago cafeteria. "Steal This Book" was the title of radical Abbie Hoffman's 1971 leftist screed. In 1967 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Director H. Rap Brown incongruously said "violence is necessary" and "is as American as cherry pie." Today, with podcasts and social media, anyone can mimic an Alinsky, Hoffman or Brown, shrouding motives in "social justice."

In his speech to Congress, King Charles emphasized religious principles and rule of law as cornerstones of British and American values. Until America's principled majority demands adherence to these bedrock principles, rationalized wrongdoing will persist.

WILLIAM J. DOYLE
Sandy Springs, Ga.

As an audit and compliance officer, I can relate to Mr. Alpert's excellent op-ed. We learn early on that every fraud or illegal activity has been rationalized by the employee who committed it. In the perpetrator's mind, the act was justified. What's scary is the wider population now rationalizing the murdering of people they don't like. I disdain health insurance companies failing to pay valid claims as much as anyone, but the murder of an executive—or judge, politician, anyone who is disliked—should never be treated as acceptable.

DON SINKO
Cleveland

Too-Cheap Credit Comes at a Too High a Cost

The underlying cause of the bubble Allysia Finley identifies in "The Credit Bubble Everybody's Ignoring" (Life Science, April 27) in federal student loans and Federal Housing Administration mortgages is the surfeit of too-cheap credit in the form of low, government-subsidized interest rates. That cheap credit stimulated consumer demand, leading to inflated prices, in these cases, for college tuition and home prices. The consequence is a concerning cohort of overleveraged borrowers.

Falling home prices, as Ms. Finley notes, have led to rising home foreclosures. Likewise, any weakening in the job market will imperil the ability of many student-loan borrowers to repay their debts, especially if they also have mortgages. In effect, one form of overly cheap credit will exacerbate the economic distress caused by the other form of cheap credit. This could broaden the economic pain beyond these particular borrowers.

BERT ELY
Alexandria, Va.

Ms. Finley is right about the massive credit bubble caused by delinquent and forgiven student loans as well as failing Federal Housing Administration loans. The federal government is a poor evaluator of the risk in lending to borrowers. It's even worse at collections. No politician wants to be hard on voters.

In regard to student loans, now $1.7 trillion with a 30% repayment rate, the best solution is to sell the loans to private collection businesses and get out of the student loan business altogether. Financial lending institutions can fill that space. They did it before the feds got involved.

MICHAEL Y. WARDER SR.
Upland, Calif.

Correspondents Dinner's Bipartisan Victims

Regarding your editorial "A 'Friendly Federal Assassin'" (April 27): Hopefully this time will be different. Many in the media and high ranking politicians, who are to some degree mouthpieces for and influencers of our society, are now the victims of the attempted shooting at the White House correspondents dinner.

It is time for strong, unequivocal and universal condemnations of the shooter. The press and politicians should discuss the morality of political violence in more than perfunctory way and call for swift and meaningful punishment upon a finding of guilt. Such condemnations might reduce violence, but, in any case, they are the right thing to do.

JAY BRODY
Potomac, Md.

The security setup for the correspondents gala worked for an attacker with a gun. But would it have been effective for an attacker using a bomb? The rapid response from the Secret Service was impressive and had this attack been orchestrated by more than an individual it is clear that the responding force wouldn't have been outgunned. But had the attacker checked into the hotel with a significant bomb or the material to make one, the outcome might have been tragic.

CHARLES H. GESSNER
Marblehead, Mass.

Anyone Remember Econ 101?

Phil Gramm and Michael Solon provide both evidence and clarity regarding the consumer harm done by the administration's disastrous tariff fixation in their op-ed "The Trump Tax Increase of 2026" (April 29).

In my lifetime, I have voted Republican because of the party's reliable pursuit of policies based on economic fundamentals: open markets, free trade, cost-effective regulation and minimum government intervention. President Trump's trade policies clearly fail any reasonable test of economic reason—so where are sensible Republican voices in the House and Senate? Asleep at the switch it seems.

It's particularly discouraging because the damage done by tariffs isn't a complicated topic in economics. God help us if both parties choose now to ignore economic fundamentals.

BILL COLTON
Houston

Gerrymandering Democracy

Regarding "Virginia Voters Back Democrats on Map" (U.S. News, April 22), I'm happy the Virginia voters will likely increase the number of Democrats in Congress, countering Texas's salvo.

However, I worry that our national politics are evolving into a system of dueling gerrymander efforts. That's pretty sad, and it isn't how a democracy should work.

GEOFFREY S. POOR
Shoreline, Wash.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Where did you get your mat?"

OPINION

Mifepristone as a Tool of Coercion

By Sierra Dawn McClain

The abortion pill is back in court. On Friday the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ordered the Food and Drug Administration to pause a 2023 regulation allowing the distribution of mifepristone by mail without the need for a doctor's visit. Danco Laboratories and GenBioPro, which make mifepristone, petitioned the Supreme Court on Saturday to lift the stay. (Justice Samuel Alito on Monday put it on hold for a week while the justices consider the drug companies' request.)

The Fifth Circuit's order has a sound basis. Mifepristone—not to be confused with the Plan B morning-after pill, which is available over the counter—poses clinical risks and is a potential tool of coercion and abuse. Its distribution without safeguards heightens these dangers.

Women across the country claim their boyfriends forced or deceived them into taking the abortion drug.

Deregulation of mifepristone began in 2016, when the agency allowed nonphysicians such as nurse practitioners to prescribe it and reduced the number of required in-person medical visits from three to one. In 2021 the FDA eliminated the requirement for in-person dispensing entirely, a temporary Covid move that was made permanent in 2023. The issue reached the Supreme Court in *FDA v. Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine* (2024), but the justices dismissed that case on grounds that the plaintiffs, pro-life doctors and medical associations, lacked standing to sue. In May 2025, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced that the FDA would conduct a "complete review" of mifepristone's safety.

The medical risk is real. An in-person doctor's visit is the only reliable way to diagnose an ectopic pregnancy—a life-threatening condition in which an embryo implants outside the uterus. Because the symptoms of a chemical abortion (abdominal pain and uterine bleeding) can be similar to those of a ruptured ectopic pregnancy, a woman who doesn't get an ultrasound or physical exam may mistake an emergency for a normal drug side effect.

Another risk arises when a woman doesn't want an abortion. The lack of an in-person dispensing requirement makes it easier for a father who doesn't want his child, or another interested party, to obtain abortion pills through the mail and administer them without the mother's knowledge or consent, such as by putting them into her food or drink.

Claims of such abuse have appeared in courts across the country. Justin Anthony Banta was indicted by a Tarrant County, Texas, grand jury in February on charges of attempted capital murder. The indictment alleges that in October 2024 Mr. Banta gave cookies containing abortion-inducing medication to his then-girlfriend with the intent of killing her unborn baby. Investigators say the girlfriend told them that Mr. Banta had previously suggested ordering abortion medication online, to which she had replied that she wanted to keep the baby. Mr. Banta's lawyers have said he maintains his innocence.

Emerson Evans of Illinois faces intentional-homicide charges for allegedly administering abortion drugs to his girlfriend without her knowledge or consent last August. She told police she was approximately seven weeks pregnant, and an officer observed what he suspected to be blood and "a human fetus" in the toilet. According to investigators, Mr. Evans bought the abortion pills from a third party. Mr. Evans has pleaded not guilty.

DAN PAGE

Beyond outright deception, the FDA's framework can embolden coercive partners. Surgery resident Hassan-James Abbas was indicted in December by a Lucas County, Ohio, grand jury, which accused him of unlawful distribution of an abortion-inducing drug and five other felony counts. A formal notice from Ohio's State Medical Board, which suspended Dr. Abbas's medical license, alleges that he used his estranged wife's identity to obtain abortion drugs from an out-of-state telemedical provider, then held his pregnant girlfriend down while forcing crushed abortion pills into her mouth. The baby died, according to a civil complaint filed by the former girlfriend. Dr. Abbas has pleaded not guilty and has until next week to respond to the civil complaint. His lawyers said he denies that he administered abortion pills by force. They said there is no evidence the girlfriend was ever pregnant, and they declined to comment on the allegation that Dr. Abbas used his estranged wife's identity.

The plaintiffs in the Fifth Circuit lawsuit are the state of Louisiana and Rosalie Markezich. She alleges that in 2023 her unnamed boyfriend ordered abortion pills by mail from an out-of-state prescriber and pressured her to take them while they sat in a car, telling her she would "ruin his life" if she refused. Fearing he might physically harm her, she complied. "I felt despair," she said in an interview. She added that she has been seeing a psychiatrist to help her recover from the trauma of losing the baby.

Research from the Charlotte Lozier Institute suggests that coercion is common. Sixty percent of surveyed women who had abortions reported facing intense pressure to do so, and 1 in 4 said the abortion was unwanted or coerced. By making abortion drugs available without a face-to-face consultation, the FDA handed a potent tool to those who wish to override a woman's will.

Asked whether the FDA is considering possible downstream effects such as coercion and abuse alongside medical data in its safety review of mifepristone, press secretary Emily Hilliard dodged the question. "The FDA will describe the mifepristone risk factors analyzed through the study after it is complete," she said in an email. The issue is on Commissioner Marty Makary's radar. "I know personally of OB doctors who prefer to insist—even though they have the option to prescribe otherwise—but they choose to insist that mifepristone be taken when necessary in their office as they observe the person taking it," Dr. Makary said during a Senate hearing last year. "I think their concern is that if this drug is in the wrong hands, it could be used for coercion."

Pro-abortion groups say they champion women's rights, yet they promote a policy that endangers women. It is possible to hold divergent views on the legality and morality of abortion while still demanding a return to basic medical standards.

The Fifth Circuit's order is a necessary corrective to the FDA's failures. The agency should use this pause as an opportunity to reinstate permanently in-person dispensing and physician-led follow-up visits, which are necessary to protect women's health and freedom. In its effort to make abortion more accessible and convenient, the FDA has sacrificed the safety of those it should protect.

Ms. McClain is an assistant editorial features editor at the Journal.

What Happened to the Pragmatic Trump of the First Term?

EDITOR AT LARGE
By Gerard Baker

One factor that explains what's gone wrong with Donald Trump's second term is the abandonment of pragmatism as a governing principle.

Mr. Trump's successes have owed to an iconoclastic style and substance that eschewed ideology and embraced practical solutions to the world's challenges.

His unique status as a businessman-president equipped him for this type of governing approach. Successful business leaders are uber-pragmatists, motivated by core values and principles but willing ultimately to do whatever works, within certain bounds, to succeed.

In 2016 the Republican Party was ripe for the heterodoxy Mr. Trump represented. Most voters were disillusioned with the tired orthodoxies of modern conservatism: globalism, which facilitated mass migration and the elevation of international capital that ravaged communities at home; neoconservatism, which committed America to costly and futile foreign interventions.

Repeated efforts to fashion an ideological construct around Mr. Trump's style have been futile: He governed by instinct, not ideology, and while he harbored some wild ideas, he seemed practical above all.

In his first term, his approach to the economy was highly practical, emphasizing what worked over what ideologues might prefer. I recall a conversation with a CEO at the time—someone who was no Trump fan, but who nonetheless presented a striking contrast in the president's style with that of his predecessor. Barack Obama, he said, would call business chiefs into the White House every now and then for a lecture on what they needed to do to address their failings. With Mr. Trump, the approach was: How can I help? What do you need government to do to assist your business?

The pragmatism was on display during the Covid-19 crisis. Mr. Trump initially endorsed lockdowns, but when the cost-benefit calculus suggested they did more harm than good, he pushed for reopening. Operation Warp Speed will rank as one of the most effective practical government interventions in economic history, even if the vaccines it produced have now become anathema to many of the president's supporters.

The same pragmatism underlay his first-term foreign-policy. It was never accurate to say Mr. Trump was an isolationist. Instead he chose a practical approach that could serve as a model for prudent strategy: a narrow, hardheaded assessment of goals that matched American objectives with its resources and political exigencies. Judicious military interventions with a high probability of success were effective—eliminating the ISIS caliphate and executing targeted strikes against Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Iran's Qasem Suleimani. At the same time he pursued a practical diplomacy that worked by abandoning the orthodoxies of previous presidents of both parties—whether securing the Abraham Accords or confronting the strategic challenge of China.

It's bad enough that he got serious about tariffs. How in the world did he end up embracing regime change?

But perhaps John Maynard Keynes was right when he said that "practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist." Second-term Trump seems to represent the triumph of defunct ideas over practical policies.

Tariffs can work in measured and target ways, but when you enslave yourself to them as "the most beautiful word" and insist against all practical evidence that they be the cornerstone of your economics, the effects are predictably ruinous.

More surprising has been Mr. Trump's conversion to the failed dogma of America as global regime-change agent. He better than anyone seemed to have understood the lessons of this hubristic concept after two decades of failure. But the current Iran misadventure is precisely the kind of faith-based exercise he had so studiously avoided.

Pragmatism has been supplanted also by an increasingly fanatical devotion to the pursuit of personal causes and sentiments. His unorthodox approach to America's allies was once effective—getting them to contribute more to collective defense. Now it is divorced from practical motivation and driven entirely by emotion and personal pique.

At home the dogged pursuit of political enemies is not only destructive of republican norms and values; it's actually hurting his economic objectives. It's one thing to launch ridiculous prosecutions against James Comey, another to bully the chairman of the Federal Reserve to the point that policy is affected. The central bank now looks set for a period of turmoil that will only damage its inflation-fighting credentials.

The best mindset for a political leader is a commitment to core beliefs and ideas allied to a flexible pragmatism in pursuing them. Even the best ideas need to be executed in a manner that acknowledges the constraints of reality. And if the ideas turn out to be bad, a pragmatic approach ensures their deleterious effects can be vitiated by wise submission to the facts.

What we have now is what happens when the pragmatism has gone and the ideas are awful.

America's Air Superiority Is Losing Altitude

By Ted Budd
And Jeanne Shaheen

Since the turn of the century, the U.S. military has dominated the skies. With unmatched speed, stealth and sensors, our fighter aircraft have achieved air superiority in every modern conflict and proved that air power is the fastest, most flexible and most lethal means to project combat power. But the future of American air power is uncertain.

The U.S. is losing its decisive edge over China, which is on pace to field the world's first sixth-generation stealth fighters. The Chinese J-36 and J-50 first flew in 2024, while America's F-47 isn't expected to fly until 2028 and won't enter operational service until the mid-2030s. As part of its historic military buildup, China is eclipsing the U.S. in aircraft production.

We need a national mobilization of our industrial base to counter China and maintain control of the air.

Over the past few decades, presidents and Congress made policy decisions and budgetary cuts that minimized U.S. military aviation power. Industrial consolidation hollowed out America's capacity to guarantee aerial dominance. The F-22 stealth fighter program was shuttered after producing only 187 aircraft, well short of the initial 750-aircraft plan. Republican and Democratic administrations alike have overseen the Air Force's total fighter fleet reduction from 4,100 in 1990 to 2,000 in 2024. Only 1,300 are now combat-coded—a record low.

Our current aircraft are aging beyond repair. The legacy KC-135 tanker aircraft are more than 60 years old. The Air Force fighter fleet now averages over 27 years old, with an operational rate of only around 50%. Spare parts shortages and a shrinking number of suppliers amplify these challenges.

All of this is compounded by a human-capital crisis in pilot training and aircrew retention. Over the past decade, flight hours for new aviators have declined from more than 200 to 150 a year, attempting to get pilots to operational units earlier. Midcareer pilots continue to seek civilian opportunities at a time when their expertise is needed most. The result is a dangerous mismatch—a historically ancient fleet with poor readiness rates, using pilots flying at record-low rates.

By contrast, China is undergoing a national mobilization of its military-industrial complex—with its defense spending increasing 13-fold over 30 years as of 2024—fielding advanced fighters at a rate that could outpace America's by nearly 200% by 2027. The Chinese are focused on usurping the interests and security of America and its allies, and they see their military as the key tool for national prominence. They are building up their air force to ensure they can dominate Taiwan and discourage Western involvement in the Indo-Pacific.

China, focused on beating the U.S., is on pace to build the first sixth-generation stealth fighters.

Ceding control of the air, through poor procurement choices and insufficient investment in human capital, would be a strategic failure. Washington needs to take three steps:

First, give suppliers the certainty they need to expand production lines. A multiyear procurement authorization for the F-35 and F-15EX fighters would lock in production stability, reduce cost per aircraft, and supercharge our defense industrial base. A healthy supplier requires a predictable customer. Multiyear procurement authority provides assured demand and provides an incentive for the defense industrial base to invest in needed supplier capacity.

Second, set higher standards for the quality and quantity of our fighter fleets. Congress should fund a 50% increase in fighter fleets by 2035 so that the U.S. can prevail in any great-power conflict. Preparing for a war in which every aircraft counts will require breathing new life into these programs and expanding production for aircraft like the F-15EX.

Third, give better support to the Americans who fight in the air. That means expanding incentives to keep experienced aviators in uniform, including bonuses, career flexibility and quality-of-life programs—practical steps to win the talent competition against our adversaries. America's war fighters will always be our advantage. Investing in them is investing in winning.

For too long, U.S. air dominance has been taken for granted—but it isn't an American birthright. Given China's advances, it is time for a renewed bipartisan focus on the skies.

Mr. Budd, a North Carolina Republican, and Ms. Shaheen, a New Hampshire Democrat, are members of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

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Notable & Quotable: Cancer

Karl Zinsmeister, who died of cancer on April 30, writing in the Journal, Aug. 21, 2025:

Moonshots won't banish cancer. . . . I'm currently taking three major drugs in an attempt to regain control of my body. . . . For each of these megamedicines that get injected into my veins I receive roughly 10 more humble therapies that are just as vital. Countercompounds that soften harmful side effects of major drugs. Common vitamins that are needed for the medicines to take hold. Antinausea medicines without which my body would refuse the monthly infusions. Steroids that reduce inflammation and suppress malignant growths. Substances that prevent the immune system from being shut down. A regular shot to strengthen bones. Dental care to prevent the bone drug from destroying my jaw. Exercises and blood thinners so vein clots won't bring treatment to a halt. Carefully evolved nursing techniques that administer the right elements at the right time. Most of these have been slowly, locally worked out by caregivers coping with immediate individual needs.

The FT View

FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

The perilously high stakes for the next UN leader

International body must refocus on its primary mission to stay relevant

In the first six decades after the United Nations' foundation in 1945, the role of secretary-general was rightly seen as one of the more influential, important and at times even glamorous global roles around. In the cold war the superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, sometimes rode roughshod over the UN's prescriptions and flouted the secretary-general's appeals. But there was a general understanding that the UN was a vital forum for debate at moments of global crisis: it was the body that would not just try to prevent war, but honourably pick up the pieces after conflicts and try to shore up peace.

How distant that era seems. The contest has officially started for candidates for the 10th holder of the post. It comes, however, as the UN is most notable for its absence from the global stage. The comparison between its performance in America's last two major Middle East wars is all too telling.

In the countdown to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, George W Bush's administration felt the need to try to seek UN approval. The then secretary-general Kofi Annan's opposition posed major problems for the US. So weakened is the UN now that Donald Trump's administration has not even felt the need to pay lip service to the idea of seeking UN approval for the war against Iran.

The secretary-general's role today is a thankless one. The shareholders, in the form of the General Assembly, are divided and disillusioned; the board, in the form of the five permanent members of the Security Council, or at least three of them, the US, China and Russia, heed the forum only when it suits them; funding is straitened; its staff are in despair over cuts and a loss of morale; the public see it as a zombie organisation past its prime if not its time.

It is easy to see why some are tempted to cite the precedent of the UN's forerunner, the League of Nations. Set up idealistically after the first world war, it was formally closed only in 1946 but it had long since lost its way and its role against the backdrop of fascism's rise. Likewise, the architecture of the UN is now clearly outdated. Yet the world needs a body to address pressing global issues, from climate change to war. Trump's "Board of Peace" is no alternative.

In this context the choice of the next secretary-general is vital. So far four candidates have applied. They should be bold in their proposed reforms. There is an unquestionable need to rein in the UN's ambitions. It should refocus on its founding primary mission: peace and security. It may find itself ignored in the great powers' wars, but there are a host of other conflicts, for example Sudan, Yemen and the Democratic Republic of Congo, that need renewed UN focus. So, too, can the UN reform its humanitarian role. It could consider ceding parts of its sprawling development agenda to the development banks. There is also a pressing need to reduce its notorious bureaucracy.

> This contest to appoint the 10th secretary-general comes at a time when the organisation is most notable for its absence from the global stage

Other contenders are thought to be holding off from applying, assuming that the P5 will stitch up the succession to suit their ends. Is this then a moment for the UK and France to show their mettle? Their membership of the P5 is a legacy of 1945. The big three members, China, Russia and the US, will be keen to do a deal behind doors. London and Paris should make clear that they will not slavishly fall into line, and that the General Assembly must have a say.

Now, sadly, the conditions are not right for a radical new vision of the UN to be enacted. But it is vital to keep the organisation alive until better conditions for substantive reform exist. For this modest but essential ambition to be achieved the best possible candidates should be encouraged to compete.

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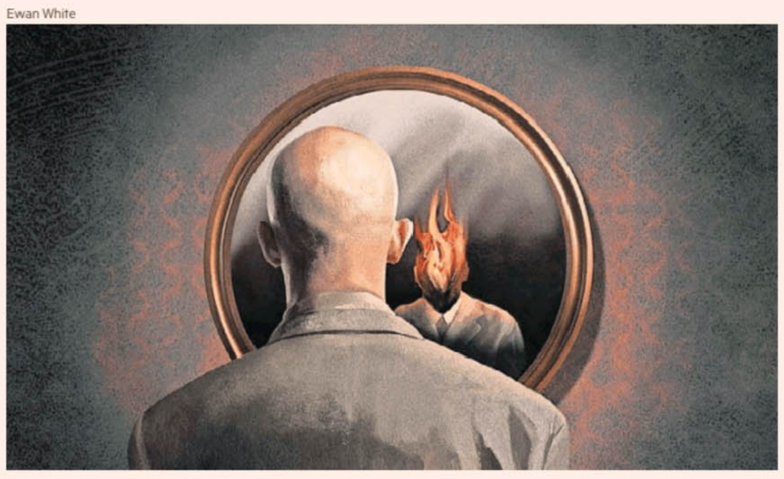
Opinion Society

How not to defeat antisemitism

Ewan White



Stephen Bush

What might a "whole society" approach to defeating antisemitism, of the kind envisaged by Keir Starmer, look like? It's a question that lies in the answer to another: what is the cause of antisemitism?

Some answers can and should be dismissed. "Israel's actions in the Middle East," for example. Not just because antisemitism is a hatred that is comfortably more than 1,000 years old, while the state of Israel only turns 78 this month. But because someone who resorts to violence against British Jews in reaction to what the state of Israel does is already following racist logic. They are looking to punish a group of people for someone else's crime. I oppose Donald Trump's tariffs and actions in the Middle East. I don't head to an area I know will be full of American tourists with a knife in my hand.

> History matters because it is only by understanding the appeal of racism that we can tackle it

The important question, then, is why ethnic hatred exerts such an enduring appeal. Why do people get a kick out of racism? And I use the word "racism" quite deliberately because that is what antisemitism is, even when it cloaks itself in religious or geopolitical clothing. As the historian Ivan Marcus shows in his book *How The West Became Antisemitic*, "the Jew as internal enemy" is a medieval invention. Christians went so far as to say that not even undergoing Christian baptism could make Jewish men anything other than Jewish — a claim that is completely at odds with Christian theology. In the absence of scriptural evidence, medieval Christians essentially had to invent their own.

Why did they want to do that? WEB Du Bois, in seeking to explain why white working-class Americans in the Deep South voted for policies that would impoverish them in order to maintain racial segregation, invented the concept of the "psychological wage". By declaring other people as "Black" and therefore outside the scope of whiteness, even white Americans who had achieved very little in their own lives gained a measure of self-esteem by claiming that the "ownership of the earth" fell on them.

Anti-Jewish racism similarly allows people to draw a psychological wage: either by declaring themselves to be members of a master race or religion to which the Jews will never belong, or because it unlocks a world of conspiracies and hidden secrets that allows the person who believes in them to feel smarter and better informed than everyone else.

This history matters because it is only by understanding the appeal of racism that we can understand how to tackle it. The historic truth is that the ebb and flow of Jewish fortunes had nothing to do with the actions of Jews, a yet-to-be-founded Jewish state, or "economic anxiety". Economic growth remained essentially flat throughout the medieval period, which is the focus of Marcus's book. In the present day, while the Conservatives presided over a long period of sluggish growth in the UK from 2010 to 2024, they did not preside over a period of worsening race relations. Labour's economic stewardship, both for reasons in their control and outside it, has not been an improvement on the last government, but nor is that the cause of emboldened racism in the UK.

What defeats racism is the willingness of civic society and the state to proselytise against it. It is weakened when people feel ashamed to express racist statements in public. And what strengthens racism is an erosion of the principle that you cannot or should not punish individuals for the real or perceived crimes of an ethnic or religious group, and the creation of an environment where racist statements are aired without embarrassment.

It was not an accident that the religious intolerance that saw Catholic Europe launch crusades against Orthodox Christianity and the Muslim world coincided with a decline in the condition of Jews in Europe. Similarly, the emboldening of racism of all stripes in the UK today has gone hand in hand with the rise of specifically anti-Jewish racism.

The lesson of the past is clear: seeing racism as the reaction to events overseas, or to economic dislocation, is wrong-headed. Such events only trigger increases in racism if societies haven't done enough to stamp out and condemn its latent appeal.

Second, the best way to defeat racism is to argue for equality before the law, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and the general anti-racist principle that individuals, not groups, bear responsibility for their actions, and that disputes are settled at the ballot box not by violence. As long as the political class rouses itself against racism intermittently and patchily and is equivocal on these points, the whole society effort to defeat antisemitism is doomed to fail.

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Letters

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ECB's stance on price stability requires action on rates now

Olaf Storbeck (Report, April 23) reports that European Central Bank policymaker Mārtiņš Kazāks believes the bank does not need to rush into raising interest rates because inflation expectations remain steady and the recent surge in energy prices does not have a significant impact on the broader economy.

However, this argument underestimates the risk that current energy shocks might become more persistent over time. In real life, higher oil and gas prices tend to spread across other parts of the economy such as transportation, food and eventually wages. In other words, it creates second-round effects that are a lot harder to control. If the ECB waits too long, it may be forced to respond more aggressively, causing even greater economic instability.

Kazāks places too much confidence in the ECB's past success. Investors and households do not form their expectations just on the previous achievements. They take actions based on the future risks and the ECB's willingness to act. By delaying its reaction, the ECB risks weakening confidence in its commitment to price stability.

The ECB should act now with a gradual increase in interest rates and should also make clear that further tightening may follow if energy inflation spreads to wages and consumer prices. This movement would reinforce the ECB's commitment to price stability and reduce the risk of implementing more damaging policy later.

Abzal Iskakov
Astana, Kazakhstan

How the City attracts talent is misallocation of resources

Zongshuai Fan (Letters, April 29) ascribes China's current success in manufacturing and technology, among other things, to "a deep engineering talent pool", and not mainly to state subsidies. Here, I feel British readers should take note.

For decades, many of the best graduates from UK universities in Stem subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) have headed at once, or at least after an indecently short period, into analytical roles in the City to become "quants". Yes, of course, the City and the financial sector pay vast amounts in tax, so the phenomenon is seen as a fair use of scarce talent. Except, I would argue, it has been a huge mistake, a misallocation of resources, and the price has been high.

The UK economy has been profoundly skewed away from manufacturing. Industry has been starved of both talent and investment. High-quality jobs, skilled and well paid, have been created in China while areas of the UK are experiencing decline, poverty and social unrest, decades after manufacturing and other manual employment disappeared.

We should do as China does: make sure Stem graduates find industry attractive, guarantee high-quality training to ensure a pool of well-qualified and motivated people but also make sure start-up funding and business finance is readily available in a preferential, low business tax environment.

Christopher Burden
Reading, Berkshire, UK

Sagan's 'Pale Blue Dot' – why it merits re-reading

My husband and I are avid readers of the FT Weekend and value the well-balanced reporting. However, the behaviour described in Lauren Indvik's article just made me sad ("Net-a-Porter has sent me packing", Opinion, Life & Arts, FT Weekend, May 2).

It appears there is a very obvious disconnect many must experience when considering the impact of their actions on the physical world.

A serial returner, like a serial litter bug, can monitor and amend their behaviour to make a difference. Cause and consequence still exist, as does responsibility for our impact on our world, city, street and neighbours. Computer algorithms don't force us to do anything.

On the same page Janan Ganesh's column is a timely reminder of the importance of keeping it real in the physical world.

Anyone with time to spare (who hasn't already done so) should read Carl Sagan's *Pale Blue Dot*, explaining why we should all reconsider our impact on our amazing world.

Jenny David
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UK

Adding a zero to Virgil's timeframe

In the interesting letter on Virgil's "Georgics" and organic farming, the poem is described as having been written more than two centuries ago ("Is Virgil's 'Georgics' an early organic farming manifesto?", May 2). That would have placed Virgil, somewhat disconcertingly, in the late 18th, early 19th centuries.

Adding a zero to make the timeframe two millennia (which was probably the author's intention) would better reflect historical fact.

Fergus Randolph KC
London WC2, UK

A simple solution to the issue of museum entry fees

Re Franklin Nelson's piece about charging entry to museums, a simple solution would be to charge those intending to take photographs (Report, May 2), rewarding them with a handsome sticker so they can easily be identified by staff. This would not only generate all the needed income, it would also allow (the rest of) us to enjoy museums again.

Ian Peter MacDonald
Spean Bridge, Inverness-shire, UK

OUTLOOK

AMERICA

Route 66 at 100 still ties the US and the world together

by Patti Waldmeir

When I set out last week on America's storied Route 66, I had to wait in line behind groups of Taiwanese and Italian tourists to grab a selfie at the sign where "the Mother Road" begins in downtown Chicago. Despite America's rapidly declining image overseas, this mother of all road trips — nearly 2,500 miles across the American heartland, from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean — remains particularly popular among overseas visitors.

"I had people from 19 countries here in one day, recently," Route 66 Hall of Fame and Museum docent Rose Geralds, 87, tells me. She gestures proudly at the visitors' log, which showed entries from Brazil, Turkey, Italy, Japan, the UK, France and Australia on the day I visited.

Geralds reckons at least one-third of museum patrons are from overseas — and there's been no decline, she says, since the beginning of the second Trump term. It helps, she adds, that the "Main Street of America" celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, alongside the nation's 250th.

"Foreign travellers have become the lifeline of the road," historian Michael Wallis, author of Route 66, 100th anniversary edition: The Mother Road, tells me. "It's the classic American road trip, and for many, it's the trip of a lifetime," he says, adding that Northern European travellers particularly like to do the route by Harley-Davidson. Interstate highways cover the same ground but bypass all the small towns en route. "When you're on 66, you are closer to your surroundings, you can see a woman in her pink curlers on a riding mower cutting the grass and you can smell that grass, all your senses are engaged," says Wallis.

The route is known for "Mom and Pop" motels and chrome-and-linoleum diners, neon signs and art deco filling stations — all the American heartland clichés that I remember from childhood summer road trips in vast sedans without air conditioning or seatbelts. But these days, many Americans find the route's quirky roadside attractions — the giant rocking chairs and grotesque fibreglass statues known as Muffler Men — too kitsch by half.

Still, the adoring Japanese and Italian tourists snapping selfies with the Gemini Giant Muffler Man made clear they didn't want me spoiling their fun by saying so. "This is the true Americana," one of them told me firmly, with the help of Google Translate.

Waitress Abby Lee is serving classic diner fare to a packed mid-morning crowd in farmers' overalls and straggly long beards and a sheriff's deputy in a bulletproof vest at Shelly's Route 66 Café in Cuba, Missouri. "I had a group from the UK this morning, and lots of French and Italians. To them, this is the American dream trip. This is America in its prime," she tells me.

The dream of recreating "America in its prime" is exactly what catapulted Donald Trump to the presidency in rural areas like this. Nostalgia is a powerful force in the heartland — both politically, and on the tourist trail, it seems.

For my money, that's what makes Route 66 so special: chatting to the waitress who served me apple pie at the Country Aire restaurant whose display case holds truly gargantuan pie slices; and the farm wife who politely asks "you just passing through?" as I unfurl my paper route map. The gentle chit-chat over making change, the genuine pride in a buttermilk biscuit well-made, the shy smile at a compliment from strangers — that's the Main Street of America vibe that draws dreamers from around the world to Route 66. And at a time when America's reality is so troubled, that dream seems as real as ever to them.

At the Wagon Wheel Motel — which claims to be the longest continuously operating Route 66 motel — Francois-Xavier and Lorenza Mallez from Versailles, France, are packing up for another day on the road across America. Their chatter wakes me, and I step outside to ask why they love it so. "It's a mythical road, it's the books, it's the music, it's the movies," Francois-Xavier tells me, his eyes misting up. "And it's the people you meet along the way," Lorenza chimes in. "If it weren't for Route 66, we wouldn't have met you!" she enthuses, insisting on a hug before they take off.

The writer is a contributing columnist

Opinion

Welcome to the Great Hunkering Down

EMPLOYMENT
Sarah O'Connor

How times have changed. Four years ago there were reports of law firms inviting staff to bring their dogs to the office, while some bankers enjoyed "summer Fridays" — characterised by one Wall Street analyst as: "Log into Teams, check email, then live my life." Now, the news is generally of perks being withdrawn, and even of companies requiring staff to put their mobile phones in lockable pouches to improve security, "remove distractions and build discipline".

It is always possible to find some sociological, technological or managerial explanation for these changing trends. But the waxing and waning of workplace perks is usually an indicator of one key thing: the shifting balance of power between employers and employees. In more normal times, this looks like a gentle push and pull in line with the economic cycle. Over the past five years it has been more like a whipsaw.

The best metric to follow is the rate at which people quit their jobs voluntarily. I have always been fond of the name given to this dataset by Nick Colas and Jessica Rabe of DataTrekResearch: they call it the "Take This Job and Shove It" index. After the pandemic, a shortage of labour gave workers an unusually strong bargaining hand. The "quit rate" — the number of people who left their jobs voluntarily as a proportion of total employment — was about 2.3 per cent in the US pre-pandemic, and shot up to about 3 per cent in 2021. UK data shows a similar pattern, though statistics on quit rates in other countries are hard to come by.

But people's propensity to quit has plunged since then. In the US, the latest reading is just 1.9 per cent, the lowest (excluding the pandemic) for about a decade. In the UK, the pattern is very similar. The Great Resignation is well and truly over. Welcome to the Great Hunkering Down.

The last time quit rates were this low in both economies, unemployment was higher than it is now. So why are employees so determined to sit tight? For one thing, there is plenty of macroeconomic uncertainty about, from trade wars to real wars. Regular warnings about looming AI-induced job losses can't help confidence either. On top of that, the US housing market is weak (though causation might run both ways). I also suspect that some of the people who switched to remote work during the pandemic and moved to rural areas might now be a little trapped in those jobs, without many alternatives that meet their needs.

> At a company level, low attrition is usually seen as a good thing. For the economy, it's the opposite

At a company level, low attrition rates are usually seen as a good thing. But for the economy, they're the opposite. That's not only because they're an indicator of low economic confidence. OECD research suggests that "labour reallocation" — people moving from stagnant companies to growing ones — doesn't just reflect economic dynamism and productivity growth, but actually helps to propel it.

All of which brings me back to AI. There are some tentative indications that new AI tools are beginning to boost productivity growth in the US. But if that is the case, it must primarily be via helping staff to be more productive in their current roles, rather than the messier, but often more transformative, types of productivity growth that come from what economist Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction".

Yet if you had believed much of the commentary over the past few years, you would have expected economies such as the US and the UK already to be in the midst of a vast "labour reallocation" process by now.

For the pessimists, that was going to look like vast job losses and the growth of a "permanent underclass" who were no longer employable. For the optimists, it was more likely to look like a normal burst of rapid technological change: some occupations and industries would shrink while others would grow, new occupations would be created while others would be destroyed, and an awful lot of people would find different jobs in a bewildering, but ultimately productivity-enhancing, bout of disruption.

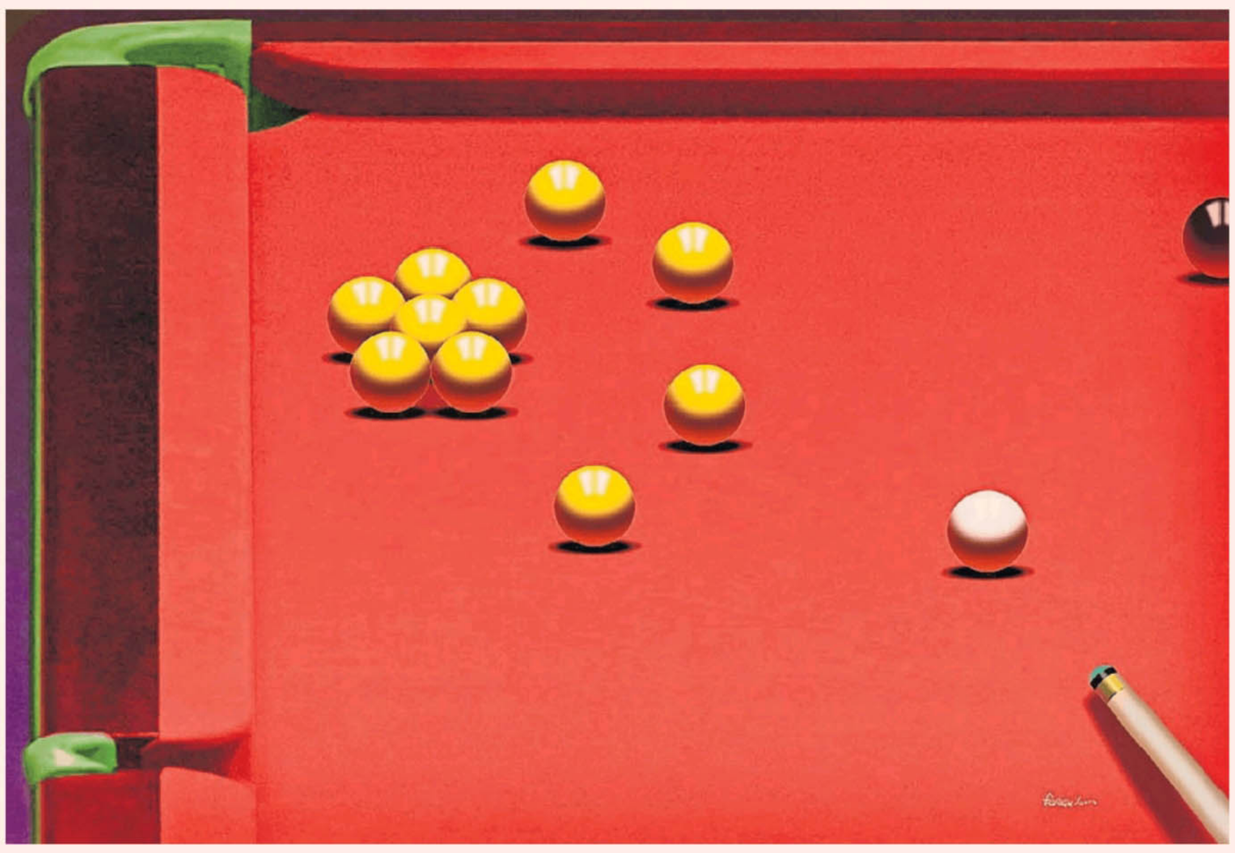
Indeed, Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the IMF, said last year that AI was "already like a tsunami hitting the labour market".

But this job market data doesn't scream "tsunami" to me. People aren't getting fired in large numbers. They aren't getting hired in large numbers. And they aren't quitting to seize new opportunities in large numbers. The sea is as placid as a lake.

Perhaps it is the calm before the storm. Perhaps people are right to batten down the hatches. Or perhaps we're all expecting more drama from the AI story than we really should.

sarah.oconnor@ft.com

China builds soft power as US burns bridges



WORLD AFFAIRS
Gideon Rachman

As I write, the World Snooker Championship is coming to a climax in Sheffield — with 22-year-old Wu Yize battling Britain's Shaun Murphy for supremacy. If Wu wins he will be the second Chinese player to be crowned world champion, following the victory of Zhao Xintong last year.

In a surprising twist of fate, China and Britain have emerged as the two centres of world snooker excellence. Sheffield, once the world's steelmaking capital, has become the snooker capital. Wu moved there aged 16 with his father and lived in a windowless flat, as he honed his game. There are now said to be some 150mn snooker fans in China. Peter Wilson, the UK ambassador in Beijing, has installed a snooker table in his living room as a tribute to this unlikely bond.

China's emergence as a snooker superpower is a small sign that the country is beginning to develop "soft power" — the cultural cachet that can burnish a country's global image.

For many years, modern forms of soft power have eluded China. Japan had manga. South Korea had K-pop. These phenomena emerged from within society rather than by government decree — which may be one reason why China, under the suffocating rule of the Communist Party, struggled to compete. But things are changing. It is not just the snooker. TikTok is a wildly successful Chinese app that has helped to create cultural memes with international resonance. The city of Chongqing is now gaining global attention because of its "cyberpunk" architecture, with railways passing through buildings. The phrase "a very Chinese time in my life" has gone viral on TikTok and Instagram. It can mean anything from wearing slippers indoors to drinking hot water.

The relationship between soft power and geopolitics is hard to pin down — but it definitely exists. The US and the west triumphed in the cold war, partly because American society seemed so much more attractive and dynamic than its Soviet rival. The yearning for Levi's jeans and rock music behind the Iron Curtain was real and it mattered. So, it is potentially significant that China is developing soft power, just as Donald Trump is burning through America's stock of global goodwill.

A survey of elite opinion in south-east Asia, released last month, asked respondents who south-east Asian nations should align with, if forced to choose between America and China. For the second time in the eight-year history of the survey, a slim majority opted for China. A poll taken earlier this year showed significant majorities in Germany, France, Britain and Canada saying that it is "better to depend on China than the US" — a remarkable result for traditional American allies.

The rivalry between the US and China is increasingly about which nation will do most to shape the world's economic and technological future. Will third countries adopt Chinese or American tech standards? Will Chinese EVs come to dominate the global auto market?

A country's global image can powerfully influence those choices. The sales of Teslas plunged in Europe in 2025, which many have attributed to the close association of the company's founder, Elon Musk, with Donald Trump. My local Tesla dealership in west London shut down recently and is now a showroom for the fast-growing Chinese car brands, Omoda and Jaecoo.

American policymakers often insist that adopting Chinese tech can expose people to Chinese espionage. A few years ago, the US went all out to persuade its global allies not to adopt 5G wireless from Huawei, a Chinese provider. This campaign was fairly successful. Britain, for example, reversed its decision to go with Huawei. But it is questionable whether similar American campaigns would now succeed.

> A country's global image can powerfully influence who other nations choose to depend on

The main argument that the US made against Huawei was that adopting their technology would open countries to surveillance and to economic coercion. But we now live in a world in which economic coercion is a mainstay of American statecraft and EU officials are told to take burner phones to the US.

Beijing, meanwhile, is buffing up its soft power. Many Europeans can now travel there without visas. China's DeepSeek has made its AI model open source, which has led to its rapid adoption around the world. And last week, China dropped tariffs on imports from almost all African countries. That made for a striking contrast with Washington's announcement that it intends to impose 25 per cent tariffs on EU vehicles.

The US has long regarded India as a crucial partner in the battle to contain Chinese influence. But Trump seems to be going out of his way to alienate the Modi government — imposing heavy tariffs on India, praising Pakistan and recently sharing social media comments that described India as a "hellhole". In March, the Modi government announced that it will now allow fast-track approval for tech investments with minority Chinese ownership in seven strategic sectors.

The irony is that US warnings about the dangers of economic dependence on China have some merit. Beijing has shown itself willing and able to use its dominance of rare earths and critical mineral production as a geopolitical weapon. To combat China's growing economic power around the world, the US will need to create international partnerships. That will require rebuilding America's stock of soft power. Otherwise Trump may find himself well and truly snookered by Xi.

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An oil price crunch is looming

Christof Rühl

The world is watching a race between two blockades. Washington blocks Iran's oil income while Tehran threatens the world's oil artery. Both disrupt energy flows to inflict economic damage and seek to force political concessions.

For Iran, the prospect that a naval blockade will force its government into serious negotiations is dim. Technically, the government still has control over its oil and gas production, including the ability to scale it up or down. Even if the blockade cuts into revenues and damages production capacity in the long term, why would economic misery sway a regime with a long record of prioritising dogma over wellbeing, and with its back to the wall? At a minimum, that will take time.

For the rest of the world, time is running out. In volume terms, the de facto blockade of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran is the largest disruption in the history of global oil markets. Many observers wonder why markets appear surprisingly unfazed: oil prices are up but not as much as after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Stock markets, in particular, are strong.

The lack of market panic is not irrational. Inventories and expectations tell the story: oil markets were well supplied when the attacks on Iran started, with supply exceeding consumption and inventories high. Financial markets signal expectations that the war and disruption will stop before inventories show the strain. While the spot price for oil has escalated, futures prices for delivery a few months from now are lower and falling. But what if the two blockades continue?

One argument often marshalled to explain why markets are sanguine is that oil is no longer as important as it used to be. Global oil intensity — the amount of oil necessary to produce a certain amount of economic output — has improved dramatically over the decades. In 1973, the year of the first oil price shock, I calculate from industry sources that about 80 per cent of one barrel of oil was consumed per $1,000 of global GDP in 2025 prices — 131 litres, to be precise. In 1980, the year after the Iranian revolution, this was down to 116 litres. Last year, it was 52 litres.

The current level is still a lot, but the average oil burden is 60 per cent less than 50 years ago. If so much less oil is needed, real prices should have much more room to escalate before they cause the economic damage associated with previous disruptions.

> Consumption today is more concentrated in high-value uses and in areas where there is no substitute

A simple illustration of today's diminished oil cost burden to the global economy is to adjust the nominal price of oil not only for inflation but also for the efficiency improvements. If one does, a hypothetical price of $115 per barrel today compares with an average price of $339 in 1980 in today's dollars. By this measure, prices have plenty of runway before the oil burden resembles 1980.

Unfortunately, the improvements in oil intensity are a double-edged sword. Oil consumption today is more concentrated in high-value uses and in areas where there is no substitute, like road or air freight and maritime shipping. These are load-bearing economic activities, less price sensitive than discretionary or consumption-oriented drivers of growth. Once disrupted they are likely to cascade through the economy.

Traditionally, oil price rises translate into an economic recession via inflation and tighter monetary policies; or by affecting growth directly, through diminished purchasing power or by triggering fiscal and balance of payments constraints. It is mostly the average cost of oil that matters to these channels.

Today, price increases will hit the high-value use of oil which cannot be substituted. The cost then is the loss of economic activity and value creation, caused by shutting down a particular node. Oil concentrated in high-value uses is a little bit like rare earths, tiny compared with the size of GDP but essential for much of it. If the size of a supply disruption requires demand to fall and prices surge to the required level, the response will be sudden with a potentially unforeseen and disproportionate impact on economic activity.

Modern, wealthy and service-based economies do not have an escape hatch. With transport disruptions, their supply chains become vulnerable and disruptions unpredictable. The longer the two blockades continue, the more likely a crisis-like adjustment in the world's leading economies, rather than the slow-growth recession we have been used to.

A theocracy like Iran can suppress economic pain. In a democracy, deliberately gambling away economic stability eventually means paying a political price.

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African economies are more resilient than ever

Ken Opalo

Whether or not the ceasefire in Iran holds, the damage to the global economy has been done. This is especially true in low-income countries, many of them in Africa. Consumers — many of whom already eked out a living on thin margins — are feeling the inflationary pinch.

A number of African governments have rushed to mitigate the worst effects of rising energy prices, but many have very limited fiscal space to offer subsidies. For example, Kenya has had to halve VAT on fuel, even as its projected deficit ballooned to almost 7 per cent of GDP. Were inflation to go unchecked, close to 2mn Kenyans are at risk of sliding into poverty.

Beyond the cost of fuel, African policymakers must also worry about food prices. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has caused a surge in fertiliser costs, which may result in lower agricultural productivity later this year.

How will African economies fare amid these challenges? Too often, observers catastrophise when thinking about how global shocks propagate across Africa. In the 1980s, a global debt crisis coming at the end of a commodity boom yielded a decade and a half of economic stagnation and several instances of state collapse across the region. Weak state capacity meant governments struggled to implement emergency social policies to cushion households from the worst effects of the crises.

Yet these perceptions need updating. The crises of the 1980s were a bad case of bad timing. Back then, many African countries were barely 20 years old, with many having gone through post-independence political upheavals. Several young and very weak states required substantial structural adjustment, which in turn imposed severe contractions in output and retrenchments of public goods and services.

> Too often, observers catastrophise about how international shocks affect the region

This time is different. Over the past 25 years, African countries have endured four external shocks — the global financial crisis, the end of the China-led commodity supercycle, the pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine. In all four cases, most of the continent's economies proved to be remarkably resilient. Before the Iran war, the region was projected to outgrow Asia in 2026 — the first time in the modern era.

Three factors explain these trends. First, the reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s significantly improved the quality of macroeconomic policymaking in Africa. The era of runaway printing of money is gone. Central banks generally do a good job of keeping inflation low. And structural adjustment periods have become shorter and better managed. Ethiopia, Ghana and Zambia recently went through painful debt restructuring without the catastrophic experiences witnessed in the 1980s; all three are now squarely back on growth trajectories.

Second, economic expansion since the mid-1990s has yielded a vibrant informal private sector. A rise in intra-Africa trade — which now accounts for almost one-fifth of total trade in the region, up from 3 per cent in the late 1950s — helps insulate countries from global shocks.

Third, deeper intra-African integration and a more diversified set of global trading partners have helped. In particular, new trade connections in the developing world — as opposed to mainly with former colonial powers — have made African economies more resilient to global disruptions.

Still, the impact of today's Gulf crisis will not be painless. African households, like their counterparts elsewhere, will have to endure the coming inflationary pain. But African governments are now much more capable of steering their economies through crises, a shift that should inform the kinds of support multilateral institutions provide. Targeted external support should focus on shoring up households' purchasing power and stabilising currency markets rather than seeking to force unnecessary reforms on governments. It must not make things worse like in the 1980s.

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