

## The Indian Express

FOUNDED BY -  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**  
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

### A task still lies ahead in former Red Corridor

FOR ALMOST six decades, the Maoist insurrection has cast a shadow. Emerging from agrarian unrest in Naxalbari, West Bengal, the movement spread to parts of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha. Today, as the country appears close to a decisive end to the insurgency — Home Minister Amit Shah has said the Red Corridor has dwindled to two districts — the moment calls for a sober reckoning. The steady squeezing of the movement in the past two years — arrests, surrenders and killings of left-wing extremists (LWEs) — is no doubt a military defeat of Maoism. Several Maoists who have laid down arms have spoken of the futility of violent means. Their ideological disenchantment also speaks of their recognition of the democratic possibilities of a state they once criticised as "semi-colonial". This points to the task that lies ahead — to build on this opening in ways that guard against the erosion of trust, and deepen democracy.

The Red Corridor took root in areas marked by multiple state abdications and political failures. Extremism drew sustenance from the government's failure to establish a credible presence through welfare interventions among marginalised communities. In forested areas, where the state's writ was weak, Maoist groups established parallel governance structures, collecting levies, dispensing justice, and tapping into the anxieties of people displaced by infrastructure. The government's response oscillated between neglect and displays of force. In 2006, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described Maoist violence as India's single biggest internal security threat. The past two decades have seen a decisive shift, however, towards combining security operations with development initiatives. The task begun by its predecessor has been pursued by the NDA government with vigour. Roads, schools and hospitals have come up in once-inaccessible areas, increasing numbers are in the ambit of the banking structure, and direct benefit transfers have enhanced the efficacy of welfare schemes. At the same time, better-equipped security forces, supported by effective intelligence, have dealt a string of reverses to LWEs.

The deeper challenge has, however, not been completely overcome. Uneven development, land acquisition for infrastructure projects and environmental degradation remain fraught issues. Areas with a history of lawlessness require continuing vigilance against the emergence of newer forms of unrest. The state should not only be efficient, it must also be, and be seen to be, just.

### Bengal's unmet challenge

THE DRIFT in West Bengal's higher education system expresses a stark disconnect between promise and performance. An investigation by this newspaper has revealed that of the 11 "dream" universities announced across north and south Bengal during the second term of the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) government in 2017-18, seven have no permanent campuses; many have no permanent faculty; most have received statutory recognition as recently as January. What was framed as a project to decentralise quality higher education beyond Kolkata has instead morphed into a troubling case of promise without credibility.

This dismal story may be symptomatic of the broader governance crisis surrounding education in the state. The 2022 teacher-recruitment scam in which several senior TMC leaders were embroiled eroded trust in the integrity of the system. At the same time, despite Raj Bhavan's assurance that "education must be treated as a no-conflict zone", during his tenure between November 2022 and March 2026, the prolonged tussle between Governor CV Ananda Bose, the ex-officio chancellor of all state universities, and the CM stalled key administrative decisions, paralysing institutions. In addition, these disruptions have compounded a steady erosion of West Bengal's once-formidable educational standing. While institutions such as Jadavpur University (JU) continue to rank among the country's finest in the National Institutional Ranking Framework, others such as the University of Calcutta have slipped. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-2022, West Bengal's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education during the period stood at 26.3 per cent as compared to the national average GER of 28.4 per cent for the same period. The 14.8 per cent share for education in the state Budget 2025-26 marks a decline from previous years.

In a state with a storied intellectual legacy, the neglect of education and employment is especially dispiriting. For a government bidding for a fourth term, these failures could be a heavy burden to carry. An absence of high quality education systems, employment opportunities, pathways to innovation and social mobility risks alienating the very demographic that the TMC's development narrative seeks to address.

### Ladies and gentlemen, this is a robbery

IT IS NOT for nothing that the head of Art Recovery International has lamented the current "smash and grab period" of art theft. The masked men who broke into the Magagnoli Rocca Foundation in Italy's Parma region and made off with three paintings — a Renoir, a Cézanne and a Matisse — showed little patience for the finesse and style that seem to have characterised such endeavours in the past. They used a crowbar to force open an entrance and were in and out in under three minutes.

Gentlemen thieves like Thomas Crown and Arsène Lupin may be mere products of the imagination, but art history is replete with stories of purloiners who combined their taste for the rare and beautiful — and the profits they bring — with a sense of mischief and real for the art. The 14.8 per cent share for education in the state Budget 2025-26 marks a decline from previous years.

Then there was Stéphane Breitwieser, art thief extraordinaire who walked off with pieces from nearly 200 museums — simply because they moved him. No smashed glass, held-ups or bloodshed were involved, just good taste and chutzpah. His luck turned in 2001 when his mother, angered by his criminal behaviour, disposed of his nearly \$1.25-billion collection, and Breitwieser was arrested. The smashers-and-grabbers of today may not execute their crimes with quite the same insouciance or love, but their desire to turn their loot to profit at least keeps alive the hope that someday the priceless works will be found and restored.

THE CATASTROPHE of war in Iran is being effortfully masked by a fog of abstractions, circumlocution, and feigned normalcy. It is almost as if the populations of democracies, particularly in the United States but also elsewhere, have been morally anaesthetised into indifference. In all wars, there is disinformation, self-delusion, and a rallying around the flag. Yet the paradox here is striking. A Pew Poll reports that 61 per cent of Americans disapprove of it. Even globally, there is no rousing support for this conflict, only a sullen, quiet coping. Normally, such facts might reassure us. Not all publics have surrendered to cruelty. But the nature of the impending catastrophe is such that these facts only deepen our anxieties rather than relieve them.

For those of us familiar with the US, it is difficult to recall a war of such consequence so thoroughly removed from effective public consciousness. The media landscapes of most democracies have become, in effect, more reminiscent of the propaganda apparatuses of authoritarian states than of free societies. There are multiple mechanisms at work. First, there is the sheer lack of coverage, or at least meaningful coverage, of the war and its tangible consequences. The fragmented media ecosystem, with its partisan reporting, random social media clips, and endless expert analyses, produces the illusion of knowledge without offering the public any real experiential confrontation or synthesis. Democracies, astonishingly, have perfected the art of disguising the true character of war.

Second, the language in which the war is described is deliberately abstracted. "Ca-

abilities degraded", "escalation logic", "targeted operations", "tactical advantage". These terms sanitise violence, rendering the war almost invisible to collective consciousness. Third, there is an intensification of racial and national hierarchies of concern. Some hierarchies are inevitable. Our empathy is shaped by common fate and shared history. But the regression we have witnessed since the war in Gaza is extraordinary. When former secretary of state Antony Blinken claimed that "there is no hierarchy of trauma", the statement was hard to classify. Was it self-delusion, a lie, or mere bulls\*\*t? The fact that such a statement could be delivered with a straight face in a democracy saturated with selective concern signals a degradation of public discourse.

There is widespread moral and psychological fatigue. Even those fully aware of the impending catastrophe feel utterly disarmed and disempowered, as though democracy itself has been seawarded as a site for reflection on war. The most worrying feature of American democracy at this moment is not that it has grown more disposed to cruelty, but that it seems to have reached a point where everyone seeks absolution from responsibility. The denial of war has become so complete that it exempts society from the moral burdens of judging and acting.

This pattern is mirrored internationally. Talk of a middle-power coalition abounds. India, Japan, Canada, and other states understandably seek to shield themselves from the immediate fallout of war. They are not responsible for initiating the conflict. But in



PRAPAT BHANU MEHTA

The most worrying feature of American democracy at this moment is not that it has grown more disposed to cruelty, but that it seems to have reached a point where everyone seeks absolution from responsibility

seeking to distance themselves, they also absolve themselves of the responsibility to try to end it. There is extensive circumlocution: The language of self-interest dominates. Yet there is a crucial difference between prudential self-interest and moral narcissism, which seems to rule the roost. Any discussion of a stabilising coalition of middle powers remains hollow so long as it is not accompanied by a willingness to confront war as war, to name its violence, and to build coalitions of naming and shaming. Without that, middle powers are neither middling nor powerful; they are trifling entities trapped in self-delusion. India illustrates this paradox particularly sharply. Even moderate calls for taking a stand or resisting a new imperial order are dismissed as moralism, when in reality, they reflect a wider and more intelligent understanding of prudence. The point is not about simply expressing an empty opinion on the war. The point is to confront the fact that this war risks global catastrophe, and it is the height of imprudence not to build coalitions to prevent it.

Perhaps the central problem is that we are not fully grasping the nature of the catastrophe unfolding before us. This is not a world war in the traditional sense, but a global interconnected war, as Timothy Garton Ash aptly describes it, where theatres from Ukraine to Saudi Arabia, Israel to Iran, Ethiopia to the UAE, and even Pakistan to Afghanistan, Sudan to Yemen, are entwined. Every action in one theatre reverberates across the globe. In this context, the US is gov-

erned not only by a regime that disregards international laws and norms but also by one unwilling to burn the house down if it cannot win. This is not only a domestic feature; it is mirrored in foreign policy. But this dynamic is not limited to the US. Israel, a major driver of regional war, has pursued the creation of an endless series of failed states as a strategic objective. Iran exhibits a strategic catastrophism. Meanwhile, Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia were already engaging in catastrophic proxy conflicts in Sudan, Yemen, and Ethiopia, actively producing state failure.

All of these actors display a willingness to legitimise any means necessary: The targeted killing of leaders, asymmetric warfare, and the bombing of civilian infrastructure and educational institutions. The full-scale horrors of this war are not confined to bombed cities or destroyed infrastructure; they are also manifest in profound psychological and social consequences. This war will heighten a global condition of suspicion and paranoia. The legitimisation of targeted assassinations, hitting water supplies, drones, and the spectres of asymmetric warfare will have catastrophic long-term consequences. Nuclear risks will intensify globally, while failed states multiply.

In short, this is a war whose true devastation is as much psychological and institutional as it is physical. If democracy is anaesthetised in the face of those willing to burn the house down, as it appears to be the case in the US, it has already lost.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

### How Naxal deadline was met with a two-pronged approach



MP NATHANAEL

WITH THE deadline of March 31 met, Union Home Minister Amit Shah was exuberant in declaring in the Lok Sabha on March 30 that "Naxalism has been more or less wiped out from Bihar" and with that, from the country, too. He reminded the House that when he visited Chhattisgarh in August 2024, he had announced that Naxalism would be wiped out from the country once and for all by March 31, 2026. The decision was unique in its own way — though insurgencies were crushed and normalcy restored in the northeastern states of Mizoram, Tripura, Assam and Nagaland, as well as in Punjab, no deadlines were ever set by a home minister. But this caused the security forces to ramp up their efforts, especially the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) — designated as the primary internal security force of the country by a Group of Ministers in 2001 — as well as the police forces of the Maoist-affected states and other Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), comprising the Border Security Force, the Central Industrial Security Force, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the Sashastra Seema Bal.

Meeting the deadline was made possible not only by acceding to the logistical and infrastructural demands of the security forces to counter the Maoists but also by focusing simultaneously on the development of the region.

What appeared to be an insurmountable task was the road connectivity in Abujmahar area, which was a bastion of the Maoists where their writ ran large. Efforts to construct roads were thwarted by the Maoists as it would facilitate the forces to rush anywhere in the region in a short time.

The onerous task of constructing roads was initially entrusted to the Border Roads Organisation under the security umbrella of the CRPF as private contractors feared to tread in the area. Once the construction of roads began, the private contractors came forward.

Despite attacks on the CRPF personnel guarding the manpower and on machines involved in road construction, the work continued in full swing over the last few

years and a stretch of 12,000 kilometers was completed, thus paving the way for development to penetrate into villages that had been cut off from the world.

With more than 5,000 mobile towers installed in Abujmahar and neighbouring areas and thousands of mobile sets given to the villagers, access to the outside world was wide open. Over a hundred forward operating bases were established by the Central Reserve Police Force right in the heart of Abujmahar, instilling confidence and fearlessness among the villagers.

Hard intelligence began to flow while the Maoists were cut off from the villagers. The combination of human intelligence and technical intelligence led to the security forces gaining an upper hand, with relentless operations yielding the desired results.

The 21-day operations conducted by the Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) and the Central Reserve Police Force in the Karagutta hills on the Telangana-Chhattisgarh border in May last year proved to be a turning point. Over 31 Maoists were killed while others escaped by dispersing in small groups into Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

The elimination of top Maoist leaders like Madvi Hidma, Nambala Keshava Rao (Basavara), Ganesh Uike (Paka Hanumanthi), Satyanarayana Reddy (Kosa) and Ramchandra Reddy (Chalapati) in encounters, and the surrender of leaders like Mallouja Venugopal Rao (Bhupati), Deva Barse (Barse Sukka) and Thiptri Tirupathi (Devuji), served a big blow to the Maoist movement.

Left rudderless, those who are still wandering in jungles may soon join the mainstream to enjoy the alluring rehabilitation schemes being implemented by the affected states.

Rather than stating that Naxalism has been completely wiped out, the Home Minister chose to say that it has "been more or less wiped out" as two top leaders — Mupalla Lakshmana Rao (Ganapathy) and Misir Besra (Sagar) — are yet to surrender. Their surrender would mark the end of Naxalism in India.

The writer is former IG, CRPF

### All eyes on Iran, but Lebanon must not be ignored



SABINE AMEER

SOUTHERN Lebanon, Israeli military activity is steadily expanding amid the ongoing war in Iran. Currently framed as a temporary security tactic, Israel's moves risks hardening into a sustained presence, a security buffer zone that pushes the boundary towards the Litani River or in the worst case, a renewed Israeli occupation. This is not without precedent. Israel's presence in southern Lebanon between 1982 and 2000 also began as a security measure. It evolved into a long-term condition that reshaped local politics and entrenched cycles of resistance. Lebanon's own trajectory matches the present moment more fragile. From the French mandate to the 15-year civil war, the country has experienced repeated phases of external intervention, violence and internal fragmentation. Weak state control, particularly in the peripheral regions, created the conditions in which non-state armed actors could emerge and consolidate power. Hezbollah, backed by Iran, emerged in southern Lebanon in 1982, following the Israeli invasion. It led a sustained resistance against Israeli forces and was widely credited with contributing to Israel's eventual withdrawal in 2000.

Israel's actions today are framed around the need to neutralise Hezbollah. While the security concern for Israel is real, treating Hezbollah solely as a military target risks ignoring the structural conditions that produced it. If those conditions — fragile governance, contested sovereignty and limited state presence — remain, then removing one armed actor won't necessarily produce stability. Power vacuums in conflict-affected regions are filled quickly, often by less accountable, more extreme actors, as seen in Iran. Hezbollah is embedded within a wider network of allied actors as a central member and key proxy for Iran. Any large-scale escalation against it could activate these networks, expanding the conflict beyond Lebanon, potentially further into Syria.

The fundamental issue here is sovereignty. Lebanon is a sovereign state and therefore its southern territory cannot be subject to prolonged military control by another state under an open-ended security justification. While international law allows for self-defence, it does not legitimise indefinite occupation. Allowing such a condition to emerge without response risks normalising a dangerous precedent, one where territorial control becomes acceptable if introduced incrementally and framed as security. Since the escalation of hostilities on March 2, more than 1,500 people have been newly displaced across Lebanon. Over 300,000 are children.

When one geopolitical crisis dominates, others evolve with less scrutiny. The international response to Lebanon risks falling into this pattern. Watching developments in Iran cannot come at the cost of overlooking Lebanon. If anything, the possibility of regional spillover makes it more urgent to prevent new flashpoints from consolidating in West Asia. Lebanon has already endured decades of intervention, occupation, and resistance. What is required is not only sustained diplomatic engagement but a message from the world to Israel that any occupation of southern Lebanon is unacceptable.

The writer teaches International Relations at University of Edinburgh

### 40 YEARS AGO

April 01, 1986



### Violence in Punjab

TERRORISTS TRIED to blow up a police station and shot dead two people while the authorities issued shoot-at-sight orders in Batala in Punjab. A petrol pump employee, Joga Singh, was burnt alive when suspected extremists set the petrol pump on fire at Kot Fathui village, about 35 kilometres from Hoshiarpur, a police spokesman said. The shoot-at-sight orders were issued in Batala as a precaution when ten people were shot after a person was beaten up in the town.

Singh, described the disappearance of two AN-32 aircraft of the Indian Air Force as "sudden and inexplicable". He said the government hoped to find clues to the cause of these accidents once the crash sites were located and the flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder in the aircraft were recovered. Making a statement in the Lok Sabha, Singh shared the concern of members over these accidents, which occurred on March 22 and March 25, and said the courts of inquiry would examine all possible clues as to what may have led to their sudden disappearance.

its mediatory role in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. Till there is an end to the killings of the Tamil population and resumption of direct talks by the Sri Lankan government with the Tamil representatives, the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, is unlikely to send any senior envoy to Colombo to resume talks, according to sources.

### Transporters go on strike

ABOUT 60,000 registered public carriers, truckers, transporters, and operators of India Motor Transport Congress, went off the roads in Delhi at midnight to protest against police harassment, demanding abolition of octroi, new taxes on commercial vehicles and withdrawal of the increase in excise.

### Missing aircraft mystery

THE MINISTER of State for Defence, Arun

### India's conditions for Sri Lanka

INDIA HAS set two preconditions to resume

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Trump is hiding the truth about the war in Iran.  
—The New York Times

# India has rare opportunity to re-imagine neighbourhood policy. Trade is key



**RAJA MANDALA**  
By C RAJA MOHAN

**B**AREILY A few months ago, it was all gloom and doom about India's neighbourhood policy. Delhi was consumed by hand-wringing about why and how India "lost" the Subcontinent. The downturn in relations with Dhaka after the ouster of Sheikh Hasina sharpened that acute sense of loss. The question now is different. Can India seize the opportunity for a reboot of regional policy triggered by new political developments across the neighbourhood?

In Bangladesh, the elections in February handed Tarique Rahman and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party a massive mandate. Rahman's emphasis on "Bangladesh First" opens the door for a mature, unsentimental, interest-based relationship with Dhaka. Over the last decade, Bangladesh has emerged as India's most important neighbourhood partner. The deep economic interdependence built over this period appears to have survived the political toxicity of the last 20 months, but the relationship now needs fresh political impetus.

Nepal's transition has been equally striking. The sweeping victory of the Kastriya Swatantra Party and the rise of Balendra Shah mark a generational political shift, one that offers an opportunity to move beyond the old cycle of distrust. India must shed the rhetoric of a "special relationship" in favour of one grounded in equality and genuine respect for Nepal's sovereignty.

Sri Lanka had, in fact, begun the positive evolution of the region. Colombo, too, has a new generation in charge since the 2024 elections. It has been moving toward pragmatic engagement with Delhi and breaking free from the historical political animosity that long coloured the ruling party's relationship with India.

Taken together, these transitions present India with a rare opportunity to reimagine

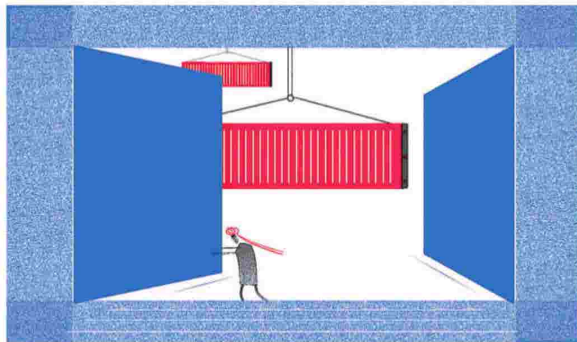


ILLUSTRATION: C SAKSHAM

its regional policy. The biggest possibilities are in trade.

Over the past two years, India has demonstrated a new willingness to negotiate ambitious trade agreements — with the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United States, and others — shedding many past shibboleths of trade policy. That same reforming instinct must now be extended to the neighbourhood.

For decades, India's regional trade policy has been hobbled by self-defeating protectionism. It has taken a peculiarly perverse trade policy in Delhi to defeat India's natural advantages of geography and economic history. Despite the 4,000-kilometre border with Bangladesh and a narrow Palk Strait separating peninsular India from Sri Lanka, the West remains the main destination for its exports while China is the dominant source of imports. India remains Nepal's largest trading partner — but barely. Delhi has systematically neutralised the extraordinary legacy of an open border through poor infrastructure and countless non-tariff barriers. The Indian trade negotiators who rail against Western protectionism become its

**India objects to its massive trade deficit with China yet runs substantial surpluses with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Delhi finds it difficult to offer its neighbours the very market access it demands for Beijing**

staunchest defenders when it comes to neighbours. Despite ambitious rhetoric on regional cooperation and neighbourhood-first, Delhi's trade policy towards the region has remained hidebound and out of step with India's own national interests.

India objects to its massive trade deficit with China yet runs substantial surpluses with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Delhi finds it difficult to offer its neighbours the very market access it demands for Beijing. The answer is not for India to export less but to import more — and to do so through stronger investment ties, trade facilitation, and modernised border infrastructure. A genuine transformation of connectivity between India, Bangladesh, and Nepal would provide a major boost to South Asia's poorest parts in the eastern Subcontinent. This transformation will require both unilateral steps by Delhi and negotiated give-and-take. It will involve guardrails, for example, on rules of origin. Trade policy cannot rest on generosity; it must rest on the recognition of shared benefits and political ownership.

The rapidly changing international context makes early action on neighbourhood trade urgent.

The global trading system that emerged after the Cold War is fragmenting. The return of tariffs, sanctions, and geopolitical competition has made export-led growth more uncertain and smaller economies. This global uncertainty creates a new regional logic. For Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, the Indian market offers scale and proximity that no distant partner can match.

Meanwhile, turbulence in the Gulf is beginning to have a deleterious impact across South Asia. As the Subcontinent's deep energy, economic, and diasporic ties with the Gulf come under stress, India has begun supporting its neighbours with the supply of essential hydrocarbon commodities. This is a moment to consider deeper cooperation on economic and energy security — with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal in the east, and Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the south. Such engagement would serve as a solid anchor against politically driven instability in bilateral relations. Getting there requires neither the much vaunted revival of SAARC nor elaborate new regional forums — only political will, policy innovation, and institutional agility.

But none of this can be achieved without a change in mindset. For too long, India's neighbourhood policy has rested on the implicit assumption that what India offers is a favour, and that smaller neighbours should respond with gratitude and political deference. That assumption has produced precisely the political resentment in the neighbourhood that India seeks to avoid.

The new governments in Dhaka, Kathmandu, and Colombo represent electorates that have rejected old forms of dependency and clientelism. They are not looking for patrons; they are looking for partners. Agreements must produce visible, measurable benefits on both sides. Connectivity must improve, markets must open, and economic cooperation must translate into jobs, exports, and growth — for India's neighbours and for itself.

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

# The first day of school, the start of a shared responsibility



**DHARMENDRA PRADHAN**

**E**VERY YEAR, when school gates open to a new academic session, India witnesses one of its most profound acts of collective resolve. Millions of children step into their classrooms with new aspirations and immense possibilities. It is a quiet yet powerful national moment. This year, too, nearly 2 crore children have enrolled in Class I, which carries both hope and a shared national responsibility.

The National Education Policy, 2020 has placed curiosity, understanding and holistic development at the centre of learning, moving beyond rote memorisation. Every academic year is a meaningful step forward in realising that vision.

With the implementation of Balvatika, early childhood learning is now integrated into the formal school system, ensuring children enter Grade I with better readiness and strong foundational skills. Schools must ensure a child's journey is rooted in joyful learning, well-being and a strong sense of belonging. The first day of school is seldom uneventful. It carries a mix of hesitation and joys of new beginnings. When children feel safe and valued, they begin to open up. Their curiosity begins to flourish. The early years must centre on play, exploration and discovery, and define the beginning of a lifelong journey.

A caring teacher can change a child's path. A supportive classroom can turn silence into participation, and participation into confidence. A child who feels a sense of belonging begins to find her voice.

At the heart of these early years lies a strong national commitment to foundational literacy and numeracy. Through the NIPUN Bharat Mission, India has set a clear goal: Every child should be able to read with understanding and perform basic arithmetic by the end of Grade II. The focus shifts from memorising answers to understanding concepts. Classrooms must inspire children to ask questions, not just reproduce answers.

This vision goes beyond academics. Arts, sports and values are essential parts of the learning process. Education must shape the "whole child" — not just the mind, but also the body and the heart. A healthy child learns better, participates more and grows with a healthy sense of confidence.

Globally, children's lifestyles have shifted significantly, with changing dietary habits and reduced physical activity being a growing concern. India is responding proactively to this challenge. Measures like mandatory physical education, "oil boards" and "sugar boards" in schools to address obesity, and a strengthened PM-POSHAN scheme with a sharper focus on nutritional quality are reorienting schools toward health and active living.

While technology is a powerful enabler for access and learning, growing exposure to social media raises concerns around screen time, attention and mental well-being. Schools and families must ensure it is used as a tool for learning, not distraction.

Equally central to this vision is the mental and emotional well-being of our children. The school curriculum and pedagogy have integrated socio-emotional learning to support the child's journey in an age when emotions are navigating a more complex and stimulating world than any previous generation. Creating safe, stress-free environments requires a shared effort by schools, parents, teachers and communities.

Reform is implemented through teachers. They must teach in a multilingual setting and also ensure that a child's mother tongue is respected and used as a powerful tool for learning. By valuing this, we ensure that the transition to formal education is seamless, confident, and rooted in their own identity.

Education does not begin or end at the school gate. The home is the first classroom, and parents are the first teachers. What children experience at home shapes how they learn in school. Promoting reading habits and parental engagement with a child's questions are subtle acts to nurture the quest for knowledge. I urge parents to ensure children get balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, enough daily physical activity and outdoor exposure.

Education is a shared responsibility. It belongs to governments, schools, teachers, parents, and communities. Let us reaffirm our national commitment to building an education system that is inclusive, innovative and future-ready. Together, we can ensure that every classroom becomes a place where dreams take flight and where the leaders of tomorrow are shaped. The harbingers of a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 are in our classrooms today. Let us give them the golden wings to soar.

*The writer is Minister of Education, Government of India. Views are personal*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Fairness in sports

**T**HE NEW rule risks confusing fairness with exclusion (Sex test in sports takes toll on equality, *IE*, March 31). A single genetic test cannot capture the complexity of human biology, yet it now decides who may compete. Instead of protecting women athletes, the policy burdens them with medical hurdles men never face, raising questions of dignity and privacy. The issue is not biology alone but equity. Women from the Global South and women of colour are hit hardest because testing standards reflect narrow assumptions. True fairness in sport means tackling unequal funding, poor training access, and pay gaps, not policing bodies.

*Veda Chidnam, Bengaluru*

### Tale of two cities

**T**HE COMPARISON between Tarique Rahman and Balendra Shah illuminates a distinction worth dwelling on between a leader who treats institutional rebuilding as political strategy and one who treats it as an afterthought ("Dhaka moves forward, Kathmandu goes back", *IE*, March 31). What the piece leaves implicit is that India has a stake in this divergence. How New Delhi calibrates its engagement with Kathmandu — without appearing to favour particular actors — will matter considerably for whether Nepal's democratic correction holds.

*Amjitsami, Coimbatore*

### Poll promises

**T**HE ELECTION manifesto of the DMK also has innovative schemes and speaks of further improvements to welfare schemes already implemented ("DMK's welfare curbanel", *IE* Web, March 30). One assurance in its manifesto — the promise to issue a coupon of Rs 8,000 to housewives from families that don't pay income tax in order to help them buy utility items of their choice, such as washing machines, TVs, refrigerators, mixies, microwave ovens or electric stoves — is again a very novel one that has been well received by the electorate.

*Tharicus S Fernando, Chennai*



**DUTEE CHAND**

**T**HE INTERNATIONAL Olympic Committee's (IOC) policy — the Prohibition of Female Category in Olympic Sport — has not taken into account the damaging consequences of a positive SRY-gene test for an athlete. Because it targets women, people will view it as a sex test, especially in countries like India, where a lot of athletes are from rural areas.

The IOC's aim seems to be to protect the female category. But is there enough scientific evidence to prove that transgender athletes, or even female athletes with a "positive" SRY test, have an advantage in track and field? As a sprinter, I can say that in track and field, there are other factors that make a difference, such as training methods, recovery processes, a coach's expertise, a scientific approach, diet, and natural talent.

Athletes from different countries are built differently. Some are very tall, some are broader, some have more muscle mass, some have bigger bones. I have competed against athletes who have bigger strides than I because they are taller. Does that mean we should have separate races based on an athlete's height? Is the SRY test 100 per cent reliable? The whole process sounds too simple. Use one test and then stop an athlete from competing. How can an athlete be blamed for

# I know the pain. IOC's sex test can ruin an athlete's life

what is naturally in the body?

Those who have not been stopped from participating in the female category will say, "Yes, the test is good." But I have gone through the trauma. Just before the 2014 Commonwealth Games, I was told I could not compete because of hyperandrogenism rules, which I challenged at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). After I won the case, I was allowed to run again and won multiple medals, including at the Asian Games.

As soon as my test results were revealed, I was moved out of the girls' hostel at the Sports Authority of India centre in Bengaluru. When I returned home to Odisha, the one question I was constantly asked by the media was, "Are you a girl or a boy?" I was able to be mentally strong, but does every other woman have the strength to handle such a situation?

People said I had failed a sex test, which meant that I was not a woman. I was studying at that time. When I went to class, I was told to sit on a separate bench. At the Bengaluru hostel, a coach made a remark along the lines of, "Dutee, you hid from us that you are a man and you competed against female athletes." Some senior athletes said I would never win a medal again. My sponsorships stopped.

In rural areas, there is a lot of

stigma. When I went back to my village in Odisha, I heard many unkind comments from people I had known for years. Some of my friends said they couldn't hang out with me anymore because I was a boy. My family members also didn't know how to react initially.

I was fortunate that I had the support to fight the case at CAS and win. I could compete again. If I had not done so, I would have had no honour left.

A lot of women athletes come from poor families; they start running barefoot. If an athlete from an underprivileged family comes up the hard way, and then she is stopped from competing because of a test, all her years of sacrifice will amount to nothing. The SRY test will also discourage parents from making their daughters athletes.

The IOC and sports federations promise to keep the test results confidential. But if an athlete suddenly stops competing, everybody will know why. A sports federation can say that the athlete is injured, but nobody will believe it. People will put two and two together and figure it out.

The IOC-mandated SRY test is discriminatory and has the potential to ruin the life and career of an athlete.

*The writer is a 100m-200m specialist. She has won medals at the Asian Games, the Asian Athletics Championships, and the World University Games*

**Just before the 2014 Commonwealth Games, I was told I could not compete due to hyperandrogenism rules, which I challenged at the Court of Arbitration for Sport**

# Anonymity can be a privilege. Banksy's story proves it



**ABHIK BHATTACHARYA**

**S**TORIES AND anecdotes often illustrate the complexities of social issues more effectively than academic jargon. To me, the Savarna privilege of "castelessness" became clear through one such story: Once, a teenager asked his mother, "What is our caste, Ma?" She then asked him, "How old are you?" The boy said, "14." To which his mother said, "If you are 14 and don't know your caste yet, you must be upper-caste." The mother's response stands on two socio-political realities that shape identity politics. First, it clarifies that any "lessness", whether caste, race or other markers of marginalisation, comes with a privilege. Second, it shows that the

burden of identity always lies with the marginalised; the privileged can get away without "coming out". Last week, when British street artist Banksy's identity was revealed in a Reuters investigation as a White man named Robin Gunningham, I was at peace: Banksy had to be a White man. Anonymity has its own burden. And not everyone has the social wherewithal to bear it.

There are three aspects through which this burden of anonymity could be read. First, historically, many authors from marginalised communities used pseudonyms to hide their identities. In the 19th century, to break away from the Victorian perception that they could only write romances, women authors used male pseudonyms. Mary Ann Evans, for example, wrote under the name George Eliot. Later, Gloria Jean Watkins used

her maternal grandmother's name, "bell hooks", to challenge patriarchal kinship. These instances show how pseudonyms can become a form of resistance, a way of overcoming bias and exploring areas that are socially off-limits. However, White men, who shape the global order, have never needed to hide their identity. So Banksy's concealment of his identity is part of his multi-layered privilege, not of any historical resistance.

Second, while subversive art doesn't need to come from "lived experience(s) alone", one cannot ignore the value of lived realities in shaping subversive notions of

**Anonymity has its own burden. And not everyone has the social wherewithal to bear it**

authors/artists. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, in their book *The Cracked Mirror*, discuss how lived experience is different from an outsider's spatial or temporal distance with certain realities. While Banksy's work undoubtedly carries immense subversive value, his privileged positionality should have been made public earlier. Understanding the author's subjectivity is as important as the work itself. That is why ethnographic work today demands a section on self-reflection where both the identity and the cultural privileges of the author can be made plain, going beyond the "dead author" trope.

Third, from the mid-20th century onwards, the assertion of marginalised identities became a tool to question the socio-political hegemonies of the privileged. Words like "Dalit", "Adivasi", "Black" be-

came markers of resistance. Hiding one's name was no longer the norm. It was a journey from the colonisers' celebration of the "universal" to the assertion by the colonised of the "particular" — the lived realities, not reality; lived histories, not history. So, for an artist belonging to a marginalised community, lived experience works as her foundation for subversive art. She wants to assert her identity, not hide it.

This is not to say that the value of Banksy's works is lost after his unmasking. But perhaps it would have been easier for many of us to know who he is — part of his historic resistance or a one-off instance of a progressive White man who can afford to hide his identity.

*The writer is senior assistant editor, The Indian Express. abhik.bhattacharya@expressindia.com*

'USE OF U.S. FED'S FIMA REPO FACILITY CAN HELP RBI ECONOMISE ON FOREX RESERVES'

## RBI should access US Fed facility to stabilise rupee: ex-DG Patra

WITH THE rupee falling rapidly and the country's foreign exchange reserves being depleted, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) should lean on a US Federal Reserve facility to ensure US dollars are "flushed continuously in and out of the market", **Michael Patra**, former deputy governor of the RBI, said in an interview.

Under the Foreign and International Monetary Authorities (FIMA) Repo Facility, central banks such as the RBI can place their holdings of US Treasuries with the Fed for one or seven days and get dollars in return. At the end of this period, the dollars must be returned to the Fed, along with some interest, and foreign central banks get back the securities. The use of the facility would have a "stabilising influence" on the market, economise the RBI's use of its forex reserves, and give it time to rebuild them, the former central banker said. "Faced with a storm, it is wise to get on to the biggest ship," Patra, who retired from the RBI in January 2025 after four decades, said in an interview with **Siddharth Upasani**. Edited excerpts:

**Last week, the RBI capped banks' daily open positions in the rupee at \$100 million. Yet, the rupee breached 95-per-dollar. Has this measure failed?**

The RBI has a distinct information and analytics advantage relative to all other stakeholders in the foreign exchange market. It also tends to act pre-

emptively rather than reactively to market developments. Hence, my hunch is that the build-up of disproportionately large arbitrage positions was detected and had to be curbed, so that markets remain liquid and function normally, especially in the context of the troubled geopolitical environment. The success or failure of any measure has to be assessed in the context of the objective it seeks to achieve. In this case, it is the unwinding of large arbitrage positions. Let us see how that happens within the time limit given by the RBI.

**You want the RBI to use the US Federal Reserve's FIMA Repo Facility, akin to the RBI's own repurchase facility for Indian banks. Can the use of FIMA — or even public knowledge of its availability — put an end to speculation against the rupee, which the RBI tried to do last week?**

The objective of proposing access to the FIMA is to ensure that dollars are flushed continuously in and out of the market, so that market is liquid and deep with all regular demands for foreign exchange being satisfied. It would also economise on the use of the RBI's foreign exchange reserves and, in fact, provide space to rebuild them. There is also some evidence from countries that have availed it that it has brought about reductions in foreign exchange swap basis spreads as well as in the sensitivity of the latter to daily changes in risk



**EXPRESS interview** MICHAEL PATRA FORMER DEPUTY GOVERNOR OF RBI

sentiment proxied by the VIX index. Some central banks have also reported stabilisation of capital flows to their economies on announcement effects.

**Why has the RBI never used FIMA?**

The FIMA was established in March 2020 as a pandemic response and in July 2021, it was made into a standing facility. In the period from 2020-21 to 2023-24, there were very large accretions to the foreign exchange reserves except in some months of 2022-23. In fact, high levels of reserves — the fourth largest in the world then — were maintained even in early 2024-25 up to July. Hence, the need for access to FIMA did not arise.

**On February 28 — the day the West Asia war began — India and Japan renewed their \$75 billion Bilateral Swap Arrangement. Are**

**more such swap lines needed or can their usage signal some sort of desperation?**

Since the global financial crisis, the lack of a truly global, democratically accessible financial safety net has been acutely felt. It has also been recognised that while crises can be global, the responsibility for financial stability is national. For many emerging economies, national holdings of foreign exchange reserves turned out to be the only recourse, especially in the context of managing global spillovers. Accordingly, apart from seeking governance reforms in multilateral institutions, these countries have sought to reinforce their crisis wherewithal with secondary buffers such as swap lines. It has been the experience that the existence of these swap lines has provided confidence to markets and discouraged speculative attacks on the exchange rate.

In my view, getting access to FIMA and using it would demonstrate that uninterrupted provision of liquidity to the foreign exchange market in India has a stabilising influence and it precludes precautionary sales of US Treasury securities in New York which can be destabilising for the markets there. In time, this can pave the way for the establishment of a regular swap line. Faced with a storm, it is wise to get on to the biggest ship.

**Is the inflationary impact from the war's energy supply shock being underestimated? Apart from a couple of economists, no one really seems to be predicting an interest rate hike by the RBI anytime soon.**

As part of the preparations for the meeting of the MPC, teams in the RBI will simulate various scenarios in order to assess the balance of risks around the projections of inflation and growth. The impact of the geopolitical situation in terms of upside risks to inflation and downside risks to growth is too big an imponderable not to be simulated. Other related spillovers will also be taken into account, including the need for inflation-sensitive petroleum products by the government. After that, the monetary policy decision is left to the judgment of the MPC, which has wisely kept powder dry.

**FULL INTERVIEW ON** [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

## IndiGo names IATA head Walsh as chief executive, to join airline by August

**Sukalp Sharma**  
New Delhi, March 31

INDIA'S LARGEST airline IndiGo on Tuesday announced a high-profile appointment as its new chief executive officer.

Willie Walsh's appointment comes three weeks after Pieter Elbers abruptly resigned as IndiGo CEO. Elbers stepped down three months after IndiGo faced an unprecedented operational disruption that brought flight operations across India to their knees. With Elbers' exit, the airline's promoter and Managing Director Rahul Bhatia had temporarily stepped in to assume management of the airline's affairs.

"The Board of InterGlobe Aviation Ltd (IndiGo) today appointed Mr William Walsh as the CEO, subject to Regulatory approvals. Mr Walsh's tenure at IATA comes to a close on the 31st of July, 2026, and he is expected to join no later than on the 3rd of August, 2026," the airline said in a statement.

"As we enter a new phase of transformation and growth, I am delighted to welcome Willie to IndiGo. He is an iconic and accomplished aviation leader and brings a rare combination of global perspective, operational expertise of having built strong customer-focused airlines, deep industry experience and a values driven leadership, making him exceptionally suited to lead IndiGo at this pivotal cusp of growth," the re-

### CHANGE OF GUARD

**WALSH HAS** helped British Airways. He is currently the Director General of the global airline trade grouping International Air Transport Association



Willie Walsh. REUTERS FILE

**PIETER ELBERS**, the former IndiGo CEO, abruptly quit three months after IndiGo's largest airline faced an unprecedented operational disruption.

**AFTER ELBERS'** exit, the airline's promoter and MD Rahul Bhatia

had temporarily stepped in to assume management of the airline's affairs

lease quoted Bhatia as saying.

In an email to employees, Bhatia is learnt to have written that Walsh has the distinction of being intimately familiar with "the levers of managing" low-cost airlines, while also having led global network airlines such as the British Airways, and with India possibly being the last bastion of massive growth in aviation globally, there couldn't have been a "finer leader" to head IndiGo's footprint within India and overseas. Bhatia, who signed off the e-mail stating announcing Elbers' departure with a reassuring "Main Hoon Naa" ("I am there), signed off the mail announcing Walsh's appointment by calling himself "Kuchh Hee Dinon Ka Mehmaan" (only a few days' guest), it is learnt.

Prior to taking over as IATA DG in April 2021, Walsh spent his entire career in the airline industry, starting in 1979 as a cadet pilot with Aer Lingus, an airline he later headed as CEO. Walsh was appointed the CEO

of British Airways in 2005. He led British Airways through the 2008-09 global financial crisis, established a transatlantic joint business venture with Iberia, Finnair, and American Airlines, and oversaw the 2011 merger of British Airways and Iberia under new parent company — International Airlines Group — of which he was the first CEO and continued till 2020.

"In his new role as IndiGo's CEO, Mr Walsh will be responsible for the overall management and strategic direction of the airline with a focus on transformational initiatives to strengthen the operational performance, advance the company's network and commercial strategy while enhancing customer experience.

"He will work closely with the Board and the leadership team to rightfully position IndiGo as it scales up to the next phase of its growth," IndiGo said.

**FULL REPORT ON** [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

## Srinivasan back as Chair at Sundaram-Clayton

**George Mathew**  
Mumbai, March 31

IN AN unusual development, Venu Srinivasan, the Chairman Emeritus and Managing Director of Sundaram-Clayton Ltd — part of the TVS group — has returned as its Chairman and MD at the company's board meeting on Monday.

Simultaneously, R Gopalan stepped down from his position as Chairman of the company with immediate effect and will continue as Non-Executive Independent Director, the company said in an exchange filing. "Venu Srinivasan was re-designated as Chair and MD of the company with immediate effect," it said after the board meeting. The Board of Directors also approved the withdrawal of the resignation by PD Dev Kishan and rescinded the relieving of Kishan as the Company Secre-

tary and Compliance Officer, and the appointment of M Muthulakshmi as Company Secretary and Compliance Officer.

"Accordingly, Kishan will continue until April 5, 2026, and thereafter, as well as the Company Secretary and Compliance Officer of the company and remains a key managerial personnel, without any break in service," the filing said. On February 26, the company had announced the resignation of Vivek S Joshi as Director and CEO and Key Managerial Personnel of the company effective March 31, 2026 due to personal reasons. Further, Joshi had confirmed that there is no other material reason for his departure, another exchange filing said. Consequently, he ceased to be a member of the risk management committee effective March 31. **FULL INTERVIEW ON** [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

## Unilever, McCormick to create \$65 bn food giant

**London:** Unilever said on Tuesday that it will merge its food business with spice maker McCormick in the second-largest food transaction in history, a deal that will create a company worth roughly \$65 billion.

The transaction will be structured as a so-called Reverse Morris Trust (RMT),

which offers tax benefits.

The deal is the largest RMT transaction involving a European company, said Roth-schild, which served as joint-lead financial adviser to McCormick.

The transaction excludes certain assets, including Unilever's operations in India, the companies added. **REUTERS**

### TRADE RELIEF TO EXPORTERS

## RBI extends export realisation timeline amid persistent global disruptions, supply chain risks

**Hitesh Vyas**  
Mumbai, March 31

IN A response to the persistent geopolitical uncertainties and supply chain disruptions in West Asia, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Tuesday announced the continuation and expansion of key relief measures aimed at supporting exporters struggling to meet payment realisation deadlines.

The central bank said it has been receiving multiple representations from stakeholders highlighting difficulties in adhering to prescribed timelines for the realisation of export proceeds. These challenges are largely attributed to the ongoing logistical bottlenecks and uncertainties arising from the West Asia crisis.

In a November 2025 directive, the RBI had extended the time period for realisation and repatriation of the full export value of goods, software, and services exported from India.

The permissible period was increased from nine to 15 months from the export date.

Clarifying its stance, the central bank on Tuesday said these relaxations will remain in force, and exporters may avail the facility as per the stipulated conditions.

### EXPLAINED

#### What prompted the relief measures

Multiple representations that highlighted the difficulties in meeting prescribed timelines to realise export proceeds were sent to the Reserve Bank by stakeholders. The key reasons behind it were logistical bottlenecks and uncertainties arising due to the West Asia war

As part of the supportive measures, the RBI had earlier enhanced the maximum period for realisation of both pre-shipment and post-shipment export credit to 450 days for disbursements made up to March 31, 2026.

In light of the continuing disruptions, the central bank has decided to extend it further. The enhanced export credit period of 450 days will now apply to all disbursements made until June 30, 2026.

The central bank said it will continue to monitor the evolving global conditions and stands ready to intervene in the

most appropriate manner, reaffirming its commitment to safeguarding the interests of India's export sector in uncertain times.

India's exports to the West Asia have been impacted by the ongoing conflict, resulting in substantial trade flow disruptions. Key shipping routes, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz, have become increasingly hazardous.

It has led to delays, elevated freight costs, higher insurance premiums, and in some cases, the suspension or diversion of shipments — further extending transit times and increasing overall expenses.

The country's total exports (merchandise and services combined) for February 2026 are estimated at \$76.13 billion, registering a positive growth of 11.05% vis-à-vis February 2025.

The falling value of the rupee, rise in oil prices and fears over inflation in the wake of the West Asia conflict led the RBI to take action.

The central bank has instructed banks to limit their net open exposure to the currency in the foreign exchange market to \$100 million by the end of each day. Authorized dealers must comply with this rule by April 10.

demand. However, "stocks could fall to a level where you have localised shortages" or high and volatile prices, he said. The EU sources around 15% of its kerosene from West Asian suppliers, although its reliance is bigger than this number suggests, since the bloc also imports from refineries in India that process Middle Eastern oil.

Europe could turn to alternative suppliers including the US substitute some, but not all, of this supply, George said. Jorgensen recommended in his letter that governments avoid measures that will limit trade of petroleum products or discourage output at European refineries.

## US trade chief sees only limited role for WTO after failed meeting

**Reuters**  
Washington, March 31

THE WORLD Trade Organization will play only a limited role in global trade policy after a failed ministerial meeting in Cameroon.

US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said Monday, vowing to seek alternative arrangements s with like-minded countries.

Greer, said in a statement issued nearly 24 hours after the WTO meeting ended in im-

passage after an extension of a e-commerce moratorium was blocked by Brazil and Turkey, said he was "disappointed at the lack of seriousness" shown by many WTO member countries in embracing a broadly acceptable reform agenda.

Greer has always been skeptical of the value of the WTO, and this week's conference confirmed that this organization will play only a limited role in future global trade policy efforts, said Greer, who has been

the architect of President Trump's multi-front tariff assault on global trading partners.

Greer said he was disappointed that the e-commerce moratorium on tariffs on digital transmissions had to lapse after being routinely extended for 28 years.

"If the WTO cannot achieve this commonsense aim, the US will work outside of the WTO with all interested partners to get it done," he said.

## Oracle lays off around 12,000 India workers, next round likely soon

**New Delhi:** US-based IT firm Oracle is believed to have laid off approximately 12,000 staff in India, with another round of layoffs expected within a month, impacted employees said on Tuesday.

Globally, the company has fired around 30,000 employees.

"In India, around 12,000 employees have been laid off. The company is planning another mass layoff within a month," said two people impacted by the retrenchment, including one from the company's human resource department. The company has approximately 20,000 employees in India, including those affected by the layoffs.

Oracle declined to comment on the development.

Oracle, in an email sent to staff, said the employees were informed about certain organisational changes and "because of these changes, a decision has been taken to streamline the operations, and as a result, unfortunately, the position you currently hold will become redundant."

The company has offered 15 days' salary to each employee who has completed a year of service in India, in addition to one month of unpaid wages till termination date, leave encashment, gratuity based on eligibility and pay for a one-month notice period.

It has also offered a two-month salary as a top-up. PTI

### BRIEFLY

#### CBIC rolls out trade reforms to enhance biz

**New Delhi:** The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has operationalised a set of reforms to strengthen and streamline e-commerce exports and broader courier-based imports and exports, effective from April 1. These reforms include the complete removal of the Rs 10 lakh value cap per consignment on courier exports, the introduction of a streamlined framework for handling returned and rejected parcels and a legally backed Return to Origin mechanism for unclearanced shipments, aimed at enhancing ease of doing business, the finance ministry said Tuesday. **PTI**

#### EY: FY27 GDP growth may erode by 100 bps

**New Delhi:** India's real GDP growth for the next fiscal year may erode by around 1 percentage point, while retail inflation could rise by about 1.5 percentage points from their baseline estimates if the West Asia conflict persists through the next fiscal year, the EY Economy Watch report said. It said that several sectors, including employment-intensive sectors like textiles, paints, chemicals, fertilizers, cement and tires, could be directly impacted. **PTI**

#### I-T department signs record 219 APAs in FY26

**New Delhi:** The Income Tax Department has signed a record 219 advance pricing agreements (APAs) in the current fiscal year with taxpayers to enhance ease of doing business by providing tax certainty. This includes Unilateral APAs and Bilateral APAs, the CBDT said in a statement on Tuesday. With this, the total number of APAs since the inception of the programme has crossed the 1,000th mark, aggregating to 1,034 APAs, it said. **PTI**

#### Regulated gas price for ONGC, OIL raised

**New Delhi:** The Centre has raised the administered price mechanism gas price for state-run producers Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Oil India Ltd (OIL) to ₹97 per mmBtu, up from ₹67.5 per mmBtu, according to an official notification. The revision applies to gas produced from legacy fields under regulated pricing regime. Under revised norms, the price of such natural gas produced from old and legacy fields, which were given to ONGC and OIL without bidding, is determined as 10% of the monthly average of Indian Crude Basket and is notified on a monthly basis. **PTI**

### EUROPEAN UNION TELLS ITS MEMBERS THAT JET FUEL, DIESEL SUPPLIES MAIN CONCERN IN SHORT TERM

## 'Prepare for prolonged disruption to energy markets'

**Reuters**  
Brussels, March 31

EUROPEAN UNION governments should prepare for a prolonged disruption to energy markets as a result of the Iran war, the bloc's energy chief has told ministers.

In a letter to energy ministers, dated March 30 and seen by Reuters, EU Energy Commissioner Dan Jorgensen said governments were "encouraged to make timely preparations in anticipation of a potentially prolonged disruption".

Europe's heavy reliance on imported fuel leaves it exposed to the conflict's impact on global energy prices. European gas



European gas prices have risen more than 70% since the US-Israeli war with Iran began on February 28.

Jorgensen said Brussels was particularly concerned in the short term about Europe's supply of refined petroleum products such as jet fuel and diesel. Analysts say jet fuel is currently the most exposed European energy product to the fallout from the Iran war.

The last kerosene shipments that passed through the Strait of Hormuz before its closure are due to arrive in Europe around April 10, according to Benedict George, head of European products at Angus Media. "There's no realistic risk of actually running out" of jet fuel, George told Reuters, adding that European countries' stockpiles can cover up to three months of kerosene

prices have risen more than 70% since the US-Israeli war with Iran began on February 28.

The bloc's supplies of crude oil and natural gas have not been hit directly by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, since Europe imports most of those energy sources from suppliers outside of the West Asia.

# Lives stalled over LPG

A cook who struggles for a cylinder while the fuel is abundant at the homes she works in; a village of Ujjwala beneficiaries where women have gone back to cooking on firewood; an Eid that went without celebrations — the LPG crisis has hit the most vulnerable

## DELHI NCR

Ashima's new stove: A beaten-up tin can

Upasika Singhal

Around 8 pm on March 8, far away from the battle raging in West Asia, a simmering tension came to an abrupt halt. The *dal* stopped bubbling. "Arrey, gas khatam ho gaya," Ashima Begum recalls calling out to her husband, Maqsood, from her makeshift kitchen in the common area that she shares with her neighbours.

That day, Ashima, who lives in Morna village in Noida's Sector 35 and works as a cook in homes nearby, had returned home late from her evening shift. The family had been waiting for her to come to break their *roza*.

She stood there for a few minutes as her mind raced: "Ab kya karoon (What do I do now)? Maqsood and the kids haven't eaten anything since their *subhoor* (pre-dawn meal) of *roti, sabzi* and fruits." Neither had she.

Maqsood, she says, looked annoyed. So she simply took the pot of half-cooked *dal* over to her neighbour, Aliya, and cooked it there.

"The gas always runs out when we least expect it to. But we usually call the agent and get a cylinder almost immediately. This time, we have been without gas for almost a month," says Ashima, 45.

With Iran shutting off the Strait of Hormuz, the key transit route for oil and gas out of the Middle East, the ripples were felt almost immediately in India — restaurants ran out of fuel and people complained of long waiting lines for LPG. With the scarcity came reports of hoarding, leading to authorities in Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and elsewhere carrying out raids and seizures. The government has increased the waiting period for a cylinder refill from 21 days to 25 in urban areas and 45 in rural areas, but the wait often extends much beyond this. The worst hit are migrants, students, domestic helps, those running small kitchens at home, and those outside the formal LPG network.

So in homes like Ashima's, the disruption was swift.

Originally from Kanpur, Ashima moved to Hardoi around 20 years ago, when she married Maqsood, a daily wageer. A few years later, after Maqsood



Ashima Begum at her home in Noida, cooking on a stove she carved out of an oil can. TASHI TORSHAL

"This has happened before — the cylinder runs out of gas when we least expect it to. But we usually call the agent and get a cylinder almost immediately. This time, we have been without gas for almost a month."

ASHIMA BEGUM, COOK IN NEARBY HOMES

developed a lung condition that made it difficult for him to do manual labour, the couple moved to Delhi. As Maqsood looked for jobs, Ashima earned by working in homes as a cook and cleaner, bringing up their three children — two daughters and a son.

Ashima's house lies at the far end of a narrow lane, squeezed tighter by the open drains running on either side. Children run barefoot, e-rickshaws and scooters brush past the walls as dogs chase them, and a thin, weak ray of sunlight filters through the thousands of tangled loops of wire hanging above.

Her one-room house is part of a half-constructed building. She shares a common area — crowded with buckets of water, boxes of spices, and her now defunct gas stove — with four other rooms. During the day, the women gather here, chatting as they cook, wash clothes, and

scrub utensils. In a far corner lies a heap of construction waste.

For Ashima and her neighbours, registering for a formal gas connection is a distant dream. Maqsood says he tried to register for a gas connection earlier but always found himself a few documents short.

In the end, says Maqsood, getting all the documents was so complicated and tiresome that he gave up and decided to buy LPG cylinders in the black market.

He says they usually buy a 14-kg cylinder for Rs 1,000-1,500 from an LPG supplier. But with the recent tightening of rules, supplies have dried up.

The day they ran out of gas, Maqsood called his LPG supplier, who told him the demand was so high that there was "no chance" he would get a cylinder that day.

"The next day he called me and gave me two options. I could either buy a full 14-kg cylinder for Rs 4,000 or take a half-full cylinder for Rs 2,000. I usually get a full cylinder for Rs 1,000 and it lasts us at least a month. I even went to the gas agency to enquire if I can apply for a new gas connection, but they said not now," he says.

The LPG supplier, from whom Maqsood usually buys in black, says his business has taken a hit. "Earlier, we would buy cylinders from the agency workers at the godown...after March 7, the workers said they can't risk their jobs selling to me. A few days later, the police raided my stash of cylinders," he says, adding that rates within the shadow economy have risen exponentially.

For the next few days after they ran out of gas, the family ate the meals that the

local mosque distributed for Ramadan. But the mosque was around 3 km away and Ashima couldn't have walked the distance everyday. So she picked up a discarded, beaten-up oil can and improvised a *chulha* (stove) out of it, managing to cut a semi-circle at the base of the tin. She then collected some twigs from a park near her workplace, fished out pieces of paper and plastic from the construction dump in their building, shoved some of it into her tin *chulha* and got it working.

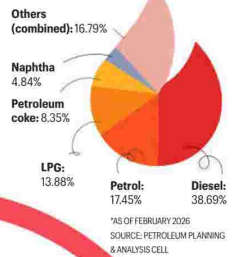
But the *chulha* is too small to cook anything elaborate. She recalls how the family had to celebrate Eid a few days ago with a small bowl of *sevyan* shared between the five of them. "I couldn't even make *dahi-bhalla* or *biryani* for the children," says Ashima.

As Ashima sits outside her room, throwing chillies, garlic and onions into the sizzling oil, her neighbour Kusma walks in. "Didi, *cylinder mila* (Did you get a cylinder?)" she asks. Ashima laughs. "Can't you see how I am cooking? *Ekmahina hone ko hai* (It's been nearly a month without a cylinder)."

From the common area of the building, Ashima's neighbour Shanti peeps into her room. Holding her *'kitab'*, her LPG customer card, she says, "I stood in line around 2.30 at night and got a gas cylinder the next morning at 9," she says.

A few metres away from Ashima's house, outside the village school, a long queue winds along the boundary wall. A line of at least 100 empty cylinders, chained up together stands nearby. People amble around the cylinders, some sit atop

## India's fuel basket, 2025-26\*



them and a few lie down on mats beside them. With the sun almost set, one unfolds a mosquito net and begins putting it up.

Metres away, Rita says she has been standing in the queue since 7.30 pm the previous day. It has been over 20 hours since she first set her empty cylinder down at the end of the line.

A thick, black drain separates the apartment buildings where Ashima works from her chaotic neighbourhood in Morna.

Around 6 pm, Ashima leaves for her evening shift — she has to cook dinner at two homes. During the short walk, Ashima talks about her younger daughter's wedding that's scheduled to be held at their village in Hardoi late April. "I am so relieved the wedding is in our village. There's no tension about gas there...everything is cooked on big *chulhas*, and the *rotis* in the tandoor. We'll have to feed at least 100 people," she says.

As Ashima crosses the bridge over the drain, the first sign of the fuel divide comes into view — yellow lines that climb up the walls of the buildings, carrying PNG (Piped Natural Gas) into homes. "The rich have it nice. They don't have to worry about empty cylinders," sighs Ashima. "The thought of going back home and lighting the *chulha*... My daughters have never used a *chulha*, so now, they don't even help me with the cooking," she says.

At the first home, Ashima walks in with ease. As she cooks some *subandna khichdi* and fries some *papad*, the woman of the house (a government employee who didn't want to be identified) says, "We have pipelines, so we have no problems." Her husband, who has just returned from work, says, "It's strange how this war is going. When Trump said there would be a five-day pause, my stocks rose...then when Iran said they never spoke to Trump, my stocks crashed. In the end, it will be the common people who pay for this war."

An hour later, Ashima is at the second home, where she is asked to make *pooris*, boil sweet potatoes and roast *makhana*. "I thought there would be a proper shortage by now," says the house owner. "It may take some time, but people are getting cylinders, aren't they? Anyway, you can always buy one in black."

Around 8 pm, by the time she wraps up her work, the crowd has thinned on the road outside and the street lights do little to light up the dark corners. "Don't worry, I am used to this... Anyway, our area is always full of people," she laughs, heading towards the drain that'll take her to the other side, where her home and the *chulha* await.

## RAISEN, MADHYA PRADESH

Ujjwala gave them smoke-free kitchens, but now, dung-cake stoves are back

Anand Mohan J

AMCHAKALA IS a village of around 60-70 homes nestled amidst the famous Bhimbetka rock caves, in Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district. It was five years ago that its residents came under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, a scheme aimed at bringing LPG connections to rural households. With that, its kitchens moved from firewood to gas stoves, offering women a smoke-free, dignified way of cooking.

But now, the *chulha* has returned to Amchakala. The smoke from their clay stoves, fed with cow dung cakes and firewood, rises before 5 am now, an hour ear-

lier because the women have to accommodate the extra effort and time it takes to cook on the *chulha*.

While a senior official in the Food and Civil Supplies Department claimed there was "adequate supply", LPG bookings have surged across Madhya Pradesh, leading to delays. Amchakala, at the end of a fragile last-mile supply chain, simply waits longer.

The smoke rises from Anuprekha Jaiswal's house. She has to cook for 12 people in the Jaiswal household, a joint family where the men farm on acres and double up as factory workers.

By the time the first light touches the Bhimbetka ridge, Anuprekha is already on her knees at the *chulha*, arranging cow



Anuprekha collects firewood in Amchakala village. ANAND MOHAN J

got used to the cylinders, the *chulhas* were pushed to corners, used occasionally for winter warmth or festival cooking. Women also stopped stacking cow dung cakes outside their doors. Now, the dung cakes are back. It burns hotter and drier than wood, releasing a smoke that settles into the lungs and stays.

When the family ran out of gas, two weeks ago, the men walked into the forest to collect firewood. The Ratanpuri Tiger Reserve begins exactly where Amchakala's fields end. Now, every morning, men with axes and ropes walk across that boundary. "We risk our lives to collect firewood," says Sunil Jaiswal, Anuprekha's nephew who works at a local factory as a labourer.

Ujjwala runs a chapati business in Ghatkopar with a friend. Until recently, they would supply up to 2,000 chapatis a day to canteens, tiffin services and hospitals. About 10 days ago, Ujjwala's cylinder ran out. With no refill in sight, the business came to a halt. For now, she is taking on a single order from a hospital that has provided her with a cylinder. "I make about 400 chapatis for them," she says. Beyond that, there's little she can do. "It's like Covid, there's nothing anybody can do. Thankfully, my daughter and husband work, so we can manage for now." Then, she asks: "Can you arrange a cylinder for me?" — HEENA KHANDELWAL

Hari Pal plans to go home to Gaya, Bihar, with his wife and five-year-old son on April 5, two days after he gets his salary on April 3. "I had no plans to go home, but the LPG crisis is making it difficult for me to stay," says Pal, who does not have a gas connection and usually buys his LPG cylinder in black. "Earlier, we would get an LPG cylinder refilled for Rs 100, but now, the LPG supplier is asking for Rs 600. When we asked for a second refill, they refused," says Pal, from his home in the Ganeshnagar migrant labour colony at Pandesara in Surat. "My wife now cooks on this stove," he says, pointing to a metal bucket that his wife Seema has turned into a cylindrical *chulha*. — KAMAAL SAIED

A clerk at an aided school, Saroja has been anxious about her cylinder running out of gas. She has made a couple of visits to her LPG supplier, asking for her spare cylinder to be refilled. "When I tried booking for the first week of March, the agency said they were not taking any bookings. I finally booked on March 16 and made the payment online. But I was not able to get the cylinder," says Saroja, who runs a family of four. Her visits to the agency, 8 km from home, haven't been pleasant. "The last time I went, an employee rudely told me to take my family to the restaurant if we run out of gas. I got into a fight," she says. "The cylinder may run out of gas any moment, within 2-3 days." — KIRANPARASHAR

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## GLOBAL

# Problems and precedent in the US seizing Kharg

Anil Sasi  
New Delhi, March 31

AMID REPEATED assertions by US President Donald Trump that he may send troops to seize control of Iran's key oil export terminal at Kharg Island, experts are divided about its chances of success, especially given the defiance of the Iranian regime. There is also a precedent, albeit one that ended in disaster.

### Snake Island

Nearly four years ago, and still early into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Snake Island, or Zmiynyi Island, was seen as a vital asset in the war. This rocky outcrop held by Ukraine was categorised as strategic in the control of the western Black Sea, similar to Kharg, which is a coral island.

The island was seized by Russia in February 2022, only to be abandoned by June end, following relentless Ukrainian attacks. Holding on to the small, exposed island was a tactical challenge, and Russia's humiliating retreat came after it lost soldiers, air defences and supply vessels.

Quite like Snake Island, Kharg — a small 8-km-long outcrop in the Persian Gulf around 50 km off the Iranian mainland — is strategic, given that it is arguably Iran's most sensitive economic target through which most of Iran's oil exports flow. On average, around 1.5 million barrels of oil pass through Kharg every day, though Iran had sharply ramped up volumes to 3 million barrels a day since mid-February in anticipation of a US-led attack. A further 18 million barrels are stored on Kharg as a backup, JP Morgan said in a note.



Around 1.5 million barrels of oil pass through Kharg every day.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

### RUSSIAN MISADVENTURE

- Early into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it gained control of Snake Island in the Black Sea, seen as a vital asset in the war.
- But it was abandoned soon, following Ukrainian attacks and significant loss of soldiers and military hardware.

### Problems in the plan

There are three problems in Trump's plans to cut off Kharg. One, capturing the site would likely trigger a sustained increase in the already surging oil prices, as this would amount to neutralising almost all of Iran's daily crude exports. That could end up impacting Trump more

than the administration in Tehran at this point in time. Two, for America to utilise the infrastructure on the island for its own benefit, oil has to flow from the Iranian mainland to Kharg. Tehran can simply turn the valves off, rendering the entire operation an exercise in futility.

Third, just like the Russians struggled to hold on to Snake Island, the Americans could find it difficult to hold on to it, given that troops could take fire from the Iranian mainland, or from Iranian vessels in the Gulf.

More significantly, in geographic terms, Kharg is pretty upstream in the water channel and does not offer any serious control over the Strait of Hormuz, which is way downstream. So, unlike Snake Island, which mattered in controlling the Black Sea, Kharg is only strategic to the limited extent of the infrastructure it houses, and not really beyond that, a shipping expert with experience of the region said.

### Holding on

Trump's plans to dispatch troops to the region are still up in the air, but statements from him and others in his Cabinet suggest that nearly 5,000 US Marines and around 2,000 paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division are reportedly on standby.

Theoretically, paratroopers could attempt an airborne assault and the Marines would be deployed through ships or amphibious vessels. For that, though, those ships would have to sail upstream through the Iranian-controlled Strait of Hormuz under enemy fire. Landing by air could be met with artillery fire from both troops stationed on Kharg, those on the mainland and Iranian vessels. Even if they were to weather that, the US troops would then have to hold the island amid bombardment from the Iranian mainland.

That would not be such a good idea, as the Russians can testify.

## POLICY

# Telangana's gig workers law: The legislation, and how other states have fared

Sreenivas Jayala  
Hyderabad, March 31

ON MONDAY, the Telangana state Assembly passed the Telangana Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2026. The legislation, which seeks to regulate gig and platform workers and ensure protection of such gig workers, is similar to those passed by four other states: Karnataka, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and Bihar.

### The Bill's provisions

Labour, Employment and Mines Minister Dr G Vivek Venkateswamy, who introduced the Bill, said the Congress-led government has brought this legislation to give legal recognition to gig workers in the digital economy and protect their rights, dignity, and livelihood. He added that the workers lacked minimum wages, job security, health insurance, labour

rights, no grievance redressal system, or other benefits.

The Bill stipulates that platform companies will have to submit details regularly and file electronic returns of transactions made by customers every three months. The government will recover a 2% levy on these transactions. Strict penalties have been prescribed for non-compliance: Rs 50,000 for the first violation, Rs 1 lakh for the second, Rs 1.5 lakh for the third, and up to five times the arrears thereafter.

A special welfare board will be constituted for gig workers using the corpus created by the government levy, which will provide for insurance, pension and maternity benefits. Every registered gig worker will be given a unique ID. A maximum of 5% of the fund can be used for the board's operating expenses.

The Welfare Board will have 20 members, including representatives of gig worker aggregators, and will meet

quarterly. Platform-level committees with special officers will be formed to resolve complaints quickly. The Bill also mandates transparent policies: platforms must clearly disclose salary and deduction details, and there can be no arbitrary use of algorithms that affect workers.

The Bill is expected to benefit over 4 lakh delivery riders, cab drivers, and other platform workers across the state.

### Legislation in other states

The laws for gig workers in all five states focus on registration of workers, providing social security, health insurance, and welfare benefits.

Bihar has included a provident fund, maternity benefits, and old age protection. Platforms have been asked to show more transparency in how they operate and pay the workers, and provide more clarity if money is being deducted for

whatever reason. Rajasthan was the first state to pass the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act on July 24, 2023, under the then Ashok Gehlot-led government. The law mandates registration of gig workers, setting up of a welfare board, with one-third of its members to be women. It also levies a fee on aggregators for a welfare fund meant to provide, among other things, health insurance and accident coverage, and imposes penalties up to Rs 5 lakh for a first offence and up to Rs 50 lakh for subsequent violations.

The Bihar Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2025, includes mandatory registration of gig workers above 16 years using Aadhaar, and the issuance of a digital or physical identity card. The Act provides for social security benefits, including provident fund, insurance, maternity benefits, accident insurance, and old-age protection,

through a welfare fund. Other provisions include a minimum wage guarantee and grievance redressal mechanism.

The Karnataka Platform-Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2025, which came into effect last May, provides a legal framework for the constitution of a welfare board. It has provisions like social security, insurance, and minimum wages. The other provisions are similar to other states.

The Jharkhand Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, passed by the state Assembly in August last year, provides for registration of all gig workers, with an ID being provided, social security benefits and grievance redressal. The framework includes minimum wages, labour rights, and fair working conditions. The welfare board will be linked to the Labour Welfare Department's Shramdaan Portal, enabling it to avail accident compensation, insurance, pensions, and other

welfare schemes.

### Stages of implementation

Of the Bills passed by Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Karnataka, only Jharkhand has been able to implement it as the others are stuck in negotiations and discussions.

One of the main challenges is deciding the fee to be levied on the aggregator. Karnataka has proposed 1.5%, and it is also grappling with framing the rules and regulations to ensure social security and welfare benefits including health insurance.

In Rajasthan, Gehlot voted out in 2023 and the incumbent government has been dragging its feet. Last December, gig workers held protests across the state. In Bihar, negotiations over social security, provident fund, maternity benefits did not progress much, stalling its implementation. The state saw protests by gig workers earlier this year.

## ECONOMY

# Iran war: Agrochemicals stress and inflation worry

Ample stocks and a bumper crop are likely to keep food inflation in check. But broken fertiliser and pesticide supply chain is a concern



HARISH DAMODARAR

IN 2020, when Covid-19 struck, India had sufficient stocks of wheat and rice in government godowns. Farmers also harvested a bumper rabi (winter-spring) crop in March-May and followed it with good production during the subsequent two seasons over 2020 and 2021.

Agriculture was a source of respite then. The situation seems somewhat similar this time too.

On March 1, the day after the US and Israel launched strikes against Iran, the Food Corporation of India and state government agencies had 23.6 million tonnes (mt) of wheat in their warehouses, compared with 13.4 mt and 9.7 mt on the same day of the preceding two years. Milled rice stocks were even higher at 36.5 mt (see chart).

### Rabi comfort

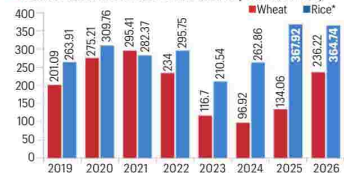
The production prospects from the rabi crops, now in various stages of harvesting, also look good. The driver for it has been the surplus monsoon rainfall in 2025, leading farmers to plant more area under wheat, mustard, maize, *chana* (chickpea), *masoor* (red lentil) and even potato and onion. "The higher acreages have been combined with reasonably favourable weather conditions."

"The rain triggered by successive western disturbances this month has brought down temperatures. It has been beneficial for wheat, as the crop gets more time for grain-filling. It translates into higher grain size and weight, and ultimately yields," said Rabi Yadav, principal scientist at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute in New Delhi. When harvesting is already underway in central India, what it would pick up in the north and northwestern states towards mid-April.

Mustard harvesting is generally from late-February to mid-March. "We had unusual rains and hailstorms after mid-March, but the silique (pod) development and grain (seed) formation was completed by then," noted Bhagirath Choudhary, director of the South Asia Biotechnology Centre at Jodhpur (Rajasthan).

He expected production setbacks mainly in seed species such as *jeera* (cumin)

Government stocks on March 1 (in lakh tonnes)



\*DOES NOT INCLUDE UNMILLED PADDY WITH FOOD CORPORATION OF INDIA AND STATE AGENCIES. SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION.

and *isabgol* (psyllium husk). "These crops need a longer and colder growing season than wheat and mustard. We didn't really have that this time."

Doongar Singh, a potato grower-cum-cold store owner in Khandauli near Agra (Uttar Pradesh), estimated yields of the tuber crop at around last year's levels: "Production is 8-10% higher because of increased acreage."

Harvesting of rabi maize in Bihar, a major growing state, will commence after mid-April. "Farmers have planted more area and the weather too has been good so far. Last year, grain yields were 4-4.5 tonnes per acre. They will average the same, if not more, this time," said Anil Kishorepura, chairman of Regaal Resources Ltd, a leading cum-well-milling company with operations in Bihar's Kishanganj district.

The big picture is that India has entered this crisis from the Iran war — just as with the pandemic six years ago — with plentiful food stocks and a bumper rabi harvest in the offing. Even in sugar, where closing stocks for 2025-26 (October-September) are projected lower (see table), both all-quota India export and modal (most-quoted) retail prices are virtually unchanged at Rs 38.5 and Rs 45 per kg respectively relative to a year ago.

Simply put, there are no food supply or inflation pressures — for now.

### Looming threat from supply shock in fertilisers...

In fertilisers, too, the stocks of urea and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), at 6.1 mt and 2.4 mt respectively on March 19 as per government data, were higher than their year-ago levels of 5.5 mt and 1.2 mt.

So were the stocks of complex fertilisers

### Pain points

Since the war broke out, landed prices of ammonia imported into India have shot up from \$450-470 to \$725-750 per tonne

Sulphur prices have gone from below \$200 to \$700-plus per tonne, and for imported DAP, from \$640-650 to about \$825

containing nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and sulphur in different ratios (5:2 mt versus 3:4 mt) and single super phosphate or SSP (2.5 mt versus 2.3 mt), while marginally lower for muriate of potash (1.3 mt versus 1.4 mt).

The problem, though, is in their availability for the upcoming kharif (monsoon) planting season from June. The war has disrupted imports from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries that are the largest suppliers of urea and DAP as well as inputs — especially liquid natural gas, ammonia and sulphur — for manufacture of fertilisers in India.

Since the war broke out, landed prices of ammonia imported into India have shot up from \$450-470 to \$725-750 per tonne. Sulphur prices have, over the last one year, soared from below \$200 to \$700-plus per tonne, and from \$640-650 to about \$825 for imported DAP.

India annually consumes roughly 40 mt of urea, 10 mt of DAP, 14 mt complex fertilisers and 5 mt of SSP. "The existing stocks can barely meet the requirement for the first half of the kharif season. The government must ensure that we continue to produce and import. It would necessitate recalibration of nutrient-based subsidy rates to fully reflect both rising international prices and a weakening rupee," a senior industry executive told *The Indian Express*.

The focus should be to maximise domestic production of complex fertilisers and SSP, and push farmers to apply more of these instead of urea and DAP. "With one tonne of phosphoric acid, you can produce only two tonnes of DAP, as against 4-5 tonnes of complexes such as 20:20:0:13 having more balanced nutrient composition. This crisis should be turned into an opportunity to promote nutrient use efficiency

and balanced fertilisation," he added.

### ...and pesticides

Crops need fertilisers to deliver nutrients for growth. They also require chemicals — insecticides, fungicides and herbicides — to protect against pests and weeds.

Crop protection chemicals are no less exposed to the raw material supply chain disruptions from the war. Some 55% of the global supply of naphtha — a primary feedstock for agrochemicals — originates from crude petroleum oil refineries in West Asia or passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

Naphtha is both "cracked" into ethylene, propylene and butadiene and "reformed" into benzene, toluene and xylene. These, in turn, are the building blocks for intermediate chemicals used in the manufacture of active ingredients and also their emulsifiers and solvents for various crop protection formulations. For instance, the herbicide glyphosate is formulated using isopropylamine that is derived from isopropanol and which further comes from propylene.

"When naphtha and propylene supplies from Middle East are hit, Chinese manufacturers raise their prices of isopropylamine. It then, increases our production cost of glyphosate formulation," explained Sohit Satyavali, chief business officer at the New Delhi-based Crystal Crop Protection Ltd.

Base chemicals apart — these also include sulphur and methanol — there has been an escalation in the cost of packaging materials, be it HDPE and PET bottles, flexible pouches, master carton boxes or even labels. "Packaging material costs itself are up 30-40%. It's all linked to petrochemicals and the war," he pointed out. How these costs will play out in farmers' fields, and eventually food prices, remain to be seen.

## SPACE

# How NASA will fly astronauts to the Moon and back for Artemis II

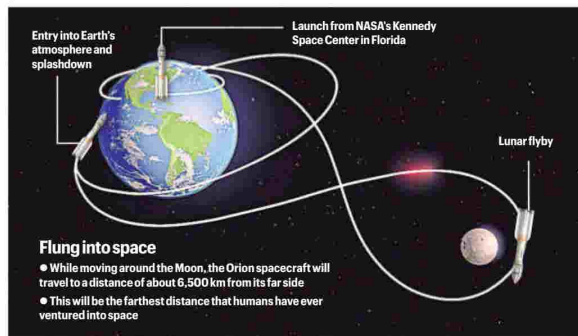
Amitabh Sinha  
New Delhi, March 31

NASA's ARTEMIS II mission, carrying four astronauts on a flyby mission to the Moon, is all set to be launched on Wednesday. This will be the first time humans will get to the Moon's neighbourhood after the last Apollo mission in 1972. The Artemis II mission will not land on the Moon but circle it and return to Earth after a 10-day journey. A successor mission, planned for 2028, is scheduled to make a Moon landing with another set of four astronauts.

### Longer vs shorter routes

The Artemis II mission will take three to four days to reach the Moon's neighbourhood — roughly the same time the Apollo missions took to land on the lunar surface. Many other recent uncrewed lunar missions, including India's Chandrayaan-3, took much longer, between a few weeks and a few months, to get to the Moon.

Longer routes are more fuel-efficient and economical, while quicker routes require more powerful rockets. The SLS (Space Launch System) rockets being used for the Artemis missions are the most



powerful launch vehicles available to NASA right now. The Apollo missions used Saturn V rockets, which are the most powerful rockets ever built.

crewed but followed roughly the same path to the Moon and back, though it stayed in space for a longer duration, about 25 days, to carry out tests. This is the first time that the SLS rocket and Orion spacecraft are being used to carry astronauts.

### The path

The Artemis II Mission will make two rounds of the Earth before embarking on its journey towards the Moon. Once there, it will go around the Moon before starting the return journey to Earth. While moving around the Moon, the Orion spacecraft will travel to a distance of about 6,500 km from the far side of the Moon. This will be the farthest that humans have ever ventured into space.

The Apollo missions that landed on the Moon reached an altitude of just about 110 km from the far side of the lunar surface, while moving around it.

Artemis II is sort of a test-ride mission, meant to test and validate all systems before astronauts finally make the landing on the Moon in 2028.

The mission's launch was aborted earlier. As of Monday, NASA said there was an 80% chance that the weather would be favourable for a smooth launch on April 1.



## Unexpected surge

The Index of Industrial Production diverges from previous data

India's industrial growth held a positive surprise in February 2026, coming in at 5.2%, marginally faster than the growth in January. Apart from November and December last year, February's industrial performance – as measured by the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) – was the best in nearly two years. Why this was a surprise was because this performance diverges quite sharply from what was indicated by the Index of Eight Core Industries released earlier this month. The eight core sectors – crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, coal, fertilizers, steel, cement, and electricity – saw their combined growth slow to 2.3% in February, about half the growth rate in January. These core sectors have a weightage of about 40% in the IIP, and so the expectation was that they would drag the IIP down too. Yet, something else happened. This would imply that sectors outside the core ones did well. Most notably, the manufacturing sector in the IIP saw growth accelerate to a respectable 6% in February. The capital goods sector's growth accelerated to a 28-month high of 12.5%, on an already strong base of 8.1%. These are good signs for labour and capital. What is more concerning is that some elements of consumer demand are going in the opposite direction. Consumer durables grew 7.3%, but consumer non-durables contracted 0.6%, the second consecutive month of shrinkage. It had contracted in February last year as well, so this was not a statistical anomaly.

In general, spending on non-durables involves greater discretion on a day-to-day basis, and so is a better gauge of consumer sentiment. At the moment, at least this data suggest that sentiment is low. This also correlates with the new series of national accounts data showing that household expenditure has had a shrinking contribution to GDP. The government should also look into why the IIP and the Eight Core Industries index moved in opposite directions in February. The two are normally highly correlated, and so a divergence is immediately noteworthy. From the looks of things, February's strong IIP performance is likely to be a short-lived acceleration. The West Asia crisis is already having an impact on the economy. The monthly economic review by the Finance Ministry has said that early high-frequency economic indicators for March are pointing towards a "moderation in economic momentum". The longer the war persists, the sharper this "moderation" is likely to be. On a positive note, while what is being measured might turn dismal, how it is being measured will soon improve. The new, upgraded series of IIP data will be released in May. As the new GDP and CPI have done, the new IIP is sure to provide a clearer picture of the economy – the good and the bad.

## A bully blinks

Russian ship breaks U.S. blockade to help fuel-starved Cuba

Ever since U.S. President Donald Trump began his second term in office, his administration's conduct of foreign policy has been that of a schoolyard bully. This is particularly true in 2026, when the U.S. launched attacks on two oil-rich countries, Venezuela and Iran. The first was on the blatantly false pretext of terminating President Nicolás Maduro the head of a drug cartel, and the second was at the instance of Israel. As with schoolyard bullies everywhere, the Trump administration recognises no rules and mistakes the absence of violent resistance for proof of its strength. The strangling of Cuba is a case in point. After seizing Venezuela's energy assets, abducting its President, and cutting off Venezuelan oil supply to Havana, the U.S. threatened countries such as Mexico that sought to step into the breach, and imposed a *de facto* naval blockade on Cuba, leading to a severe fuel crunch and acute distress for ordinary Cubans. This behaviour, justified by Mr. Trump as an attempt to take over Cuba and remove its decades-long communist government, is part of a strategy so nakedly imperial that it has been termed the "Donroe Doctrine", a crude play on the original instrument of U.S. hemispheric dominance for over two centuries. Yet, the bully's power is often brittle and holds only until someone calls the bluff. When Russia, Cuba's ally since the Soviet era, dispatched a tanker, *Anatoly Kolodkin*, as humanitarian aid to fuel-starved Cuba, it also tested the will of the Trump administration to interdict a ship owned by another nuclear power. The tanker reached without incident.

The U.S., it turns out, did not push back and the bluff now stands exposed, even if by a country that has itself displayed similar behaviour in neighbouring Ukraine. Cuba's fuel crisis has not ended and the threat of American attacks still hangs over the socialist government led by President Miguel Díaz-Canel. But Russia's timely help reveals that the rest of the world need not simply endure the Trump era as this administration goes about breaking every accepted tenet of the international order. For all its flaws as a one-party state, Cuba has been an avowed member of the Non-Aligned Movement, has shown solidarity with the Global South by deploying well-trained doctors for medical programmes across poor countries, and has contributed materially to anti-colonial struggles for decades. It is time other countries repaid the Cubans by showing the will to break the American blockade and continue sovereign trade and commerce with Cuba, asserting their right to do so. After all, the international order holds only when its constituents accept that might does not always make right.

West Asia is currently enmeshed in what is essentially Benjamin Netanyahu's war, aggravated by Donald Trump's folly, leading itself to large-scale devastation. The conflict that began on February 28, 2026, when the United States and Israel launched large-scale joint military operations against Iran, is still continuing. What appeared to be a limited confrontation earlier in June (the 12-day war in June 2025) may now be seen as a kind of curtain raiser for this – the more devastating conflict taking place now. Titled 'Operation Epic Fury', the human cost of the war has been colossal, apart from other types of collateral damage. With several thousand Iranians killed, more than half of them civilians, it is apparent that the U.S. and Israel are preparing for a long campaign and, incidentally, in course of time, to commit troops on the ground. The world, nevertheless, needs to prepare for a long-drawn-out conflict

### Iran survives the onslaught

To date, despite the widespread disruption and devastation, including the assassination of senior Iranian leaders such as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and National Security Chief Ali Larjani among others, Iran has not only survived but its uranium stockpile also remains safe. Iran appears ready for an extended war. Also, Iran hopes to get its own back on the U.S., Israel, and their allies in the region by provoking a serious oil crisis through a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, through which nearly 30% of the world's shipment of oil passes. There has been other collateral damage as well, including the fact that many U.S. allies in Europe and elsewhere have openly refused to respond to Mr. Trump's plaintive appeal for help in opening the Strait of Hormuz, even as Iran has made a tempting offer of safe passage (through the Strait) for countries friendly to it. Having survived the initial onslaught of the combined forces of the U.S. and Israel, Iran is now beginning to raise the stakes, at least as far as the U.S. is concerned, by calling for an American commitment to withdraw its bases in West Asia, to restrain Israel and arrive at an armistice of sorts.

Most experts believe that, if anything, time is on the side of Iran. Despite all the fire and fury visited on Iran in the first month of the conflict, and despite the loss of its top leaders, Iran has not only survived but has also managed to hit back, though with lesser intensity. The regime's command structure has been disrupted, but a collapse of the Iranian state has not occurred. On the other hand, for the U.S., its strategy of saturation bombardment from the air is leading to certain other repercussions, in terms of both cost and replenishments of key weapons such as Patriot missiles, Terminal High Altitude Area



M.K. Narayanan

A former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

As the West Asia conflict – widely seen as Benjamin Netanyahu's war – falls, Iran appears to be enduring while the world grapples with growing economic strain

Defence (THAAD) interceptors, Tomahawk cruise missiles and the like. Within the U.S., more so among sections of the U.S. Navy, signs of war weariness appear to have set in; while it is possible to overstate its significance, it cannot be ignored. In this respect, Israel's strategy of containing the threat posed by Iran, while firing from Mr. Trump's shoulders, may have gone awry. It would seem that the conflict has upended the Thucydides aphorism that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", for in the present case, Iran has refused to accept suffering without hitting back with full ferocity. Notwithstanding this, the U.S. and Israel display few compunctions in persisting with a conflict that is focused 'on extracting advantage, rather than in underwriting order'.

### 'Netanyahu's war' escalates

This is undoubtedly Mr. Netanyahu's war, and while standard declamations may continue to be made, it is apparent that Mr. Netanyahu's plans to decimate Iran with the aid and the support of the U.S. has gone wrong. What is surprising also is that, apart from U.S. support to Israel's devious plans, much of the rest of the civilised world has not upbraided Israel for embarking on a patently illegal conflict, which has no merit whatsoever. The world continues to remain a mute spectator, notwithstanding the price it is paying due to the escalating cost of oil.

Israel's obsession about seeking fulfilment of the 'Biblical Promise of the chosen land', notwithstanding the huge cost in human and economic terms, is unfortunately proving costly for the world at large as well. However, Israel remains adamant in pursuing the war with little regard for the costs involved, and, with Mr. Trump's backing, hopes to expand the ambit of the conflict across West Asia to include Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. All this, despite the already apparent severe maritime disruptions and retaliatory steps taken by Iran such as the closing of the Strait of Hormuz.

The Iran war today has entered a phase of 'no peace, no large-scale war', one defined not merely by military confrontation but through the weaponisation of the infrastructure underpinning the global economy. Energy prices, shipping lanes and logistical systems provide the essential backdrop to the current conflict and are, in a sense, central to the strategy of those involved. The U.S. has far more to lose than Israel if the world plunges into prolonged chaos – but the economies of most nations across the globe are already being, and would continue to be, adversely affected by the disruption of the oil economy and its fallout in every sphere.

Notwithstanding the opinion of military experts that Israel's objective of effecting a regime change in Iran is impossible without a ground

invasion, Israel is pursuing such an objective with vigour. Neither the U.S. nor Europe display any enthusiasm for this. The economies of most nations concerned are, once again, in no position to undertake such a conflict – including the U.S. Both China and Russia are almost certain to oppose it. A war of this kind is, moreover, certain to throw up many other issues often lost sight of in the Councils of the World. The fact that Iran is a large country is often ignored, as also that Iranian forces are better acclimatised to carry out a war of attrition. Reliance on air power provides no significant advantage to any 'aggressor'.

### On Shia resistance

Additionally, one must add a symbolic dimension to any conflict that is aimed at overthrowing a Shiite regime. Shiite political culture draws heavily on the memory of the 'Battle of Karbala' that symbolises civilisational resistance, and not just geopolitics. The narrative emphasises patience, sacrifice, resistance and strategic endurance. A war intended to change the present dispensation in Iran by outside forces such as Israel, would only provide an opportunity to enhance the religious, political and transnational aspects of Shiite Islam.

Expansion of the current war launched by the U.S. and Israel is more likely to be perceived as approximating to striking at the roots of political Shiism – in Iran and elsewhere. Western military superiority does not guarantee strategic victory. Nor will a war automatically result in altering geopolitical outcomes inside Iran and across the region, or to a regime collapse in Iran. All this would pave the way for a long drawn-out war, irrespective of the consequences.

The appointment of Mojtaba Khamenei as the Supreme Leader following Ali Khamenei's killing on February 28, should again be viewed not as a mere rite of passage but as a triumph for the radical messianic-apocalyptic aspect of Shiite Islam. In a sense, it is triggering a revival of Shiite militancy – and in an aggravated form. This leaves little room for any expectation that the revolutionary fervour will diminish with the killing of additional Ayatollahs.

The U.S. and Israel, hence, need to be careful before venturing into the 'spider's web', for the cost of delusion could be grave not only for Israel and the U.S. but also for the world at large. There is still time, at least for the U.S., to retrieve the situation and alter the policy direction that has been initiated under Mr. Netanyahu's instigation. Israel's deliberate provocation, including its latest attack very close to Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant (built with Russian collaboration) was a needless – and perhaps a deliberate – act of provocation by Israel. Such issues need to be avoided lest the world is plunged into third world war, with untold sufferings for mankind.

# Counting people is not counting disaster risk

Odisha is, by any measure, one of India's most disaster-prone States. Its 574.7-kilometre coastline has absorbed some of the most powerful cyclones to make landfall on the subcontinent. Over two decades, through investment in early warning systems, cyclone shelters, and mass evacuations, the State has reduced cyclone mortality to near zero. It is, therefore, not merely paradoxical but troubling that the 16th Finance Commission has awarded Odisha the single largest reduction in disaster funding share among all 28 States, a decline of 1.57 percentage points relative to the 15th Finance Commission's allocation.

How does a State with the highest hazard score in the country, and the deepest investments in preparedness, end up losing the most? The answer lies in a structural problem in the Finance Commission's allocation formula.

### The revised formula and its rationale

The 16th Finance Commission has allocated ₹2,04,401 crore to State Disaster Response Funds (SDRF), a 59.5% increase over its predecessor. The Commission adopted a multiplicative Disaster Risk Index (DRI = Hazard X Exposure X Vulnerability), drawing on the theoretical framework. This is a departure from the additive approach of the 15th Finance Commission, which treated hazard and vulnerability as substitutes rather than complements. Risk arises only when hazard intersects with exposed and vulnerable populations. A powerful cyclone striking an uninhabited coastline is a natural event, not a disaster. The logic is correct. The operationalisation is not.

The first problem lies in the measurement of 'Exposure'. The Commission uses the total population of each State, scaled linearly between 1 and 25, as its exposure metric. Uttar Pradesh receives 25 and Sikkim receives 1. This is administratively convenient but scientifically indefensible. Exposure, per the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change



Aswathy Rachel Varughese

Assistant Professor, Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Structural problems in the 16th Finance Commission's disaster funding formula leave India's most hazard-prone States underserved

(IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report, is the presence of people in places that could be adversely affected by hazards, not simply the number of people within a political boundary. A State with 10 crore people on a hazard-safe inland plateau has lower exposure than a State with three crore people settled entirely along a cyclone-prone coastline. Total population and hazard-zone population are not the same variable.

The practical consequences are stark. Odisha's hazard score of 12 is the highest in the country. But because its population score is only 5, its computed DRI of 79.8 is overshadowed by Bihar's 224.2 and Uttar Pradesh's 413.2, two States with lower hazard scores. The multiplicative formula, in practice, rewards demographic size. A State can face the most intense hazard in India and still lose funding because it is not populous. This is precisely the outcome that a risk-based allocation framework was designed to prevent.

The second problem compounds the first. Vulnerability is measured through each State's average per capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP), inverted so that poorer States score higher. The intuition is clear – poorer States have fewer fiscal resources to absorb disaster shocks. But the NSDP measures fiscal capacity, not disaster vulnerability. Vulnerability is multidimensional, encompassing housing quality, health infrastructure in hazard zones, early warning reach, and the share of population in structurally unsafe dwellings. Average per capita income conceals enormous intra-state inequality.

In 2018, Kerala suffered its worst flooding in a century, causing estimated damages of ₹31,000 crore. Yet, the formula assigns Kerala a vulnerability score of just 1.073, near the minimum, because its per capita income is relatively high. Combined with a population score of 4, Kerala's DRI, of 34.5, is lower than many States with negligible disaster history. Jharkhand, with the second-highest vulnerability score reflecting genuine poverty and tribal fragility, still loses 0.78 percentage points of funding share

because its population score cannot compensate in the multiplicative framework. Twenty States in total have low relative share. The common thread is not that they are safer; it is that they are smaller, wealthier on average, or both.

### What needs to change

Exposure should be measured as the number of people living within defined hazard zones, flood plains, cyclone-prone coastal belts, earthquake-susceptible zones, using the Building Materials and Technology Promotion Council (BMTPC) Vulnerability Atlas cross-referenced with Census enumeration block data.

Vulnerability should be reconstituted as a composite index incorporating the share of kutcha housing, agricultural labour dependence, health infrastructure density in high-hazard districts, crop insurance penetration, and early warning effectiveness. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) database, National Health Mission (NHM) facility surveys, and India's Meteorological Department (IMD) monitoring records collectively provide that information. The Finance Commission should mandate the National Disaster Management Authority to publish an annual State Disaster Vulnerability Index as the authoritative input for each subsequent audit period, institutionalising the methodology and ending contested metrics at every Commission.

India cannot afford to get disaster finance wrong. Climate projections indicate intensifying cyclone frequencies along both coastlines, expanding drought belts across peninsular and central India, and escalating extreme rainfall in already-stretched States. The States most likely to face the sharpest increase in disaster frequency – Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Assam – are precisely those the current formula underserves. A formula that measures total population rather than the exposed population is not a risk index. It is a headcount.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Rupee's steep fall

It is amusing that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has gone on record to state that the Indian rupee is doing "absolutely fine" thanks to robust economic fundamentals. Comparisons with peers such as the Thai Baht and Philippine Peso conveniently hides the fact that the rupee plunged

10.96% in FY 26, its deepest fall in 14 years, making it Asia's worst performing currency. One cannot forget that the rupee was the only Asian currency to withstand the onslaught of the Asian currency crisis, in 1997, and remain stable against the dollar, when all other Asian currencies were in trouble. This was possible only due to the intelligent manner in

which our currency was managed by the financial wizards who were at the helm of affairs. **Tharicus S. Fernando,** Chennai

### The safety pin

This is no exaggeration, but the bonding that a safety pin has with clothing is much like a mother's bond with her child (Open Page =

"Ode to the safety pin", March 29). Its brilliance lies in its versatility – mending, crafting, and emergency repairs. As a common practice, sterilised safety pins are used for removing thorns or splinters from the bottom of feet. In times of social and political unrest, it has been adopted as a symbol of unity, solidarity, and resistance. Its simple

form and accessibility have made the safety pin a powerful tool for expressing collective sentiment. **R. Sivakumar,** Chennai

### In Guwahati

Chennai Super Kings totally looked out of sorts in their first match of this edition of the Indian Premier League in Guwahati on Monday.

That the team was all out for just 127 runs in 19.4 overs against Rajasthan Royals was deplorable indeed. Powered by Iad, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, Rajasthan Royals made it a one-sided contest. **S. Ramakrishnasayee,** Chennai

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

# An impeachment move with no winners

A win-win situation benefits all stakeholders even if a compromise is reached in search of a workable alternative. It could even be a way in which the winning side deludes the losing side to perceive its loss as a necessary price it paid for survival.

The impeachment motion of the Opposition parties against the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is one such example. It is a motion destined not to carry. Yet its prime movers may not see the loss as a defeat. But can the CEC see their loss as his victory?

The move of the Opposition parties is doubtlessly dramatic. However, the question that needs to be pondered by the well-wishers of the Election Commission of India (ECI) is what prompted them to don the gloves for a fight with no chance of victory. Perhaps, sometimes one fights not to win but to wound the opponent. And the troubling part is that political parties treat the CEC as an opponent.

## Steadfast defiance

The move to impeach the CEC is a first in the history of an institution that is supposed to be a vanguard of Indian electoral democracy. "India built many institutions after attaining freedom and adopting a Republican constitution...if anyone were to conduct an opinion poll on which of these institutions rendered the best service to Indian democracy with the highest degree of integrity, I have no doubt that the ECI will be our people's first choice," said Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then Prime Minister at the ECI's golden jubilee celebrations on January 17, 2001.

And now, 25 years later, 193 parliamentarians of the Opposition have submitted notices for an impeachment motion against the CEC citing charges of "partisan and discriminatory conduct", "obstruction of investigation into electoral fraud" and disenfranchisement via the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. The notice is as



**Ashok Lavasa**

Former Election Commissioner and Union Finance Secretary of India

unprecedented as the manner in which the revision of electoral rolls has been undertaken despite serious challenge by most political parties, except the ruling dispensation. Such an alignment of thinking disconcerted the Opposition, which sharpened their attack against the CEC. The repeated press conferences by the Leader of the Opposition (LOP) exposing discrepancies in the electoral rolls of States where elections had been held, further eroded trust in the body.

While the aggressive style and severity of the LOP's attack on the poll body, questioning its integrity was surprising, what was more surprising was the poll body's obduracy in not providing a credible response to the doubts raised on its functioning and impartiality. As the attacks became more and more bitter, communication channels between the poll body and the opposition political parties seemed to choke.

The nation had seldom seen such a relentless campaign against a CEC even as the Supreme Court heard endless petitions against his decisions. As the petitions failed to yield any substantive relief, frustration mounted and so did the CEC's apparent indifference. The CEC persisted with the SIR despite the fortnight-long Vote Adhikar Yatra just before the Bihar State elections.

Not that there was no dialogue. The one between the poll body and the Trinamool Congress caused more rancour culminating in the theatrical presence of Mamata Banerjee in the Supreme Court. Never before had a Chief Minister appeared in Court arguing against the ECI's unfair decisions. The dharnas against the SIR in West Bengal or officials dying in the course of conducting the SIR failed to deter the CEC or change his avowed commitment to "purify" the electoral rolls.

The ECI invented the "logical discrepancy" tool that pitted electors against the AI used to detect discrepancies. West Bengal saw 58,20,899 electors deleted at

the draft stage and 60,06,675 "under adjudication" in the final list. But the ECI went on to announce elections in the State, where the fate of nearly 10% electors remained undetermined. It employed micro-observers for finalising the revised rolls, something never done in the past. The SC also took the extraordinary step of appointing over 500 judicial officers to decide the fate of these electors in a short span.

It is unusual for a constitutional body mandated with electoral rolls preparation to involve another constitutional body in discharging its routine functions by disregarding the elector's voting right, which it was created to protect. The exclusion of even a single eligible voter due to the way the SIR has been conducted would legitimise the criticism of this arbitrary and aggressive exercise.

**A loss for the common man** However, does all of this justify the impeachment move? The answer depends on which side of the divide one stands. The crores of voters who figure in the final electoral roll might not protest, treating the tension and trauma during the revision process as part of the routine struggle that helpless citizens go through to secure their rights. The voice of those excluded doesn't count in the elections in any case.

Eventually, the valid concern of protecting the right to vote turns into the lament of losers who are left with no choice but to resort to the ultimate constitutional weapon against the CEC.

Meanwhile, the ECI has sounded the poll bugle asking players to contest against each other rather than against the referee. It is now in full control. The successful completion of the poll process will justify all its decisions. Victors will exult; losers will find reasons to complain.

What the nation would be left with will be a poll body in which the Opposition, representing more than half the voting population, has expressed no confidence.

# The TVK makes a go for it alone

The party seems to have not learnt its lesson from the Karur stampede

## STATE OF PLAY

**T. Ramakrishnan**  
ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in



The fledgling Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), on March 29, crossed one of the most important stages of the electoral process, by naming candidates for all the 234 Assembly constituencies in the State.

Ever since the initial excitement about the TVK's entry into the political scene started evaporating after the Karur stampede that killed 41 persons in September last year, the party's founder C. Joseph Vijay (Tamil actor known only as Vijay) became a target of attack from his critics. Thanks to his party's litigation, the stampede case was transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) from a Madras High Court-appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT) and a State-constituted enquiry commission. In two spells spread over two months, Mr. Vijay has faced interrogation by the CBI in New Delhi. Meanwhile, the talk of a decisive shift in the TVK's stand on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which Mr. Vijay had called all along as the "ideological adversary," began doing the rounds a day before the actor-turned politician left for New Delhi. Sections of the media frantically reported that a host of district secretaries of the TVK had expressed, at an internal meeting held virtually, their preference for an alliance with the BJP.

Mr. Vijay had made it clear at the TVK's inaugural State-level conference in October 2024, that he was open to having pre-poll alliances and a coalition government, a concept which is anathema to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

(DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Yet, barring the AIADMK and the BJP which had sought to court the TVK, others, including allies of the DMK, stayed aloof in the light of buzz from certain quarters that the Congress and the Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi might move towards the TVK.

## An interesting potpourri

It was against this backdrop that the TVK came out with its list of nominees in one go. As of now, only one more party — the 16-year-old Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK) — is contesting in all the seats. Mr. Vijay is contesting from Perambur in north Chennai, once a seat reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) but now a general constituency with economically vulnerable sections of society living in large numbers, and from Tiruchi East, a seat in the central region of the State with a substantial population of Christians, especially Vellalas (the denomination to which Mr. Vijay's father S.A. Chandrasekhar belongs), and Muslims. The party has fielded many of its prominent faces in Chennai, including AIADMK's former veteran, J.C.D. Prabhakar (Thousand Lights), and the TVK's general secretary 'Bussy' N. Anand (N. Nagar).

As per an estimate, about 45% of the candidates — 106 nominees — are from other parties. While no one would have anything negative to

comment about giving tickets to former School Education Minister K.A. Sengottaiyan and his associate V. Sathyabama, who, as Tiruppur's MP during 2014-19, took her job seriously in terms of participating in debates (both joined the party about four months ago), Mr. Vijay's decision with respect to some others caused disquiet among party cadres. There was an element of surprise over the inclusion of two former MLAs of the Dravidian major, Dusi K. Mohan and Reddiyarpatti V. Narayanan and a senior office-bearer of the Congress D. Selvam, all of whom joined the TVK at the last minute. When the TVK founder held a meeting at a hotel in Chennai, sections of party cadres staged a demonstration outside the hotel, protesting against the choice of candidate for K.V. Kuppam, a constituency reserved for SCs in Vellore.

## Lack of crowd control

On the first day of filing nominations, Mr. Vijay submitted his papers in Perambur but his plan for campaigning in three Chennai seats suffered a setback as he was not able to cover the third constituency, for which his party blamed the police. While after the Karur stampede, TVK functionaries would be expected to be more meticulous to detail, this campaign incident proves that they have become none the wiser. Instead of blaming the police or officials, the party managers should take a cue from how crowd management was handled during the annual theme festival of the Arubathumooar (Idols of the 63 Nayanmars) on the same day in Mylapore smoothly, despite the event being watched by thousands of devotees. Else, one does not have to hazard a great guess about the hazard.

# How women voters are shaping State politics in 2026

Even though women are increasingly shaping party strategies and political outcomes, their representation in State Assemblies remain low

## DATA POINT

**Sanjay Kumar**  
**Vibha Attri**

Women voters have become a central point of discussion in elections in India in recent times. Rightly so, because parties in power roll out women-centric schemes, sometimes even direct cash transfer ones, to win their support. Opposition parties too make promises about initiating schemes for women's welfare, if elected. These promises seem to be making some impact, reflected in the rising turnout of women voters. Parties appear to have mobilised women through welfare schemes, and this mobilisation is seen as a key factor for electoral success.

The upcoming Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu are unlikely to be different. Women, who constitute nearly half of the electorate in each State (and slightly more in Kerala), are a key focus of all political parties. Electoral trends show that while turnout has increased, women remain underrepresented in State assemblies. However, evidence from Lokniti-CSDS data suggest that their voting choices have somewhat shaped party strategies and political outcomes.

Across all four States, women's voter turnout has remained high and largely stable over the past three decades, often matching or slightly exceeding men's participation (Table 1). In Assam, the gender gap narrowed from -1.48 percentage points in 1991 to +0.41 in 2021. Kerala shows a similar trend, with women voting at levels equal to or slightly higher than men. In 2016, women's turnout surpassed men's, with a gap of +2.17 percentage points. By 2021, the turnout was nearly equal, with a gap of +0.09 percentage points.

In West Bengal, women's turnout remained slightly below men's until 2011, when it sur-

passed men's for the first time and maintained a marginal lead in the subsequent election (+0.28 percentage points in 2021). Tamil Nadu, historically lower in voter participation compared to other States, reached near parity by 2011, and women's turnout has remained close to men's turnout through 2021, with only a minimal gap of -0.27 percentage points.

**Representation in Assemblies** While women have consistently shown high voter participation, converting this engagement into representation in State Assemblies remains a persistent challenge. Over the past three decades, the proportion of women elected to Assemblies in all four States have varied, but remained low.

In Assam, women's representation rose from 3.97% in 1991 to a peak of 11.11% in 2011, but fell to 4.76% in 2021 (six of 126 seats). Kerala shows a relatively stable but persistently low level of women's representation, with women legislators occupying between 5% and 9% of seats over the years. In 2021, only 11 women were elected, accounting for just 7.86% of the 140-seat Assembly.

West Bengal stands out for gradual gains rising from 7.41% in 1991 to 13.95% in 2016, and 13.61% in 2021. In 2021 about 40 women were elected to the 294-member Assembly, the highest among these States. Tamil Nadu presents the most volatile trajectory. Representation peaked at 13.68% in 1991 but fell sharply to 3.85% in 1996. In 2021, women's representation stood at 5.13%, with 12 women elected to the 234-seat Assembly.

**On voting patterns** Survey-based estimates from Assembly election studies conducted by the Lokniti-CSDS provide insight into how women have voted over time. In Assam, there has been a clear shift. In 2011, the Congress led among women voters with 39% of women voting for them, while the BJP secured 10%

By 2021, the BJP-led alliance increased its women's vote share to 44%. The Mahajot alliance also secured significant support, receiving 33% in 2016 and 41% in 2021, making the contest more competitive (Table 2).

Kerala presents a closely contested pattern between the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) with women's support nearly equal in 2011 and 2016. In the 2021 Assembly elections, the LDF gained a modest advantage securing 45% of women's votes compared to the UDF's 41%. The BJP which contested independently in 2011 received 5% of the women's votes. In 2016 and 2021, contesting as part of an alliance, its share rose to 12% and 11% respectively, but it remains a secondary player in a largely bipolar contest (Table 3).

In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress (AITC), whether contesting alone or in alliance, has consistently secured close to 50% of the women's vote. The BJP, contesting independently in 2011 and 2016, received 4% and 10% of the women's votes, respectively. By 2021, the BJP and its allies expanded sharply among women voters, receiving 36% of the votes, pointing to some restructuring of the electoral landscape (Table 4).

Tamil Nadu shows alternating patterns between the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The AIADMK led among women voters in 2016 (46%), but the DMK alliance overtook it in 2021 with 45% compared to the 42% of the AIADMK and its allies (Table 5).

Despite their high participation, women remain a small minority in State legislatures. Over the past three decades, structural barriers such as limited party nominations, competitive electoral dynamics and social and cultural constraints have constrained representation. Yet, their voting patterns increasingly shape party strategies and influence political contests.

## Women's electoral power

The data for the tables were sourced from Lokniti-CSDS



**TABLE 1:** The gender gap in voter turnout in State elections. (+) indicates higher turnout of women compared to men, (-) indicates lower turnout of women

Year	Assam	Kerala	West Bengal	Tamil Nadu
2021	+0.41	+0.09	+0.38	-0.27
2016	+0.34	+2.17	+0.9	+0.17
2011	-1.91	-0.3	+0.23	+0.98
2006	-1.6	-2.09	-1.59	-3.66
2001	-5.49	-3.72	-5.3	-4.47
1996	-2.54	-1.65	-1.94	-4.3
1991	-1.48	-0.31	-1.57	-4.25

**TABLE 2:** Party-wise women's voting trends in Assam Assembly elections (in %)

Year	Mahajot/Congress/ Congress+	NDA/ BJP	AJUDF	Others
2021	41	44	-	15
2016	33	42	13	12
2011	39	10	13	38

**TABLE 3:** Party-wise women's voting trends in Kerala Assembly elections (in %)

Year	UDF	LDF	NDA/BJP	Others
2021	41	45	11	3
2016	42	42	12	4
2011	46	45	5	4

**TABLE 4:** Party-wise women's voting trends in West Bengal Assembly polls (in %)

Year	AITC/ AITC	BJP/ BJP	Sanyukth Mocha/JNC	Left	Others
2021	50	36	10	-	4
2016	47	10	11	25	7
2011	49	4	-	40	7

**TABLE 5:** Party-wise women's voting trends in Tamil Nadu Assembly polls (in %)

Year	DMK+	AIADMK/ ADMK+	BJP	Others
2021	45	42	-	13
2016	35	46	3	16
2011	40	51	2	7

Sanjay Kumar is a Professor and Political Analyst. Vibha Attri is a Research Associate at Lokniti-CSDS

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 1, 1976

## Prosperity brigade and youth service corps to go

Madras, March 31: Both the Prosperity Brigade and the Youth Services corps started by the previous DMK regime in Tamil Nadu are to go. While the Prosperity Brigade will be wound up immediately, the members of the YSC will be discharged on completion of four years of service. The Government found that the Brigade had ceased to be the non-political organisation that it purported to be, the contribution of YSC to improvement of rural economy was "not very satisfactory".

At his weekly press conference to-day, the Governor Mr. K.K. Shah said the Brigade was brought into existence in February 1968 with the objective of developing local leadership and better utilisation of rural manpower. Over the past eight years, it had undertaken small works, which did not involve a high degree of technical skill, with the Government's contribution ranging from 50 per cent for building works and 33-1/3 per cent for other works. "The organisation was expected to be non-political in character. But, in fact, it was not so. Even the enlistment of volunteers at village level had a political bias," he said. The organisational set-up and co-ordination at various levels were "not good".

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 1, 1926

## Royal geographical society

Rugby, March 31: Several prominent British explorers have been awarded medals with the approval of the King by Royal Geographical society.

These include Col. Norton, who has received the Founder's Medal for his leadership of the Mount Everest expedition in 1924 and his ascent to 28,100 feet and Professor Sir Edgewood David for his work on Fanafuti Atoll and his leadership of the first ascent of Mount Erebus and of the party which first visited the South Magnetic Pole.

Other awards and grants are given to Dr. John Ball for his desert surveys in Egypt, to Mr. Frank Debenham for scientific exploration of Antarctica to Afrax, Mr. Gul for his surveys in Central Asia and Mr. Hunza, to Major Kenneth Masen to assist his future exploration of Himalayas, to Dr. Gordon Thompson for his journey on Tibetan and Mongolian borders of China.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Audit queries ignored by Maharashtra departments**

**10,340** The Comptroller and Auditor General of India has flagged "systemic deficiencies" in Maharashtra's governance, identifying ₹891 crore in possible financial irregularities across more than 10,000 audit queries that various departments ignored despite repeated reminders over a decade. PTI

**The percentage surge in Indonesian forest loss in 2025**

**66** percent. Forest loss in Indonesia surged by 66 percent in 2025, hitting its highest rate in eight years as a result of weak environmental protections and an ambitious food and energy self-sufficiency drive, an environmental group said on Tuesday. The archipelago leans heavily on mining and palm plantations to support its \$1.4 trillion economy. REUTERS

**The average monthly mobile data usage per user in India last year**

**31** GB India's average monthly mobile data consumption per user crossed the 31 GB mark in 2025, up from 27.5 GB in 2024, according to a report by telecom gear maker Nokia. India boasts the world's second-largest 5G subscriber base, the second-highest level of 5G data consumption, and the second-largest 5G Fixed Wireless Access user base globally, the report says. PTI

**RBI borrowings availed by Telangana for most of FY25**

**27,730** in ₹ crore. The Telangana government availed a Special Drawing Facility (SDF) of ₹27,730 crore from the RBI for 363 days to meet its financial requirements. According to the 2024-25 annual account, the State also utilised Ways and Means Advances amounting to ₹64,188 crore for 298 days. PTI

**Funds released by the Centre under Jal Jeevan Mission 2.0**

**1,561.53** in ₹ crore. The Jal Shakti ministry has released funds of ₹1,561.53 crore for five States under the Jal Jeevan Mission 2.0 for 2025-26, after signing reform-linked MoUs, and fulfillment of mandatory compliance conditions, an official statement said on Tuesday. PTI

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## On global tensions and India's economy

In an economy that imports more than four-fifths of its crude oil, external shocks transmitted through energy prices, shipping route, and volatile commodity markets can significantly reshape fiscal arithmetic. In this context, India must rebalance toward income-led demand, more resilient revenue bases and greater energy diversification

**ECONOMIC NOTES**

Deepanshu Mohan

Rising geopolitical instability in West Asia is forcing a reassessment of how India's macroeconomic strength is measured.

As of March 2026, this instability has translated into active macroeconomic stress. The rupee has depreciated to a record low of ₹95 per dollar, the Indian basket of crude oil hit \$156.29 per barrel, and the Reserve Bank of India has deployed billions of dollars of foreign exchange reserves to contain volatility. In such conditions, strong quarterly GDP prints capture domestic activity but often overlook vulnerabilities linked to energy imports, shipping routes and fiscal buffers.

Against this backdrop, India enters the post-Budget season with a striking macroeconomic contradiction. Headline indicators remain robust: the State Bank of India expects Q3 FY26 GDP growth of about 8.1 percent, public capital expenditure is near 4 percent of GDP, and fiscal consolidation toward a 4.3 percent deficit by FY27 remains intact. At the same time, external buffers are weakening. Foreign exchange reserves have declined from recent highs to about \$709.76 billion, while foreign portfolio outflows of over \$8 billion following the onset of the conflict have intensified currency pressures.

Yet income dynamics are weaker. Real wages remain subdued, household liabilities have risen to roughly 41 percent of GDP, and private investment continues to lag the state's capex-led expansion.

This divergence reflects a deeper shift in India's fiscal architecture: revenue buoyancy is increasingly driven by transaction-linked taxation while expenditure tilts toward capital formation. In a stable global environment this model can sustain growth, but when energy markets become volatile, its durability depends on whether fiscal revenues, consumption and investment can withstand external commodity shocks.

**Shifts in revenue structure**

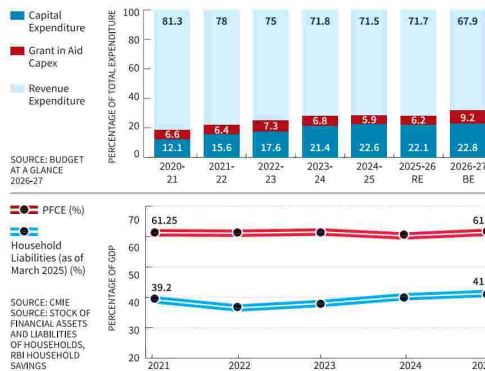
India's revenue structure has been shifting in ways that matter more in a volatile global environment. Revenue receipts have risen from 8.5 percent of GDP in FY16-20 to about 9.1 percent in FY22-FY25 (PA), but the increase reflects recomposition rather than a broadening of income taxation. The Union Budget 2026-27 estimates gross tax revenue at ₹44.04 lakh crore, yet much of the buoyancy now comes from transaction-linked channels. GST collections reached ₹22.8 lakh crore in FY25, while levies on financial and cross-border transactions have also expanded.

Direct taxes typically expand when more workers move into stable paid employment. As a result, revenue increasingly depends on the volume of economic transactions rather than income deepening.

External shocks particularly energy price spikes that raise transport costs and compress household spending can quickly slow transactions. In such conditions, a fiscal model reliant on activity-linked taxation becomes more sensitive to geopolitical disruptions that ripple through consumption, trade and financial markets. This vulnerability has been evident

**Fiscal trends**

India's fiscal stability is tied to capital spending and transaction-based revenues, leaving it vulnerable to energy shocks amid geopolitical tensions



during past shocks. During the pandemic, widening gaps between projected and actual GST revenues forced the Union government to borrow over ₹2.69 lakh crore between 2020 and 2022 to compensate states for revenue shortfalls.

**The effects of oil price surge**

India's fiscal system remains structurally exposed to oil price volatility. The country imports around 85-87 percent of its crude oil, making it directly vulnerable to external energy shocks.

Empirical estimates suggest that a \$10 per barrel rise in crude prices can increase Consumer Price Index inflation by roughly 0.2 percentage points, widen the current account deficit by about \$9-10 billion (around 0.4 percent of GDP) and reduce GDP growth by nearly 0.5 percentage points under partial pass-through conditions. Oil shocks also propagate through the fiscal system: higher energy costs raise fertiliser and LPG subsidy requirements, increase transport and logistics costs, and elevate inflation-linked expenditure.

Recent policy responses illustrate this transmission. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Indian crude basket surged from roughly \$59 per barrel in 2019 to over \$120 in mid-2022.

To contain inflation, the government reduced central excise duties on petrol and diesel by a cumulative ₹13 and ₹16 per litre between November 2021 and May 2022, resulting in an estimated ₹2.2 lakh crore revenue loss. At the same time, energy-linked subsidies expanded, with fertiliser support rising sharply and total energy subsidies touching nearly ₹3.2 lakh crore.

Amid the ongoing conflict in West Asia, estimates by ICRA suggest that if oil prices average around \$100 per barrel, India's current account deficit could widen from about 0.7-0.8 percent to nearly 1 percent of GDP, while government expenditure could rise by as much as ₹3.6 trillion due to higher subsidy and compensation requirements. This underscores how energy shocks translate simultaneously into external imbalances and fiscal stress.

**Impact on households**

Household balance sheets reveal a key channel through which energy volatility transmits into the domestic economy. Private consumption accounts for roughly 61.4 percent of India's GDP, yet household liabilities have risen sharply from about 36-37 percent of GDP in 2022 to over 41 percent by 2025, increasing sensitivity to inflationary shocks and suggesting that consumption is being sustained less by income growth and more through credit expansion. Net financial savings have also become more volatile, falling to around 3-4 percent of GDP in recent quarters before recovering to about 7.6 percent. The exposure is being amplified by the current shock, as disruptions to LPG supply chains – over 60 percent of which depend on imports – have translated into

longer refill cycles and local shortages, raising household energy costs even as leverage remains elevated.

At the same time, India's expenditure strategy has pivoted toward infrastructure-led growth. The Union Budget 2026-27 places effective capital expenditure at ₹17.15 lakh crore.

While such front-loaded investment strengthens long-term productive capacity, it compresses fiscal space for welfare stabilisers. Allocations for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act fell to ₹60,000 crore in 2023-24, 33 percent below the previous year's revised estimate; by December 2022, States had already spent 117 percent of available funds, with ₹8,449 crore in pending liabilities.

In a low-wage environment, imported energy inflation compresses real incomes while debt servicing obligations remain fixed. Rising household leverage therefore becomes a macroeconomic vulnerability, especially when fiscal policy prioritises capital formation over income support.

**Implications for industrial sector**

India's industrial upswing is increasingly concentrated in capital-intensive sectors aligned with public investment. Industrial output rose 7.8 percent in December 2025, with manufacturing expanding 8.1 percent year-on-year and 4.8 percent over April-December. High- and medium-technology industries now account for about 46 percent of manufacturing value added, according to the Economic Survey 2025-26.

By contrast, labour-intensive industries remain weak. Private investment remains cautious despite rising project announcements.

CMEI (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) data shows private firms account for nearly 80 percent of new project announcements, yet only about 9 percent reached completion in 2022-23, suggesting a recovery that expands production capacity more than wage-linked income.

In a volatile global environment, this financial strength has translated into greater risk selectivity rather than broader credit expansion.

The recent LPG crisis induced shortages of commercial cylinders have forced the closure of restaurants, cloud kitchens and small food businesses, with gig worker unions reporting a 50-60 percent decline in food delivery orders. Such shocks disproportionately affect labour-intensive and informal sectors, where incomes are directly tied to daily demand and lack institutional protection, even as capital-intensive sectors remain relatively insulated within the financial system.

As external pressures intensify, they raise a broader question of fiscal optionality: the state's ability to absorb shocks without abandoning consolidation targets. With fiscal space tied to capital expenditure and revenues dependent on economic transactions, geopolitical disruptions can quickly narrow the room for counter-cyclical intervention. In such a context, India must rebalance toward income-led demand, more resilient revenue bases and greater energy diversification, or risk turning external shocks into a recurring source of fiscal stress.

(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. Saksham Raj and Aditi Lazarus contributed to this column.)

**THE GIST**

India's fiscal system remains structurally exposed to oil price volatility. External shocks, particularly energy price spikes raise transport costs and compress household spending.

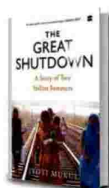
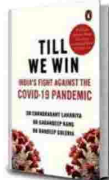
Private consumption accounts for roughly 61.4 percent of India's GDP, yet household liabilities have risen sharply, increasing sensitivity to inflationary shocks. At the same time, India's expenditure strategy has pivoted toward infrastructure-led growth.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY



GETTY IMAGES



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of "stay put"? (D. Arumugam, Salem)

When someone tells you to "stay put", they want you to remain where you are; they don't want you to move around. It's an expression used in informal contexts.

Priyanka told Rahul to stay put in the car while she changed the tyre. (She told Rahul to remain seated in the car.) Because of the trouble in the city, we stayed put in the hotel for three days. (We remained in the hotel for three days. We didn't step outside.)

What is the pronunciation of "entrepreneur"? (R. Devarajan, Chennai)

The first syllable "en" is pronounced like the word "on". The "e" in the second and third syllable is pronounced like the "a" in "china", "about", and "amount". The "eur" in the final syllable "neur" sounds like the "or" in words like "worm" "world". The stress is on the final syllable. The word is pronounced entrepreneur.

Dictionaries define an entrepreneur as someone who starts a business in order to make a profit.

What is the meaning and origin of the expression "Pyrrhic victory"? (Dr. N. L. N. Moorthy, Hyderabad)

First, let's start with the pronunciation. The "y" in the first syllable is like the "i" in words like "sit" and "bit". The "rthic" sounds like the "rick" in words like "brick" and "cricket". The stress is on the first syllable. In the expression "Pyrrhic victory", however, the main stress is on the first syllable of "victory".

King Pyrrhus of Epirus in Greece invaded Italy in 280 B.C. He had plans of conquering the country. During his campaign against the Romans, Pyrrhus won many battles. After defeating the Romans at Aschulum, the King apparently said, "Another such victory and we are undone"; the reason being that he lost many of his soldiers in the battle. Pyrrhus' army became so depleted that he was forced to return to Greece without ever setting foot in Rome.

Though the King won many battles, he ultimately lost the war. So when you refer to something as being a "Pyrrhic victory", it implies that you have suffered so many losses that the victory pales into insignificance.

What is the difference between "glimpse" and "glance"? (A. V. R. Rao, Amalapuram)

When you "glance" at something, you look at it very quickly and then look away. For example, when we get stuck with a bore, every once in a while, we glance at the clock or the watch. We don't keep looking at the clock/watch because we don't want to be rude. We take a quick look (glance) at the watch and turn our attention to the speaker – and pretend to be interested in what he is saying. A glance is intentional; you deliberately look in a particular direction.

Ashok glanced at the headlines while waiting for the bus.

When you catch a "glimpse" of something, you catch a quick sight of it. For example, while you are in the jungle, you may catch a glimpse of a tiger. In other words, you see the tiger very briefly. You may or may not see it completely. In the case of "glimpse", it is the object which appears before our eyes. In the case of "glance", it is the eyes which go to the object.

I caught a glimpse of Kamal in the crowded room. Published in The Hindu on February 22, 2000

Word of the day

**Petulant:** easily irritated or annoyed

**Synonyms:** cranky, fractious, nettlesome

**Usage:** The actor's petulant response drew sharp criticism online.

**Pronunciation:** https://newsth.live/fwk6l

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /petjulant/

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# Looking into the continuing costs of India's COVID-19 policy

Six years since the COVID-19 pandemic, the question that three books collectively pose is not whether India's response succeeded or failed; the evidence on that is substantial. It is whether those who bear the costs of policy failure have been taken seriously enough

Vignesh Karthik K.R.

It was around this time six years ago that Indians were given just four hours' notice before a rigid 21-day, nationwide lockdown to combat the spread of COVID-19. Several countries, including the U.K., New Zealand, Sweden, have since held formal inquiries into their pandemic responses. In India's case, no such inquiry has taken place, but a body of writing has accumulated, something like an unofficial reckoning.

Three books, arriving across five years, are worth reading together: Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya, Gagandeep Kang, and Randeep Guleria's *Till We Win: India's Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Penguin Random House), Jyoti Mukul's *The Great Shutdown: A Story of Two Indian Summers* (HarperCollins), and Jyoti Yadav's *Faith and Fury: COVID-19 Dispatches from India's Hinterland* (Westland). Together, these cover the clinical, the systemic, and the human.

### Logistical failures

The lockdown's most immediate consequence was the disruption of transport. Mukul, a former journalist-turned-policy analyst, argues that the snapping of transport links was not a side effect of the pandemic response, but its most defining feature. The Indian Railways suspended all its daily passenger services with no plan for the millions already in transit. The Shramik Specials, when they finally ran weeks later, charged a fare till political

pressure mounted. People who could not wait walked.

Yadav's reportage follows individual lives over years. Five years in the making, thousands of kilometres across Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it tracks people such as the teenager Jyoti Kumari, who cycled 1,200 kilometres with her injured father (now deceased) during the lockdown. She is still unable to enrol in college.

The same logistical failures that stranded passengers also broke the oxygen supply chain. Mukul documents the second COVID-19 wave with particular precision: beds, ICU capacity, and ventilators all fell between September 2020 and January 2021, when the government declared victory, by between 30% and 46%. The Pressure Swing Adsorption oxygen plants recommended for all major hospitals numbered 38 installed, against a target of 500 when the second wave peaked.

### The science of it

Lahariya, Kang, and Guleria, three medical practitioners at the centre of India's pandemic response, arrived in the thick of events. Their account, published in November 2020, notes the policy's public health logic. Dedicated to ASHA workers and oriented around community health infrastructure, the book keeps the clinic and the field hospital in view.

On the science, the insider account is honest. They narrate the hydroxychloroquine arc, from global excitement to systematic disproof, without defensiveness. Their final call for

Universal Health Coverage and expanded community participation reads differently now than it did in spring 2021. The second wave made every gap the authors identified more visible. What was a call to action became, in retrospect, a forecast.

### Problem of counting

At the centre of the pandemic was a problem of counting. In 2025, the Office of the Registrar General confirmed that India recorded 1.02 crore registered deaths in 2021, a disproportionate 25.9% increase from the previous year. Yadav had been tracing this issue for five years – not through statistics, but through cremation ground registers she coaxed out of a Lucknow municipal staffer, documenting 101 cremations on a day the State claimed only 14 COVID-19 deaths. She also visited villages where families buried their dead in the fields because the neighbourhood feared contagion.

She embeds herself so deeply in individual lives that the numbers arrive as the culmination of a face and a name. There is Kalyani Agrahari, an eight-months pregnant schoolteacher who applied in writing for exemption from panchayat poll duty, was threatened with an FIR, spent 12 hours on duty, and died two days before her third wedding anniversary. Her widower Deepak appears in the book's final pages, training to become a peon because the compensation he was promised never came.

Yadav also writes, with some candour, about being a woman journalist on these

roads; no hotels, no toilets, an episode of harassment she insists on reporting to a sceptical Station House Officer. This is not a personal aside. It is part of a broader argument that ground reporters were neither protected nor counted as frontline workers, and that some 500 of them died doing the work that produced much of what we now know.

The uncounted dead, the uncounted workers, the uncounted journalists – the pattern holds across all three books. Mukul's transport data; Lahariya, Kang, and Guleria's clinical framework; and Yadav's years of follow-up all converge on the same point: the Indian state's capacity to not count what it does not wish to acknowledge.

The pandemic failed to become a poll issue. Yadav notes that people in villages remembered it as divine intervention, not state failure. This muted response is perhaps the most significant finding across all three books, more significant than the oxygen numbers or the excess mortality data now in the public domain.

Six years on, the question these works collectively pose is not whether the pandemic response succeeded or failed; the evidence on that is substantial. It is whether those who bear the costs of policy failure have been taken seriously enough. That question remains open and might not be answered.

(Vignesh Karthik K.R. is a postdoctoral research affiliate of Indian and Indonesian politics at KITLV-Leiden and research affiliate at King's India Institute, King's College London)

## THE DAILY QUIZ

### From medieval calendar quirks to famous media hoaxes, April 1 has inspired centuries of elaborate pranks and cultural curiosities

Prathmesh Kher

#### QUESTION 1:

Which ancient Roman spring festival, celebrated in late March with disguises and mockery, is sometimes proposed as a precursor to April Fools' traditions?

#### QUESTION 2:

In France and several Francophone regions, what name is given to the person tricked on April 1, traditionally marked by secretly attaching a paper fish to their back?

#### QUESTION 3:

Which Renaissance writer recorded early French references to April-1 foolery in his satirical works?

#### QUESTION 4:

In a famous April Fools' radio prank in 1976, which planet was falsely said to align with Pluto and briefly reduce gravity on Earth?

#### QUESTION 5:

Which medieval English poet's work contains one of the earliest debated references to an April-1 style prank?



This 19th-century ticket invites visitors to which famous April Fools' hoax? PUBLIC DOMAIN

#### Questions and answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

- This gentleman, who opposed the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was forced to leave and settled in the village of Neauphle-le-Château near Paris in 1978. Name him. **Ans: Ayatollah Khomeini**
  - This former U.S. intelligence contractor fled to Hong Kong after releasing classified information about global surveillance programs. He was eventually granted asylum in Russia. **Ans: Edward Snowden**
  - This revolutionary and Red Army chief was forced to exile after losing a political struggle in the post-Vladimir Lenin Soviet Union. **Ans: Leon Trotsky**
  - This gentleman was granted asylum by Ecuador but could not leave the UK, and therefore remained in the Ecuadorian embassy in London between 2012 and 2019. Name him and the organization he is best known for. **Ans: Julian Assange, Wikileaks**
  - Identify this high-ranking British spy who was later revealed to be a member of the Cambridge Five, a spy ring that passed information to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. **Ans: Kim Philby**
- Visual: Identify the former Black Panthers activist from the U.S. who received asylum in Cuba. **Ans: Assata Shakur**
- Early birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Sudhir Thapa | Pulkit Sathe | Haridas Pal | Shailbala Kumari

Please send in your answers to [dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in](mailto:dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in)

thehindubusinessline.

WEDNESDAY - APRIL 1, 2026

# Existential crisis

WTO needs to rediscover its *raison d'être*

**T**he recently concluded WTO Ministerial at Cameroon throws up two distinct sets of questions. The proverbial elephant in the room, of course, concerns the organisation's relevance at a time when the rules of the game in global trade have been entirely upended. On this, the meet offers little succour. The second deals with the implications of what actually happened at the latest meet.

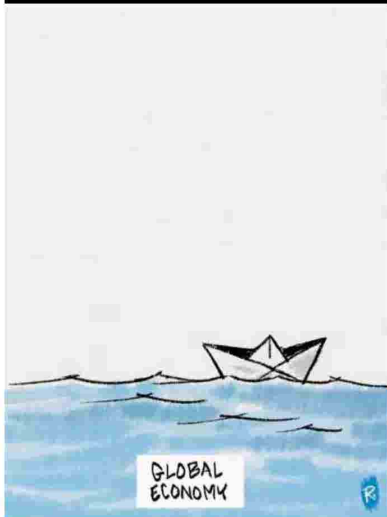
On the latter, there were two interesting developments, where India laudably stood its ground. Along with Brazil and Turkey, India opposed the extension of the 28-year moratorium on tariffs on e-commerce goods. Not surprisingly, the US is incensed. India needs to reserve the sovereign right to tax digital transactions, even as it offers concessions from time to time. The digital economy accounted for about 11 per cent of India's GDP for FY23, with artificial intelligence set to raise this share. Such a stand aligns with past policy. The government removed tax-free benefits for IT industry in 2009 when it was seen capable of thriving without support. Today, when Big Tech wants to prise open India's market, it must be willing to pay for it. It is heartening that India has not mixed up its position with its trade talks with the US.

India also rightly resisted the China-backed Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) proposal, arguing that plurilateral deals have no place in a multilateral body. Here, a select group of nations agree on a proposal and try to get the WTO's approval. However, what has not been satisfactorily resolved is the moratorium on certain TRIPS-related complaints. Thanks to this moratorium, India has been able to implement the Patents Act by disregarding minor innovations or 'evergreening', assuring access to affordable medicines and other products for its people. It is also to be noted here that investment facilitation pacts have always been controversial. The Western demand for transparency in such deals could clash with a developing country's policy space. In fact, it is possible that the erstwhile PNs would have perhaps run foul of such an investment pact. It is, however, another matter that IFD was opposed on grounds of process.

Finally, WTO has strayed away from the 1994 Marrakesh script of 'trade for development' and removal of poverty. The principle of consensus between big and small, the Global North and South, has been jettisoned. The US has run it down. What really showed up the toothlessness of the WTO was its inability to resist the Liberation Day tariffs — which tear apart the very basis of fair trade, by doing away with uniform tariffs for a single product. There are few indications so far of China playing the game fairly either, as it seeks to push its own interests. There is also the problem of FTA agreements running foul of WTO principles; India too has allowed such inconsistencies to creep in. With the emergence of new alliances and supply chains, WTO truly needs a 'third force' to stay alive.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



# What happens when CAD rises

**TIME LAG.** Speed of adjustment to normal levels can vary across countries. In India's case, this adjustment has been slow



SAUMITRA BHADURI  
SHUBHAM ANAND

**T**he escalation of conflict in the Middle East has pushed global oil prices higher, exposing a familiar fault line in India's external position. Despite robust domestic growth, the rupee has slipped to record lows and equity markets have turned volatile. Why has strong growth and contained inflation not insulated the currency? In the near term, oil and risk premia dominate pricing when patient capital is scarce.

This is a flow story overwhelming a stock story: war-driven energy shocks and a stronger dollar have collided with thinner, more flighty capital inflows — pressures that overwhelm fundamentals in the short run and take years to adjust. Let's understand this better.

### THE DISCONNECT

On paper, India's macro story is reassuring: growth projected at 7.4 per cent this fiscal, inflation relatively contained, reserves near \$701.4 billion, a current account deficit (CAD) of about 0.8 per cent of GDP, and resilient services exports and remittances. Yet the rupee fell by more than 5 per cent last year and has hovered near recent lows. The proximate drivers are clear. As a large oil importer, India's dollar demand jumps when crude spikes, widening the trade deficit and squeezing corporate margins; at the same time, a stronger dollar tightens global financial conditions.

Ordinarily, a modest CAD is easily financed, but in 2025 foreign portfolio investors pulled back and net FDI softened as profit repatriation and outbound investment rose. That shift changed the market's risk calculus. With less patient capital, the rupee became more sensitive to shifts in risk appetite. As oil buyers needed more dollars just as investors sought safety, the rupee took a hit from both sides.

### RUPEE DYNAMICS

Why couldn't fundamentals defend it quickly? In the short run, risk and oil premia price the currency. In the long run, fair value anchors it.

On that front, we tried understanding the rupee dynamics, and purchasing power parity (PPP) offers one such long-run compass. It indicates where the

## Speed of adjustment towards PPP equilibrium of different countries

Country	Months					
	12	24	36	48	60	72
Brazil	0.2	0.38	0.65	0.98	1.24	1.46
Canada	0.16	0.31	0.48	0.69	0.91	1.09
Chile	0.19	0.38	0.69	0.96	1.23	1.39
China	0.15	0.29	0.36	0.43	0.56	0.67
Colombia	0.18	0.32	0.54	0.84	1.13	1.34
Czech Republic	0.14	0.22	0.31	0.46	0.58	0.72
Denmark	0.23	0.47	0.62	0.83	1.08	1.28
France	0.2	0.44	0.64	0.85	1.09	1.28
Hungary	0.18	0.3	0.4	0.59	0.77	0.96
Iceland	0.47	0.87	1.07	1.3	1.45	1.42
<b>India</b>	<b>0.13</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>0.54</b>
Indonesia	0.48	0.69	0.83	1.08	1.15	1.2
Japan	0.05	0.21	0.35	0.35	0.33	0.42
Mexico	0.36	0.51	0.6	0.72	0.82	0.92
Norway	0.11	0.23	0.34	0.55	0.77	0.99
Russia	0.31	0.54	0.66	0.72	0.75	0.9
South Africa	0.22	0.48	0.66	0.8	0.9	0.9
Sweden	0.15	0.32	0.43	0.6	0.8	0.94
Switzerland	0.28	0.55	0.71	0.94	1.13	1.21
United Kingdom	0.18	0.31	0.37	0.49	0.58	0.51

Source: Compiled by authors

currency tends to settle once shocks fade. From that perspective, our pre-shock estimate placed the rupee roughly 18 per cent below PPP fair value (also referred to as "equilibrium" in economic literature).

We computed equilibrium using monthly real exchange rate (RER) data for more than three decades, following PPP theory that RER exhibit a mean-reverting behaviour.

The key nuance is speed: India's adjustment towards PPP is slow (as shown in the Figure), with a half-life of more than five years, meaning only half of any misalignment typically closes over that horizon.

For instance, in one year, only 13 per cent of the adjustment towards equilibrium is completed; in three years, only 25 per cent; and in five years, just 44 per cent.

Several emerging peers, such as Brazil

or Indonesia, appear to adjust faster.

Also, we observed that these adjustments are also uneven: when the currency is far from equilibrium, corrections often arrive abruptly during risk-off episodes and outflows. But simply, even when fundamentals are sound, the path back to equilibrium is long and bumpy — too slow to offset a sudden oil-and-dollar shock. This explains the current dynamics.

### THE TRANSMISSION

Because India imports most of its crude, pricier oil raises the import bill before quantities adjust, widening the CAD and pressuring the rupee. Some of the hit is cushioned by the service surplus and remittances, as well as heading and pricing policies that delay pass-through. Over time, higher prices can curb demand, induce efficiency and alter the terms of trade, gradually narrowing the gap.

Multi-country evidence suggests that for oil importers, a 1 per cent real oil price shock — that is, a 1 per cent increase in the oil price after adjusting for inflation using the US consumer price index — can worsen the current account balance (CAB) by up to 0.08

percentage points (pp) of GDP over five years, while improving oil exporters' balances by up to 0.9pp in emerging markets (World Bank, 2023). For India, a sustained 10 per cent real increase in oil could translate into roughly 0.8pp of deterioration in the CAB over five years, and a sustained 20 per cent increase about 1.6pp; a persistent 5 per cent increase could imply around 0.4pp. These are cumulative pressures — buffers mute them, but do not eliminate them. Unless capital inflows deepen and diversify, these current-account stresses transmit into the currency during shock periods.

### PATH FORWARD

The rupee's recent struggles underscore a deeper reality: its trajectory is shaped not only by fundamentals, but by sensitivity to external shocks and capital composition. Durable currency strength requires more than growth and low inflation; it requires resilience in the flow dynamics that matter most during stress.

Near-term shock absorbers include calibrated fuel-tax adjustments to smooth pass-through while protecting fiscal anchors, deploying FX reserves opportunistically to counter disorderly moves rather than to target levels, and strengthening risk management for oil imports through diversified sourcing and prudent hedging.

Medium-term insulation means attracting and retaining higher-quality, "stickier" capital, especially greenfield FDI — by maintaining a stable, predictable policy regime, depending on local-currency financing markets, and reducing policy uncertainty that widens risk premia.

Long-term competitiveness depends on sustainably strengthening the external position by raising export complexity and scale in manufacturing, while accelerating energy security — diversifying crude sources, expanding strategic reserves, speeding the renewables transition, and improving energy efficiency.

Every crisis carries a lesson. This one should prompt policymakers to treat energy security and capital quality as central pillars of external stability, not peripheral goals. By turning a recurring oil-and-flows vulnerability into a managed risk — through better shock absorbers, deeper and steadier inflows, and higher export competitiveness, India can safeguard the currency through well-calibrated policy responses.

Bhaduri is Professor, and Anand is PhD scholar, Madras School of Economics, Chennai

# A holistic approach needed on menstrual leave

SC has refrained from issuing a blanket directive. Policymakers should balance social protection with economic opportunity

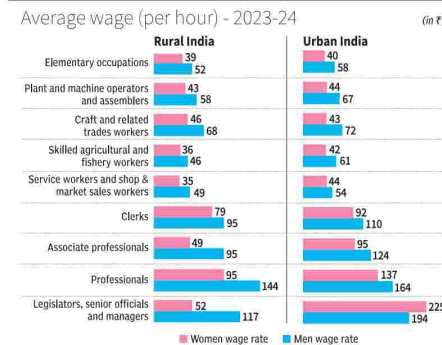
Dona Ghosh  
Chandril Bhattacharyya

**O**n March 13, 2026, the Supreme Court declined to consider a petition that sought a nationwide policy on menstrual leave for women students and employees. The court noted that the demand was rooted in genuine concern for women's health. However, it also expressed caution. Judges observed that making such leave compulsory could reinforce gender stereotypes. It could also affect hiring decisions and limit job opportunities for women.

The ruling has sparked debate across legal and social circles. Supporters of menstrual leave say menstruation is a natural biological process. For many women, it involves pain, fatigue and emotional stress. These challenges can be severe, especially for those in physically demanding jobs.

Women working long shifts or without flexible schedules may find it hard to cope. In such cases, the absence of supportive policies can result in lost income or declining health. Advocates argue that recognising menstrual health at the workplace is a matter of dignity and fairness.

Economists and industry groups have raised concerns about the economic impact of mandatory leave. They point



Note: Occupation Division as per NCO 2015 and based on the age group 15 years & above. Source: National Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

out that paid menstrual leave could increase labour costs for firms. This is particularly important for small and medium enterprises that operate on thin profit margins. Employers may try to adjust by offering lower starting wages to women. Some may reduce hiring or rely more on short-term contracts.

In addition, entry-level wages may be the first to see such adjustments. In highly competitive sectors, this could slow career progression for women. Without strong anti-discrimination rules, the risk of widening pay gaps may increase. Wage data also reveal existing inequalities. Women's earnings are

generally lower than men's across many occupations. The gap is more visible in rural areas, where women are often concentrated in informal and low-paying work. Urban labour markets offer better pay, but disparities still remain. These patterns show that the labour market is already discriminating women in terms of wage (see Chart).

Any new policy, even with good intentions, must consider these realities. The Supreme Court's approach reflects a cautious middle path. Instead of issuing a blanket directive, it has suggested that governments and stakeholders work together to find practical solutions. Some States and private companies have already introduced voluntary menstrual leave policies. Others are experimenting with flexible hours and wellness support.

These initiatives show that change is possible without imposing uniform rules. As India seeks to increase women's participation in the workforce, the debate on menstrual leave highlights a deeper challenge. Policymakers must balance social protection with economic opportunity. Measures that protect health should not weaken employment prospects.

Ghosh is Assistant Professor of Economics, Thiagarajar School of Management, and Bhattacharyya is Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research Bhopal. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to [bleditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bleditor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

### Rupee's trajectory fragile

Apropos, 'Rupee doing fine compared to other emerging economies' FM (March 31). The rupee continues to face persistent depreciatory pressures amid escalating geopolitical tensions in West Asia, elevated crude oil prices, and sustained capital outflows. The RBI's recent imposition of a \$100-million cap on banks' net open foreign exchange positions triggered a sharp, liquidity-driven appreciation. However, such regulatory-induced corrections lack durability. Absent substantive improvements in macroeconomic fundamentals, external balances, and capital

inflows, the rupee's trajectory remains inherently fragile.

**N Sadhasiva Reddy**  
Bengaluru

### Supply chain hindrances

"The global economy's many chokepoints" (March 31) is a timely reminder about the disastrous supply chain disruptions. The impact of the closure of Strait of Hormuz is reverberating across world economies and the consequences could last long. The next big chokepoint could be the rare earths, which are vital for tech-led global economic growth. The control and processing of rare

earths are largely concentrated in the hands of China. The world must wake up quickly and strive to build resilient supply chains through cooperation.

**Kosaraju Chandramouli**  
Hyderabad

### RBI's bag of tricks

Apropos 'Bond Blues' (March 31), the RBI faces a tough remit of containing yields without diluting its inflation-fighting credibility. Deft open market operations like Operation Twist of 2019 — long term interest management — could smooth the yield curve. Liquidity management can be through tested

devices as variable rate repos/reverse repo to arrest abrupt spikes. Clear forward guidance will be critical to anchor market expectations. If pressures intensify, limited deviation in auction or green-shoe options in support may be used to stabilise demand.

**R Narayanan**  
Navi Mumbai

### Economic vandalism

The relentless commodification of our last pristine landscapes is nothing short of ecological vandalism. We treat bio-corridors like theme parks ignoring that human intrusion disrupts critical carbon

sequestration. For instance the foothills in the Himalayas have surged by 40 per cent in a decade. The result is a trail of plastic and eroding glaciers.

When pleasure activities are permitted in eco-sensitive zones we trade millennia of biodiversity for transient revenue. Statistics suggest that nearly 75 per cent of terrestrial environments are severely altered by human activity. We must designate biological hotspots as absolute no-go zones. Governments must strictly enforce inviolable zones and cancel destructive permits.  
**Vijaykumar HK**  
Raichur, Karnataka

# Domestic safeguards

Trade remedies, a vital tool to protect Indian firms

Rajiv Arora

In an era defined by escalating trade wars, supply chain nationalism, and the strategic use of tariffs as geopolitical instruments, one would expect India to lean more heavily on trade remedies (TRs). These legitimate, WTO-sanctioned tools are available to governments to protect domestic industries from unfair or disruptive import practices.



TRADE REMEDIES. Tough calls GETTY IMAGES

As global trade patterns shift sharply, domestic industry needs to be protected through anti-dumping duties, countervailing measures, and other safeguards.

Yet, the Finance Ministry's recent rejection of nearly 85 per cent of positive recommendations from the Commerce Ministry for the imposition of TRs is counter-intuitive. Is this simply an unusual coincidence, or is it the first sign of a policy shift toward discouraging the use of TRs?

India has long been a major user of trade remedies, primarily anti-dumping (AD) and safeguard measures. Globally too, trade remedies have been a preferred instrument, despite a chequered history shaped by techno-legal complexities and public interest concerns.

India's application of trade remedies has been notably rule-bound and restrained, often limited to the quantum necessary to mitigate injury and, in many cases, set below the WTO-permitted ceiling of fully offsetting dumping or subsidy.

### WTO COMPLIANT

WTO rules allow a country to impose anti-dumping duties up to the full margin of dumping, which is the gap between the export price and the normal value in the exporting country. However, the Lesser Duty Rules (LDR) cap the duty at the level sufficient only to remove injury to the domestic industry.

While the LDR no doubt balances stakeholder interests, the downside is that it may fail to deter repeat dumping, thereby contributing to recurring trade remedy petitions. Until 2020, the Finance Ministry rejected fewer than 1 per cent of DGTR's recommendations.

As globalisation deepened, the tensions within value chains intensified, especially where trade remedies were repeatedly used at specific stages. Anti-dumping measures have often drawn criticism for protectionist overreach and for distorting

supply chains, particularly for MSMEs, even when such measures are justified under WTO rules. The Covid-19 crisis amplified this tension, with supply-chain continuity often taking precedence over industry protection. It was in this context that the Finance Ministry rejected a high number of DGTR recommendations in 2020.

But since January 2026, 16 cases, or about 85 per cent of the total, have been rejected, with no clear correlation with either public interest or industry type. This raises the possibility that the Finance Ministry may have attributed the injury in these cases to factors other than dumping.

If that is indeed the underlying rationale, India may be better served by an institutional mechanism to examine such divergences more transparently. An inter-ministerial standing board, akin to the safeguard-action framework, could be constituted to review DGTR recommendations before a final decision is taken by the Finance Ministry.

Likewise, a structured and transparent public-interest inquiry, on the lines of the European Union model, could help assess public-interest concerns arising from anti-dumping recommendations. Such a framework would improve transparency, preserve institutional balance, and sustain confidence in trade remedies as a legitimate policy tool.

Trade remedies are carefully negotiated instruments of the multilateral trading system, designed precisely for the kind of disrupted global trade environment India now faces. They should not be allowed to atrophy through unexplained rejections at an unprecedented rate, especially in an exceptionally volatile and uncertain global environment.

The writer is former Additional Secretary, Ministry of Commerce

# For a permanent 'stabilisation fund'

CRISIS CONTROL. It should be institutionalised by statute, with States as stakeholders – and not just a response to crises



S ADIKESAVAN

The creation of an Economic Stabilisation Fund by the Finance Ministry signals the need for institutional mechanisms to respond to shocks. As of now, the Fund's creation appears to be a response to recent geopolitical and economic disruptions. While presenting the Supplementary Demands for Grants, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman remarked: "In an era marked by heightened global uncertainty, India must equip itself with dedicated institutional buffers to safeguard economic stability. The Economic Stabilisation Fund is envisioned as a forward-looking instrument to ensure that unforeseen shocks do not derail our growth trajectory."

Globally, there are few precedents for such a fund. While several advanced economies have established large sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), these are not directly comparable, as SWFs are typically designed for long-term asset management rather than short-term macroeconomic stabilisation.

### DEALING WITH CRISES

In recent decades, governments worldwide have relied predominantly on fiscal measures to counter economic disruptions.

The global financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic are instructive examples. In both instances, expansionary fiscal policies — manifested through increased public spending and higher deficits — proved effective in cushioning economic downturns and supporting recovery.

If the ongoing conflict in West Asia worsens, India may be compelled to expand its fiscal deficit. This raises an important question: can we not structure and formalise such responses to ensure both effectiveness and sustainability? A critical distinction must be noted here. Neither during the 2008 crisis nor



TRANSPARENCY. The Fund's governance must be overseen by an independent group insulated from political considerations GETTY IMAGES

the Covid-19 pandemic did governments resort to outright monetary expansion in the form of large-scale money printing as a primary tool. Instead, deficit financing was largely achieved through increased borrowing. In India's case, this borrowing has been predominantly in domestic currency, thereby insulating the economy from exchange rate risks.

During the pandemic, fiscal deficits rose to over 9 per cent of GDP without triggering any destabilising consequence. It has tapered now to about 4.5 per cent. This suggests that, under certain conditions, higher deficits can be managed without undermining stability.

Therefore, the key challenge lies in

**The key challenge lies in designing the Fund in a manner that allows it to function as a reliable, flexible, transparent and a longish buffer against future shocks**

designing the Fund in a manner that allows it to function as a reliable, flexible, transparent and a longish buffer against future shocks.

### FIVE STEPS

Five broad steps could help anchor this initiative within India's long-term economic strategy.

First, there must be a clear legislative framework. The objectives, scope, and governance structure of the Fund should be articulated through Parliament, even if incorporated within the Finance Bill — similar to the statutory basis provided to the Monetary Policy Committee. At the same time, the framework must retain sufficient flexibility to address unforeseen contingencies. Given the nature of crises, the governance of the fund should have the authority to deploy funds swiftly, even without prior parliamentary approval in emergency situations. The Fund should not come under the purview of the CAG/CVC/CBI in the normal course.

Second, the Fund should be supported by regular annual allocations from the Union Budget, even in the

absence of an external trigger. Though these contributions are financed through borrowing, the corpus must grow steadily over time. A clearly defined target — say, ₹5 lakh crore, equivalent to roughly 1.5 per cent of GDP (half of the FRBM target) — would signal policy commitment.

Third, States should be encouraged to participate. Contributions from States could be linked to defined "drawing rights", enabling them to access resources in times of need. A structured mechanism — akin to Special Drawing Rights — could be devised, with provisions for additional support to strategically important or vulnerable regions such as the North-East and Union Territories like Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh (not linked to their contributions).

Fourth, the governance of the Fund must be insulated from day-to-day political considerations. An independent board of trustees, comprising domain experts, could oversee its management. Transparency should be ensured through the publication of an annual report detailing contributions, investments, and utilisation, to be tabled in Parliament. The fund may be subject to review by Parliamentary Committees.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that, in practice, the Union Government will retain significant influence over the Fund's deployment. This may not be inevitable but also desirable, particularly in responding to national-level crises.

Fifth, complementary mechanisms must be developed to address State-specific contingencies. Within the GST framework, States could be granted separately (through GST amendments) the authority to levy temporary, purpose-specific cesses — subject to clear timelines and safeguards to be levied within the State. The example of Kerala's flood cess in 2018 offers a workable template.

At a time when global uncertainties are becoming the norm rather than the exception, building institutional resilience is no longer optional — it is imperative.

The writer is a commentator on banking and finance

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 1, 2006

#### STPI units eligible for IT sops

The Finance Ministry has said that Software Technology Park of India (STPI) units should not be denied tax exemption under Section 80 of the income tax law merely on the grounds that approval to such units have been granted by the directors of the STPIs and that such parks have not been approved by the Central Government.

#### Videocon-GAIL group bags Oman contract

Only days after making public its acquisition bid for Daewoo Electronics of South Korea, Indian consumer durables major Videocon Industries Ltd has gone prospecting for oil in Oman. The company informed the stock exchanges on Friday that a consortium that includes GAIL (India), BPCL, HPCL and Oiles of Australia had been awarded Block 56 in Oman for exploration and further development.

#### Norms eased for unlisted cos raising money from abroad

The Government has eased the domestic listing rule for unlisted companies that raised money from overseas markets through foreign currency convertible bonds (FCCBs). American depository receipts/global depository receipts (GDRs) issued in terms of guidelines of May 1998 and are not making profit.

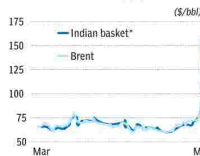
## STATISTALK.

Compiled Dhruval Ganesakaran | Graphic: Visveswaran V

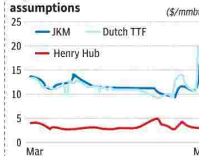
### Energy shock from West Asia puts India's FY27 Budget under strain

The West Asia conflict has triggered a sharp surge in crude and gas prices, significantly complicating India's fiscal calculations for FY27, an ICRA report says. With Brent and the Indian crude basket rising steeply, and LNG prices nearly doubling, subsidy burdens for Fertilizer and LPG are set to overshoot Budget allocations. ICRA estimates that the Fertilizer subsidy alone could exceed the Budget by ₹400 billion. Elevated crude prices may also force excise duty cuts, risking significant revenue losses. Meanwhile, tax and dividend inflows from petroleum companies could weaken as refining margins shrink. Key facts.

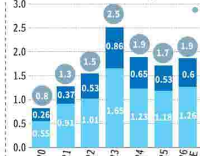
#### Crude oil prices double in March 2026 on West Asia supply shock



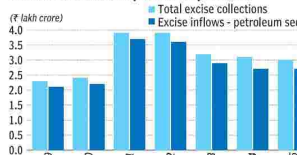
#### Gas prices mirror crude volatility, together threaten India's fiscal assumptions



#### Annual trends in Fertilizer subsidy



#### Gol's aggregate excise duty collections and excise inflows on crude and petroleum products

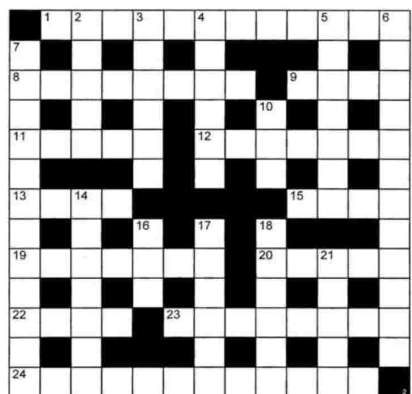


#### Corporate tax collections from the petroleum sector



\*The Indian basket of Crude Oil represents a derived basket comprising of Sour grade (Oman & Dubai average) and Sweet grade (Brent Dated) of Crude oil processed in Indian refineries. In the ratio of 78.71 : 21.29. This does not reflect the average price of India's crude oil imports. JKM: Japan Korea Marker; Source: CME, ICRA Research

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2648



### EASY

- ACROSS**
- One working in association with another (12)
  - Coping with (8)
  - Record (4)
  - That in which one excels (5)
  - Lamp-case (7)
  - Ultimate (4)
  - Attar (4)
  - Polish by rubbing (7)
  - Rotate into coincidence with another plane (5)
  - Superficial extent (4)
  - Satisfy as to truth or error (8)
  - A sect (12)
- DOWN**
- Proprietor (5)
  - Lay lazily about (6)
  - Act in a clumsy manner (6)
  - Three-pronged spear (7)
  - Examines with view to military operation (12)
  - Shove-ha-penny (12)
  - Unit number (3)
  - Operating doctor (7)
  - Establish, drive in, settle (3)
  - Having been unseated (6)
  - Hedge plant (6)
  - Form of lotto (5)

### NOT SO EASY

- ACROSS**
- He helps the enemy to local bar, or puts him out (12)
  - Dealing with the cards one is dealt on the heather (8)
  - Record is concealed within it (4)
  - It is one's strength to play it loudly (5)
  - The light case at the top of a dome (7)
  - Be enduring as a shoemaker's model (4)
  - Rose essence to be taken back and forth (4)
  - To polish, rub and endlessly shine it (7)
  - Rotate into another plane when some grab attention (5)
  - Extent to which some square arrangement is put (4)
  - Satisfy one it's true no nice VC is handed out (8)
  - How many pounds a note represents to a religious sect (12)
- DOWN**
- Captain of warship now re-assigned (5)
  - Lazed around with the Spanish doll (6)
  - Make a clumsy mistake giving a bribe to the French (6)
  - Weapon I'd found in a river (7)
  - Makes preliminary examination in Centre, soon dismantled (12)
  - 'Make' the cards the directors use for game (12)
  - A singular turn-up in the North (3)
  - He may administer cuts while one's out (7)
  - An awkward situation one can mend (3)
  - Is off one's horse and on the canvas? (6)
  - Quietly bolt it to the hedge (6)
  - Game with cards and no big shuffle (5)

## SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2647

**ACROSS** 1. Ballot 8. Enrol 9. Conform 11. Tangible 12. Jetty 15. Farm 16. Wax 17. Aloe 19. First 21. Quandy 24. Yatagan 25. Annul 26. Dredge  
**DOWN** 2. Adobe 3. Lifetime 4. Tort 5. Wedge 6. Grab 7. Blue 10. Mandatory 12. Jiff 13. Navigate 14. Beat 18. Adult 20. Slang 21. Quay 22. Aunt 23.Yard

OUR VIEW



# Insolvency code tweaks open up a useful avenue

India's bankruptcy law is making space for creditor-supervised resolutions without a shift in control of insolvent companies. This is the most welcome of various changes being enacted

India is amending its Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). The revised law will include a new provision for corporate revival under the incumbent management but supervised by its financial creditors, authorize the government to frame rules for group and overseas insolvencies subject to some conditions, limit the arbitrary power of liquidators and grant creditors greater say in cases of liquidation. It also aims to tie up loose ends that were being used to subvert conservation of the value of an insolvent firm's assets.

The highlight of this exercise is the novel path it lays out for cases where a company defaults on debt for reasons unrelated to managerial incompetence or ill-intent. Management control need not be taken by a panel of creditors, as with a regular IBC process, if those in charge (and clued in) work out a revival plan with lenders. In the US, companies can file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy to get a court order that holds off debt servicing for a specified period, during which they must turn the business around with or without the same managers. India's IBC has a provision for voluntary bankruptcy filing, but it has not quite worked. The new Creditor Initiated Insolvency Resolution Process (CIIRP) gives promoters a chance to fix things under the supervision of creditors without first having to go through any court proceedings. This is welcome. However, the government retains the right to notify classes of debtors and creditors who would be eligible for CIIRP. Barring some creditor classes could stop firms from rigging their debt in favour of friendly lenders, whose votes count in decisions on how to resolve insolvency—via the harsh old process or softer new path. But why restrict the scope of debtors who qualify for CIIRP? It could have been left to

qualified lenders to decide if a debtor is fit for CIIRP or not. For timeline clarity, the amended IBC will clearly identify an initial application—not, say, the last of many—as the starting point; this matters for defining the lookback period of a case, the span within which the debtor's actions can be put to scrutiny. It is puzzling, though, why the law has still not made space for a Swiss Challenge, which would have let fresh entities join the bidding process for an asset with higher bids that existing bidders could match. Restricting bids for an entire company to qualified bidders is justified, as lenders might not want an asset stripper to enter the fray, but why not let asset values be settled in a wide open field to maximize recovery in case of liquidation?

The IBC Amendment Bill passed by the Lok Sabha on Monday bears the imprint of a select committee to which it was referred last year. The Centre has accepted all the tweaks suggested by the panel, which formulated them on the basis of wider consultations with experts. It received 30 memoranda of expert opinion, an impressive seven of them from its own members. On group insolvency, the committee went along with the Bill's restriction of the IBC to voluntary arrangements among firms under common control, with binding rules expected to crystallize later from case law and resolution experience. On cross-border mergers, it amended the government's open-ended latitude to frame rules by specifying areas for rule-making and defining a "corporate debtor" for IBC purposes as an entity incorporated with limited liability, whether in India or abroad. The panel also set a time limit for appellate decisions on insolvency cases. All considered, the select committee did a commendable job.

LEENA SRIVASTAVA



is an independent expert on climate change and clean energy.

The successful negotiation of the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change was made possible by a key compromise on country-wise commitments. These would no longer be determined in a top-down manner based on what would be needed to cap global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at safe levels (the Kyoto protocol approach), but instead through a bottom-up approach by countries themselves in accordance with their national development priorities—or nationally determined contributions (NDCs). This key difference recognized the diverse development status of countries, their need for economic growth and varied capacity to invest in a climate transition. At the same time, the pact recognized that a bottom-up approach could result in less-than-adequate climate commitments. It therefore laid down processes for a global stocktake every five years, with the expectation that countries would increase their ambition on climate action as technologies matured and they ascended their own learning curves.

So, how has India's national status changed and where are we in terms of climate action drivers and opportunities? Around the time that the Paris Agreement was signed, India was the seventh-largest economy in the world. We are now about to become the fourth largest, with a robust GDP growth rate expected even in 2026-27. While we have surpassed our non-fossil energy capacity commitment, the share of non-fossil energy in our total primary energy supply mix grew from 4.25% in 2014-15 to just 4.85% in 2023-24 (Niti Aayog data). This share may have grown since, but fossil energy remains the vast bulk. In other words, we have not made any real difference towards a transition to clean energy.

A narrow lens on electricity supply reveals that our share of non-fossil installed capacity increased from 30% to 50% over the last 10 years. Its contribution to actual generation increased from 20% to 30%, reflecting the difficulties of making use of renewable power. The increase in non-fossil capacity has gone mostly towards meeting incremental demand growth. Conversely, India's coal thermal electricity capacity has also increased to fill demand-supply gaps.

In the 10 years since the Paris Agreement, not only has India's oil demand surged, but

the country's import dependency has also gone up to nearly 90%. Our dependency on imports of liquefied natural gas is more than 50%. The vulnerability became starkly clear after Western sanctions were imposed on Russia in 2022, and now with the US-Israel war on Iran. Paradoxically, India's coal production and consumption too have increased by nearly 66% and 50%, respectively, in this period.

India's cabinet recently approved new NDCs under the Paris framework going up to 2035. These include a reduction in the emissions intensity of India's GDP by 47% from the 2005 base level, 2 percentage points more than the 45% target set earlier for 2030; achieving 60% cumulative electric power installed capacity from non-fossil fuel energy sources by 2035, up from 50% by 2030; and creating a carbon sink of 3.5-4.0 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent through forest and tree cover by 2035.

Prima facie, this new set of commitments seems to step up our ambitions. But a large

part of the reduction in emissions intensity achieved so far has come from the denominator effect—growth in GDP. Our GHG emissions on the whole have only increased with greater fossil energy consumption. A coarse evaluation would suggest that the government expects a further increase in India's net emissions—an anticipated 50% increase in GDP between 2030 and 2035 translates to a more than 43% increase in emissions to arrive at a 20% decrease from the 2005 baseline in emissions intensity, given our current scenario.

As far as non-fossil fuel-based electricity generation capacity is concerned, India's minister of state for new and renewable energy Shripad Yesso Naik had said in a written reply to the Lok Sabha in November 2024 that the percentage of clean sources of energy in our total installed capacity is likely to be 64.4% by 2029-30. If that is indeed the case, a global commitment under the Paris pact of just 60% by 2035 would be alarming.

Apart from a lack of ambition in the context of a looming climate catastrophe that's almost upon the world, with India being particularly vulnerable, the country's latest commitments also seem oblivious to the myriad existential challenges that large swathes of the Indian population face. These range from vulnerabilities arising from high levels of dependence on energy imported from volatile regions of the world, the unbreathable air quality in most if not all urban areas for most of the year and the heat extremes we suffer on account of both concrete-heavy urbanization and already observed climate changes to the threat of expensive energy coupled with water scarcity.

India's approach to defining its NDCs continues to be conservative at best. These are modest targets that can confidently be met in a business-as-usual manner, rather than stretch targets that carry a negligible risk of being under-achieved but could provide much-needed global responsibility and leadership. At a time when governments in some developed countries are stepping back from their earlier commitments under the Paris Agreement, India, as the world's third largest GHG emitter, could still lead the global vacuum and become a stronger magnet for climate investments.

MY VIEW | ECO SQUARE

# India's latest climate commitments: Are they for real?



**JUST A THOUGHT**

The worry today is not just about immediate policy uncertainty but an entire change in the US's economic philosophy. [It's] not just policy uncertainty, so to speak, but structural uncertainty.

**RAGHURAM RAJAN**

THEIR VIEW

# The dollar's supremacy has been supported by a war that isn't over

The US currency has strengthened but multiple scenarios could unfold that alter current dynamics



**DEEP MUKHERJEE** is a risk management and AI consultant, and a member of the visiting faculty, IIM Ahmedabad and IIM Calcutta.

The dollar has been winning against gold. Since the start of the Iran war on 28 February, the dollar has strengthened against most major currencies. In an earlier op-ed in Mint on 9 March ([bit.ly/43F9R9x](#)), I delved into the anomalous trend of the dollar strengthening by 1.5% and gold weakening by 1%. Since then, the dollar index has gained a further 1.1% while gold has fallen by a further 15%.

Given the competing narratives on the war's trajectory, it is difficult to fathom how the scales will eventually tilt. One may guess that America's 'Ashvamedha' run has not gone by plan; *The Economist's* latest cover story is titled 'Advantage Iran'. However, if one undertakes a dispassionate analysis of the direction of currency and bullion markets, a different story emerges.

The strengthening dollar not only reaffirms its status as a safe-haven currency during turmoil, but suggests its privileges as a reserve currency are not weakening. Both of these would not have been possible if America's military and strategic dominance had materially reduced. But there are tactical reasons as well for the dollar's strength.

*Safe haven or one-eyed ruler among the blind?* The currencies of almost all G-20 countries (the largest 20 global economies) have weakened against the dollar in March. The currencies of India, Mexico and South Korea weak-

ened by more than 4%, while those of Australia, Eurozone, the UK, Japan and South Africa fell between 2% and 3.5%. The least weakening was observed in the currencies of Saudi Arabia and China, as both are more or less pegged to the dollar (even if the former technically runs a hard peg and the latter a managed float).

With around 95% of the world's crude oil and natural gas priced in dollars, higher hydrocarbon prices increase global demand for the US currency. This was the direct reason for the dollar's strength. The associated effects of it include a rise in inflation across most countries.

Local factors had a role too. Fiscal deterioration in emerging economies such as India and South Africa further weighed their currencies down. While the energy price shock will seep into the US economy too, the US is a large oil producer, so its economic activity will be less impaired than of countries that import most of their crude oil—which, apart from the price increase, will also be hit by a physical oil scarcity.

Interestingly, the Swiss and Swedish currencies have dropped 3% plus, perhaps explained by a loss in safe-haven appeal. For the time being, the dollar's top status is being upheld by the world.

*Ground realities and narratives:* Iran's crude oil deliveries to China have long been priced in the yuan. So, Iranian oil going via Hormuz to China will not hurt the petro-dollar's dominance.

The US is the third-largest exporter of crude oil (with a 10% share) and the largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (16% share) to the world. Since the war started, US oil firms have made an estimated incremental \$5 billion in revenue. The price of Brent crude oil has risen from around \$70 per barrel to about \$115 during March. Of course, the war could not have been motivated by such gains. Even if we ignore the cost of inflation on the US economy and weigh direct costs against benefits, the math would not favour war. In the first week,

the US government spent \$11 billion on hostilities. A month's war bill is estimated at \$35-\$40 billion. Now consider an extreme scenario. A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that for America's monthly war expenses to be covered by an oil windfall, Brent would need to touch \$170-\$180 per barrel. A \$15-\$20 spike in oil translates roughly to \$5 billion extra monthly revenue for US oil firms. Iran would do well to take this into consideration. The longer its Hormuz blockade lasts, the higher the global price of crude oil, and that means a bonanza for US firms that Washington could tax to fund its war. For most oil importers, the doomsday scenario is one of oil hitting \$135-\$140 per barrel. But even under this, the dollar may remain strong while those of other economies weaken. It's about time that the world brought all warring parties to the table for talks on ending hostilities.

*Hope for the best and prepare for extremes:* Uncertainty under the dollar's dominance has reduced. Thus, gold, which is a hedge against uncertainty, has stopped rising. Gold, being a yieldless asset (as it generates no cashflow), is now getting hurt by worries of heightened inflation. In the short-to-medium-term, given the current scope of the war, the dollar is likely to remain strong and gold weak.

A quick end to the war, even with an ambiguous winner, is possibly the best outcome. A protracted war may hurt America's geopolitical standing. While its military dominance will remain, its capacity to enforce its will may be questioned, weakening its stature and what it possibly the dollar. If crude oil prices continue to move up, the world may have to intervene—without boots on the ground or gunboats. In the event of an extreme-oil-price scenario, extreme reactions could include Europe or Japan, say, opting to go for non-US oil in non-US currency. America needs to run more game-theory scenario simulations than Iran and Israel.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Recycled water can insure India against the threat of shortfalls

Boosting our capacity for treating used water offers an ecologically sound and economically prudent path to water security



**V. K. PAUL**  
is a member of the Niti Aayog.

**W**ater is life. Our lives, environment and livelihoods depend on this vital resource. As we aspire to a new India, we stand at a crossroads in our water management journey. The way we manage it will shape the future of our villages, cities and people. India's annual per capita water availability declined to 1,486 cubic metres in 2021 and is projected at 1,367 cubic metres by 2031. The 'water stress' threshold of 1,700 cubic metres has already breached and we are approaching the 'water scarcity' benchmark of 1,000 cubic metres per head. With climate variability and increasing freshwater demand, it is time to think beyond conventional sources.

**Challenge:** Nine of India's 20 river basins are water scarce. Our groundwater use is more than that of the US and China put together, and one in four blocks is exhibiting groundwater stress. Our water-use efficiency in the irrigation sector is about 38%, below the world average of 45%. This is compounded by difficulties in the recovery of operational and maintenance costs. In urban areas, water supply systems suffer losses estimated at 39% of their total—called 'non-revenue water.' These challenges are amplified by climate change, which reduces rainy days and concentrates precipitation in shorter periods. The pattern triggers a cycle of floods followed by water scarcity.

**The promise of recycled water:** India's urban areas alone generate nearly 72,000 million litres per day of sewage, yet only about 27,000 million litres is treated daily. A 2023 study by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) estimated that if treated water is used for irrigation alone, it could irrigate 1.38 million hectares, generate ₹96,600 crore in agricultural revenue and recover nutrients worth ₹5,000 crore. That is over \$11 billion of potential value waiting to be tapped.

Treated watersheds at the intersection of health, sustainability and development. It can reduce freshwater withdrawals, ensure reliable water availability for cities and farms, support industrial growth and ameliorate groundwater stress through recharge. The Prime Minister's directive at the third Chief Secretaries Conference (2023), as a start, urged states to promote the use of treated wastewater for horticulture and vegetable cultivation within a 10-50km radius of peri-urban areas. The government's Amrut scheme is encouraging states to reuse 20% of domestic treated water and 50% of industrial effluents.

A few utilities and municipalities have undertaken commendable efforts in the reuse of treated water. Islands of excellence include Bengaluru Water Supply Sewerage Board, Surat Municipal Corporation, Chennai Water Supply and Sewerage Board, Nagpur Municipal Corporation and Prayagraj Municipal Corporation. These efforts must be scaled up nationwide.



**Reduce the rural-urban reuse gap:** As India's development paradigm demands that we bridge our rural-urban divide fast, the ministry of Jal Shakti should assess rural waste water generation, ensure implementation of identified treatment techniques and make it available for alternative uses. The gap between urban and rural areas in the use of treated water could be bridged by providing panchayats with additional finances.

**The emerging digital thirst:** Data centres demand huge amounts of water for cooling. The US 2024 Data Center Energy Usage Report mentions that US data centres consumed 66 billion litres of water in direct use. It is estimated that a data centre of 1MW capacity consumes 26 million litres a year of water, enough to meet the annual household requirement of about 460 persons in an urban area. With India's data centre capacity likely to rise nine-fold to 9GW by 2030, using consistent-quality treated used water for data-centre cooling can prevent depletion of freshwater.

**The country's long journey ahead:** Today, as we stand at a critical juncture in our nation's water management journey, we must look beyond conventional approaches. The solution to our water challenges may well lie in treated used water, an untapped national resource with transformative potential when it comes to water security in the future. This is not an option. It's an imperative. The journey ahead will demand both technological innovation and behavioural transformation. Treated used water offers a path that is environmentally sound, economically prudent and aligned with our Viksit Bharat goal by 2047.

**From waste to wealth—Create a circular water economy:** Treated water exemplifies the principles of a circular economy. For our urban water supply utilities, it represents a blessing. Rather than viewing wastewater treatment as a compliance requirement, they should see it as an opportunity to diversify their water portfolio. By enhancing treatment capacities and quality standards, these utilities can create reliable secondary water sources and thus benefit from new revenue streams.

# Nothingburger: A McDonald's video went viral but still failed

The fast-food chain is suspected to have lost touch with customers



**BETH KOWITZ**  
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering corporate America.



The video seemed to personify America's K-shaped economy.

**A** viral video clip of McDonald's CEO Christopher Kempczinski eating the fast-food chain's Big Arch burger has been memed and ranted across the internet. It surely cost him a little bit of his dignity. But that's a small price to pay for the equivalent of millions of dollars in free publicity. One advertising consultancy estimated that the episode generated some \$18 million in brand value for McDonald's this month alone.

The social media frenzy, however, does not seem to have translated into a commensurate sales surge for the Big Arch, which features two quarter-pound beef patties and three slices of white cheddar cheese tucked between a toasted sesame and poppy seed bun. It's one of the most expensive items on the menu, costing \$10.09 at the McDonald's around the corner from my office in New York.

The company told the *Wall Street Journal* that early sales were beating expectations, but data provider Placer.ai found that foot traffic rose a modest 2.2% in the week of the Big Arch's launch in the US on 3 March. "These results may suggest that consumers are becoming increasingly selective in their spending," it reported.

The disconnect may in part reflect the K-shaped economy at work, which has further split consumers into haves and have-nots. That dynamic makes it more challenging for companies focused on mass consumption. And there is perhaps no brand that depends more on its ubiquity than the so-called Golden Arches. The company says it serves about 90% of the US population every year. "McDonald's has to target different customer groups, and they are overlapping less and less," said Morgan Stanley restaurant analyst Brian Harbour.

The result: Playbooks that once worked across all these groups are at risk of breaking down when opposing sides of a customer base are living entirely different economic realities.

For decades, successful fast food chains have employed a barbell pricing strategy. On one end are their value items—think McDonald's "Dollar Menu" of the past—and on the other are premium items such as the Big Arch. When times are good, customers are lured in by value items and are tempted to trade up. But when times are tough, premium products can offset lost business by attracting higher-income consumers who trade down into the brand from the likes of, say, Shake Shack.

That does not seem to be happening this time round. Although lower-income consumers are increasingly eating at home,

McDonald's has said that higher-end consumers who are trading down have not been making up for those declines. Meanwhile, those struggling but still spending are hunting for bargains. The *Wall Street Journal* reported last week that when consumers are eating out, they are purchasing items with deals attached more now than at any time in the last half century. And at the top of the food chain, research firm Black Box Intelligence said last month that fine dining was the top-performing segment in the restaurant space in four of the last five months.

Balancing that barbell has always been a delicate task. When I was covering McDonald's more than a decade ago as a reporter, its management team ran into trouble when the two sides of the barbell crept further apart, making it harder for consumers to make the jump from a Dollar Menu item to a \$4.80 Big Mac.

In the last few years, the barbell has fallen out of balance again—this time because prices crept up too far and too fast as franchisees tried to keep up with inflation after the covid pandemic started to wind down. That left very little on the low end to convince consumers McDonald's was still a place to find good value.

The company has realized its mistake and has since 2024 been on a mission to reclaim its affordability image. It started by launching \$5 meals and in 2025 expanded to \$1 add-ons.

The efforts are starting to pay off, with the company reporting last month that during the fourth quarter its sales grew at the fastest pace in more than two years. "As I've said before and I will say again, McDonald's is not going to get beat on value and affordability. It's in our DNA," Kempczinski said on the company's earnings call. The *Wall Street Journal* has reported that next month the company will push its value image even further, launching items for \$3 and less, as well as \$4 breakfast meals.

Against this backdrop, it's easy to see why Kempczinski's burger-eating gaffe took hold of the internet. It's the K-shaped economy personified. As he took a performative nibble of the Big Arch, Kempczinski looked to many like just another well-paid CEO who had lost touch with his struggling customer base.

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

# The Hormuz clamp has rattled the world of technology

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and the author of 'The Third Way: India's Revolutionary Approach to Data Governance'. His X handle is @matthan.

**E**ven though the Strait of Hormuz is just about 33km wide at its narrowest point, about 20 million barrels of crude oil and refinery products would pass through it every day before the war in West Asia. This was roughly a quarter of all seaborne oil trade. Since late February, tanker traffic through the strait has fallen sharply, driving up the price of Brent crude and triggering an oil shock. But while our attention has been focused on oil, there are other consequences—equally, if not more significant—that could threaten the global economy in far more dangerous ways.

Amid the freight sitting idle in the Gulfare 200 containers of liquid helium waiting for Iran's permission to pass through the strait. These containers were chilled to near absolute zero when loaded, but have been slowly warming up with every day's delay. If they are not allowed to pass within the next 40 days, the liquid helium will eventually revert to gas and be vented into the atmosphere, where it will be lost forever.

Helium is produced as a byproduct of processing natural gas into its liquefied form, LNG. Qatar accounts for roughly a third of the world's commercial helium output. When QatarEnergy halted production after Iran attacked its Ras Laffan refinery on 2 March, helium output ceased. This leaves staring at a global helium shortage both in the short and medium term.

Chipmakers in the semiconductor industry use liquid helium to cool silicon wafers during the plasma etching process. South Korea, home to Samsung and SK Hynix, sources 65% of its helium from Qatar, while Taiwan sources 69%. SK Hynix produces 62% of the world's high bandwidth memory (HBM) units contained in every Nvidia H100 and B200 GPU. Without HBM units, GPUs cannot be made. Without SK Hynix, HBM units run scarce.

The Hormuz squeeze has not just affected the global energy trade, but several other elements of the deep, multilayered supply chains that hold the world together. While our immediate focus is on energy, the current conflict is a stark reminder of just how tightly interlinked the global economy is. Our instinctive response to such crises has always been to restore, decouple and diversify, but we are constantly forced to come to

terms with the reality of a highly interdependent global production stack. We may have reached the point where self-sufficiency is no longer an option and we have no choice but to live with disruptions.

TSMC cannot make its chips without highly specialized machines from ASML, a Dutch firm in Veldhoven that has a *de facto* monopoly over extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography, a sophisticated technology essential for making sub-5nm chips. Despite decades of effort and tens of billions of dollars, China remains, by most estimates, at least a decade away from replicating this technological capability. At the heart of ASML's machines are specialized optics made by Carl Zeiss, a German

firm whose semiconductor division is the sole supplier of the mirrors that are essential to every EUV system. These mirrors must be polished to within a single atom's thickness, a level of precision that took 25 years and billions of euros to perfect. This means that the manufacture of 80% of all chips worldwide depends on the optical products made by a single company in Europe.

Which brings us to the strangest dependency of all. In addition to chips, South Korea is also a significant shipbuilding nation. From on ships and like HD Hyundai, Samsung Heavy and Hanwha Ocean have built over 80% of the world's LNG carriers over the past five years. This creates a striking paradox: one of the countries that is most dependent on Gulf energy is also the one that world depends on to build the ships it needs to transport hydrocarbons. If the Korean industry slows, the global capacity to reroute energy supply would slow with it, further deepening the crisis.

Over the past few years, our instinctive

response to crises like this has been to localize production. Around the world, countries have invested in domestic semiconductor making capabilities and rare-earth extraction facilities to offset the impact of conflicts they have had to deal with in recent years. But there are limits to that approach. You cannot compress 30 years of accumulated manufacturing intelligence into a policy cycle. Even after decades of effort, tens of billions of dollars in investment and a concerted engineering push, China cannot build the machines it needs to make sub-5nm chips. That is knowledge that cannot be bought or learnt without iteration.

We could view the Hormuz crisis as evidence that our experiment with globalization has failed. That, however, would be a mistake. If anything, it should remind us that we chose, rationally and repeatedly, to allow different parts of the world to do what they do best so that the global economy could prosper.

Interdependence is not an option. It is the condition under which much of the modern world operates. The real risk is not that we have come to depend too much on one another, but that conflicts like these will sever connections we can no longer afford to break.

# Not-So-Happy New Financial Year!

### Impact of AI on tech is longer-term trend

Sensex recorded its weakest annual performance since the pandemic in FY26, declining 7.1%, as Trump tariffs, AI and the US-Israel war on Iran led to FPIs selling a record \$18.69 bn of Indian equity during the year. Stocks posted their biggest declines in March as elevated oil prices fed investor worries over the Indian economy's dependence on imported energy. Rupee closed at ₹94.83 as an RBI directive to banks to unwind their forex holdings provided temporary relief at the end of a financial year that saw the currency decline 9.85%. Rupee declined 4% in March. The 10-yr gilt hardened to 7.04%, its highest in nearly 2yrs, despite a percentage-point reduction in RBI's policy rate.

The latest official projections peg India's GDP growth at 7.4% and inflation at 2.1%. These estimates will change to incorporate developments in the Persian Gulf over the next few weeks. But they serve to emphasise the country's strong economic fundamentals as it confronts the latest energy shock. Markets had recovered partially from the uncertainty over US reciprocal tariffs, which were lowered as New Delhi and Washington moved closer to a trade deal. That now seems like a long time ago. Impact of AI on India's technology industry is seen as a longer-term trend, and is reflected in the IT index leading the decline in equities over the financial year.



# Transgressionary State



**T K Arun**  
Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act dilutes rights seriously enough to attract adverse commentary from Rajasthan High Court and Supreme Court's advisory panel on transgender rights. This is part of public discourse. What is not widely discussed is the harm the Act's attack on individual autonomy and personhood does to economic growth and development.

Pretext must end that the law affects only the LGBTQIA+ community that it does not directly affect the heterosexual majority of the nation as a whole, or its aspiration to secure growth and development. 'What was recognised by the Supreme Court as an inalienable aspect of personhood now risks being reduced to a contingent, state-mediated entitlement,' wrote Rajasthan High Court's Justice Monga about the amendment. Act's removal of transgender persons' right to determine their own gender status.

Self-determination of gender is out of the window. Multilayered medical boards must examine genitalia of those who wish to assert their transgender identity and their assessment must get the district magistrate's endorsement, before a person is recognised by the state as transgender. This embodies and perpetuates the mistaken conflation of gender with sex. Sex has its basis in biology and is not always binary. Gender is social and psychological identity. Medical boards have little expertise in gender and DMs have neither expertise nor time, in the middle of all the diverse functions they oversee, as centre of governance at the district level.

Suppose a medical board fails to recognise an individual's claim to being transgender. The law then criminalises



**Flagging it**  
sees the individual's associates as those who imposed this identity on that individual — whether it was in the form of human solidarity, financial support, or medical, surgical or psychological intervention. These associates can be sent to prison for up to life.

As transgender activists have pointed out, crimes committed against transgender people go unpunished. But now, those who help transgender people stand to be prosecuted and put behind bars for long periods.

This is an attack on individual liberty and one more weapon in the state's armoury to be used to control society. Such curtailment of freedom is inimical to the flowering of human creativity, whether aesthetic, cognitive or entrepreneurial, and harmful to humanity.

In Development as Freedom, Amartya Sen sees freedom as development ends as well as means to that goal. Development is not just economic growth, skyscrapers, fast trains, high fashion and billionaires signalling virtue through philanthropy. Development is expansion of human agency, ability of people to live the lives they value.

Sen identifies interconnected freedoms that promote development. Political freedom: Civil rights, democracy, freedom of speech and transparency in governance. Economic freedom: Participation in trade, production and credit. Social freedom: Access to education, healthcare and public facilities. Health and economic insecurity: Social safety nets such as unemployment

benefits and famine relief. While Sen emphasises individual empowerment, the actual case of effective empowerment to achieve a modicum of freedom from asserted social, economic and political deprivations has materialised through collective action — as through peasant mobilisation of secure land reforms, popular struggles and agitational politics to end government control of schools and healthcare, for example, in Kerala.

The natural tendency for the state is to stay biased towards incumbent elites, not against attempts to change power equations in society even if such change is being demanded to secure the very goals the Constitution of democratic India sets for the nation. En-

hancement of power of the state over the people is inimical to expansion of political, economic and social freedoms that produce growth and prosperity.

How does this square with the lived experience of authoritarian governments presiding over fast economic growth, whether in Nazi Germany, Indonesia under Suharto, South Korea under its authoritarian rulers before 1987, Taiwan under the Kuomintang, and China under the Communist Party?

That Germany collapsed into chaos and rubble, Indonesia and South Korea grew out of authoritarian rule and achieved democracy. So did Taiwan. The fact that China is still authoritarian doesn't mean that it would be forced to become democratic, if growth is to sustain.

China might be ruled by a party that calls itself communist. But the economy is capitalist, with minimal rights for workers and common people. Control of the state comes twinned with support under carefully-crafted industrial policies and so growth has maintained and sustained. But cancellation of Anti Financial's planned IPO at the last moment, and its founder Jack Ma's virtual exile, show limits of authoritarian freedom in China.

Singapore and Dubai are full of Chinese entrepreneurs exercising the freedom they are stripped of back home. For them to channel their entrepreneurial energy at home, China will have to break out of the inquest of authoritarian control exercised by the Chinese Communist Party.

India's goal is to strengthen its democracy not to erode it. To break out of whatever little it has, the Transgender Act is a step back from freedom, democracy and growth.



Israel, US, a Different Kind of 'Rogue State'

Israel's parliament crossed a perilous threshold in its larger and longer dehumanisation project, by passing a law on Monday that makes death penalty the default sentence for Palestinians convicted of terror attacks. Palestinians convicted in Israeli military courts for 'acts of terrorism' — almost impossible to disprove in such 'special courts' — will now be executed by hanging within 90 days, with a possible postponement of up to 180 days. In theory, Jewish citizens could also be executed. But with the law to be carried out only where intention is to 'negate the existence of the state of Israel' — a cause that almost certainly will be ascribed only to non-Jewish Israelis — this is a 'Palestinians-only' legislation in Jewish practice.

# Apple Hasn't Fallen Far from the Tree

Apple, which turns 50 today, is much more than magical technology or a charismatic brand. It's the 'forever' beginning of change in the way we live and work. A sassy biopic can easily be stitched from just the history sheets of product innovation. Apple Computer (1976) was the very first accessible computer system to be sold in a video terminal. Macintosh 128K, incubated by the iconic 1984 TV commercial, defined the PC regime, while the LaserWriter, c. 1985, established the foundation for desktop publishing. In 1988, Apple Mac GS became the magic potion for mass market creativity. The very next year, iBook showed up with the company's pioneering consumer-centric laptop, inspiring the best in each of us. iPod (2000) turned up as a loveable jukebox, and Apple TV (2007) was a fine convergence of technologies.

Designed by Jony Ive — now developing an agentic device for OpenAI — iPhone was the 2007 game-changer. It was a dramatic catalyst over time, no less influential than Steve Jobs. iPad (2010) and Apple Watch (2015) were fresh jewels in the continuum, continuing Apple's long legacy of evolutionary excellence. But, then, a product timeline, however spicy, can never be sufficient stimulus for a mega biopic. The *Brand Story*, the tongue-in-cheek 'Get a Mac' series, and the designer iPod silhouettes. These were showstoppers, almost as unique as the real product experience. Apple has always been the quintessential employer, inspired perhaps by Jobs taking a catalysing course in calligraphy in college, a 'craft' seed for design development. Every Apple user feels better equipped to bring a unique acumen to a meaningful life, as creator or consumer. Those in creative industries carry a perceptible swagger — a mind language across both body language, which gets reflected in any routine engagement. Many pitches have been won by Apple Surplus, a perceptual edge in the outcome creation as a result of 'Brand Chutzpah'. Magnetic presence of an



**Shivaji Dasgupta**  
Apple device seems to be evidence of elevated callibre. Apple deliberately positions itself as a formidable subset of 'us too's, bolstered by the prolific penetration of both smartphone and broadband. Whether phone, laptop or tablet can be a matter of entertaining detail. But Apple' remains the crown that bears every jewel. All of the above, up to an iconic brand benchmark, commencing with easy access and topped by delightful influence, courtesy our very own devices. Apple, commanding a majestic premium, to justify demands of user imagery and not just realities of engineering acumen.

More than 25% of iPhone production is now routed out of India, mirroring the latter a multifaceted stakeholder. iPhone also enjoys a 28% share in the local smartphone market. Fresh launches

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# THINK ABOUT IT

Every day of the year being All Fools' Day, let's treat today differently

# April 1, That One Full Day of Wisdom

April, as T S Eliot reminds us in his by-now poem of realism, 'The Waste Land', is 'the cruellest month breeding/ lilacs out of the dead land'. We seem to have moved — environmentally geopolitically existentially — far from Chaucer's happy description of the advent of spring from the prologue of 'The Canterbury Tales': 'When that April with his shroures soote/ The droghte of March hath perced to the roote/ (When April with his sweet showers/ The drought of March hath pierced to the roote). So, perhaps we, in our infinite idiosyncrasy, should rethink crowning April as the official carnival of foolishness, pranks and hoaxes. With the other 364 days of the year already a global improv act of incompetence, misinformation and mendacity, why designate today as April Fools' Day when every headline already reads like a Monty Python sketch rewritten by Kafka? Let's flip it. Let April 1 be the one day when wisdom, truth, kindness and politeness are still celebrated as virtues, not silliness. One day when Twitter/Truth Social pauses its gladiatorial combat, when politicians are legally required to answer questions with facts, when your neighbour greets you with courtesy instead of passive-aggressive noise — one day of sanity surrounded by year-round lunacy that we seem to have normalised. April is Wisdom Day would be the greatest, fittest joke of all.



**Nisha Taneja**

Last month, the Union Cabinet approved modifications to India's foreign investment regulatory framework on cross-border investments originating from landlocking countries (LBCs) with India. This amendment to 'Press Note 3' (PN3), originally introduced in April 2020 during the pandemic to curb opportunities for investment from Indian companies — triggered in part by People's Bank of China increasing its stake in HDFC Bank — marks a cautious but important shift in India's approach to foreign investment from LBCs, particularly China. While justified at the time, the blanket approval requirement significantly constrained investment flows. The 2025 revision recognises that such an approach may no longer be optimal. By permitting small, non-controlling investments of up to 49% under the automatic route, clarifying beneficial ownership and streamlining approvals, the amendment seeks to balance national security with investor confidence.

many and Australia, would strengthen India's openness to global capital while safeguarding strategic interests. At the same time, any discussion on economic engagement with China must extend beyond investment flows to the equally critical domain of trade. India's approach so far has been disproportionately shaped by concerns over rising imports, which gets reflected in anti-routine engagement. Many pitches have been won by Apple Surplus, a perceptual edge in the outcome creation as a result of 'Brand Chutzpah'. Magnetic presence of an

China's market due to concerns about political risk, regulatory uncertainty and reputational considerations. But this caution has not been mirrored on the import side, where inflows from China have continued to grow. The result is an asymmetry that reinforces existing imbalances. This is where clear and consistent policy formulation becomes critical. During periods of political strain, governments can play a vital role in reassuring businesses, clarifying permissible activities and reducing uncertainty. A well-communicated stance that distinguishes between strategic sensitivity and commercial engagement can help rebuild confidence among exporters, and encourage them to explore opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked. India's broader trade strategy also warrants reconsideration. Its decision to stay out of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was driven largely by concerns over import surges, particularly from China. While these concerns are not unfounded, an excessively defensive approach risks missing export opportunities that such frameworks can offer. In fact, as trade barriers lie in standards, regulations and other non-tariff measures. Negotiating access in these areas requires an offensive strategy that goes beyond tariff cuts. While PN3 amendments is a good step, the next critical phase in strengthening India's economic engagement with China lies in greater focus on exports.

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The writer is an autonomous brand consultant



# Fool's Paradise

DEVENDRARA SUTHAN

There is a subtle turning in life that rarely gets noticed; the moment, it is the illusion of knowing, fully without resistance. Not as a flaw to hide but simply as it is. In that quiet recognition, something loosens. The mind, which was busy proving itself, pauses and a different kind of clarity appears.

We often imagine silliness as a lack of knowledge. But more often, it is the illusion of knowing. It is the quiet certainty that 'what I think, feel or believe must be right'. One thought appears, then another follows, connects, or disconnects, forming a chain. And, suddenly, there is a subtle claim: 'I am thinking.' From that moment, the entire structure of identity begins to form.

From there, everything strengthens this sense of ownership. 'My opinion', 'my belief', 'my truth'. And once something becomes mine, it must be protected. Even when evidence suggests otherwise, the mind resists change. This is where silliness deepens — not in not knowing, but in not seeing how the mind operates. It reacts quickly, concludes prematurely and defends persistently. It prefers familiar patterns over fresh perception. In doing so, it remains trapped.

In this movement, something simple is overlooked; the fact that all this effort is driven by a sense of incompleteness that is never questioned. To see this is not to stop loving or acting, it is to understand the movement's source. Stillness is not a state. It is a process, a continuous misreading of what is happening within. And the moment it is seen clearly, it begins to dissolve through attention.

# PEAS IN A PODCAST

# Prankster History

April Fools' Day has always been a holiday of delightful chaos. But this year's 'History Fix' podcast episode, April Fool's Day: How No One Ever Knows What This Holiday Really Is, turns that chaos into a fascinating exploration of cultural absurdity.

The episode is both witty and scholarly, offering listeners a tour of the holiday's roots in certain origins of April. The hosts gleefully admit that no one truly knows where the tradition began, and that very ambiguity becomes the central joke: a holiday dedicated to pranks whose own history is itself a riddle on historians. — from Roman festivals like 'Hilaria', to medieval customs and Renaissance poetry, before landing on the oft-repeated tale of France's 1564 calendar reform under Charles IX. Whether or not that story is true hardly matters — slipperiness of the holiday's roots is precisely what makes it endure. Along the way, the hosts pepper the discussion with sharp humour, treating history itself as a prankster that refuses to be pinned down.

This podcast is a clever, hilarious and surprisingly thoughtful meditation on why April Fool's Day is less about jokes than about the enduring comedy of human history itself.

# Chat Room

# Tech, Conduct to Intersect Again?

Apropos 'Where is the Defining Gadget of AI Age?' by Jaspreet Bindra (Mar 29), on Jony Ive truly spark the next big leap in technology, one that genuinely makes life simpler for more humans? His collaboration with Sam Altman on OpenAI suggests that this isn't just another gadget launch but an attempt to rethink how we live with technology altogether. With design expertise shared at Apple, Ive has done it before by redefining how people interact with technology. But this time, the challenge is deeper: not just building something new but convincing people to let go of habits built over decades. If they can deliver technology that feels less intrusive and more like a natural extension of daily life, it would mark a meaningful shift toward senseless human-centric design. Anuraj Kumar Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

India, explore new aisles in the sun

The writer is senior visiting professor, ICRIER

# Economy

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1, 2026

## IN THE NEWS

**LOHIYA, KUMAR AMONG KEY PICKS IN RESHUFFLE**



Sanjay Lohiya Chanchal Kumar

**SENIOR IAS OFFICER** Chanchal Kumar has been appointed Information and Broadcasting Secretary as part of a top-level bureaucratic reshuffle effected by the Centre on Tuesday. Kumar, a 1992 batch IAS officer of Bihar cadre, is currently Secretary, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region. The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) has approved Kumar's appointment as Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in place of Sanjay Jaju. Jaju will be the new Secretary, DoNER Ministry. Sanjay Lohiya, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Mines has been appointed as Special Secretary, Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Finance. He will take over as Secretary, Department of Financial Services, after the superannuation of incumbent Nagaraju Maddirala on May 31, an order issued by the Personnel Ministry said.

## CBDT simplifies DIN norms for I-T notices

THE CENTRAL BOARD of Direct Taxes (CBDT) on Tuesday issued revised guidelines on quoting Document Identification Numbers (DIN) in income-tax communications. All notices, orders, letters and summons must carry a DIN. Exceptions are allowed in cases like technical glitches, field enquiries or system issues, but reasons must be recorded and post-facto approval obtained within 15 days from the competent authority.

## CBIC removes ₹10-lakh cap on courier exports

THE CENTRAL BOARD of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has operationalised a set of comprehensive reforms to streamline e-commerce exports as well as broader courier-based imports and exports to enhance ease of doing business from April 1. The reform includes removal of ₹10 lakh cap on courier export consignments to boost e-commerce exports. Simultaneously, the Finance Act, 2026 has delivered a major relief to India's service export sector by removing intermediary services clause under the Integrated Goods and Services Tax Act, 2017.

FE BUREAU & AGENCIES

## AMERICA SHIFTS STANCE AFTER MORATORIUM SETBACK

# US to renew 'plurilateral' e-commerce pact at WTO

**MUKESH JAGOTA**  
New Delhi, March 31

**AFTER FAILING TO** secure an extension of the moratorium on taxing cross-border digital transmissions at the recent 14th Ministerial Conference (MC) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the US announced it will now pursue a plurilateral e-commerce moratorium and invited trading partners to join the initiative.

"If the WTO cannot achieve this common sense aim, the US will work outside of the WTO with all interested partners to get it done. To that end, the US invites all trading partners to commit to a plurilateral, e-commerce moratorium agreement," US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said in a statement.

At the just-concluded 14th MC, the US first entered the discussions with a proposal to indefinitely extend the moratorium. At Yaounde in Cameroon, during discussions, it brought its demand for extension down to four years.

Some countries were willing to go along with the US proposal, but Brazil and Turkey did not agree to the extension of the moratorium beyond two years — a usual practice. This led to no decision on the fate of the moratorium, which expired on March 31, 2026, after 28 years.

Plurilateral agreements at the WTO are resorted to when the entire membership cannot be convinced to agree to a common initiative agreement. A plurilateral agreement is a deal negotiated by a smaller group of members who want to move faster or go deeper on specific trade topics.

## GLOBAL TRADE SPLIT

- US fails to extend WTO e-commerce moratorium
- Pushes plurilateral pact outside WTO framework
- Invites partners to join new initiative
- Later scaled down demand to four years
- Brazil, Turkey resist beyond two-year norm
- No consensus at 14th Ministerial Conference
- Moratorium expires March 31 after 28 years
- Pact barred tariffs on digital transmissions
- Expiry allows countries to impose duties
- US biggest beneficiary of tax-free regime

The US is the biggest beneficiary of the e-commerce moratorium, with the biggest portion of the digital content being consumed worldwide originating from there. The expiry of the moratorium enables countries to impose duties on the sale of content digitally across borders.

"Fortunately, the United States has secured commitments from dozens of countries — and nearly all of our major trading partners — not to impose tariffs on US digital transmissions," Greer said.

However, even the plurilateral agreements take time. While countries willing to join can move fast, it requires approval of all members of the WTO to get it included in the architecture of the WTO. The Investment Facilitation for

## Moratorium call shifts to Geneva meeting

THE MEETING OF the General Council of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Geneva will now take a call on a moratorium on taxation of electronic transmissions that expired on Tuesday, as the Ministerial Council (MC) could not take a call on it at their 14th meeting last week.

Along with the moratorium, the GC will also take up the Work Programme on e-commerce for discussion, a commerce ministry statement said. The work programme is examining all trade-related issues arising from global e-commerce. "India extended its support for robust work at the WTO with a focus on the critical issues such as digital divide, digital infrastructure and skills and regulatory frameworks to ensure developing countries and LDCs have the tools to build their own digital futures," the ministry said.

The statement detailing the participation of the Indian delegation led by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal also pointed out that India opposed the incorporation of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement in the WTO despite its backing by 128 countries, as it risks eroding the foundational principles and functional limits of the organisation.

FE BUREAU

# FY26 ends as war risks cloud growth outlook

SAIKAT NEOGI

THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2025-26, which ended Tuesday, saw a moderate recovery in investment and consumption after two subdued years, aided by cuts in direct and indirect taxes. Inflation remained under control, and the economy showed resilience despite external headwinds such as US tariffs, relying largely on domestic demand.

However, growth momentum eased toward the end of the year as the West Asia conflict began affecting key sectors. With uncertainties ahead, policymakers may face slower growth and pressures on fiscal and external balances. Rising imported inflation and a weakening rupee could also trigger an earlier-than-expected monetary tightening cycle.



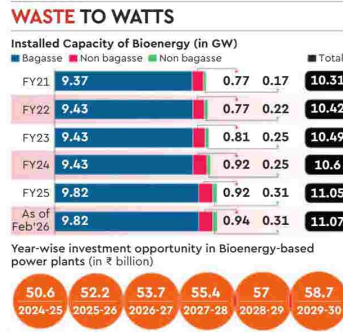
# India's bioenergy capacity to reach 15.5 GW by FY32

**SAURAV ANAND**  
New Delhi, March 31

**INDIA'S BIOENERGY** INSTALLED capacity is projected to rise to 15.5 GW by FY32 from about 11.6 GW as of March 2025, driven by sustained policy support and abundant biomass availability, even as supply chain bottlenecks and cost pressures remain key concerns, according to a CareEdge report.

Bioenergy currently contributes 11.6 GW to India's renewable energy mix, with bagasse cogeneration forming the dominant share, supported by biomass and waste-to-energy (WtE) segments. Over the last five years, the sector has added around 868 MW of biomass power/cogeneration capacity and 693 MW of WtE capacity, indicating steady expansion backed by government initiatives.

The report highlighted that the sector's growth is being accelerated by multiple national programmes including the National Bioenergy Programme, Waste-to-Energy Programme Guidelines, Biomass Co-firing Policy and bio-fuel blending targets, which are providing "targeted financial support, technology stan-



Year-wise investment opportunity in Bioenergy-based power plants (in ₹ billion)

Year	Investment (₹ billion)
2024-25	50.6
2025-26	52.2
2026-27	53.7
2027-28	55.4
2028-29	57
2029-30	58.7

standards and stable offtake mechanisms" to improve project viability.

India's strong biomass base continues to underpin long-term growth. The country generates nearly 750 million tonnes of agricultural residue annually, with surplus biomass availability estimated at around 250 million tonnes in FY24 — enough to support energy generation of nearly 28 GW. This is expected to increase further, with total bio-

# Solar imports at 99 GW reveal cell capacity gap

**SAURAV ANAND**  
New Delhi, March 31

A TOTAL OF 99 GW of solar modules and cells were imported in 2025, with modules accounting for 25% and cells 75%, highlighting continued dependence on overseas supply despite a sharp expansion in domestic manufacturing capacity, according to a Mercom India report.

India added 119 GW of solar module manufacturing capacity and over 9 GW of solar cell capacity in CY2025, taking cumulative module capacity to around 210 GW and cell capacity to about 27 GW.

The surge in capacity was driven by demand from utility-scale solar projects, rooftop targets, the PM Surya Ghar programme and the ALMM List-II domestic cell mandate.

However, the data points to structural imbalance. ALMM-certified module capacity stood at 173.1 GW, while certified cell capacity was around 26.5 GW, indicating that domestic cell capacity accounts for only 15.3% of module capacity.

The manufacturing ecosystem also remains concentrated, with the top 10 manufacturers accounting for 44% of module capacity and 99.5% of cell capacity.

Technology adoption is shifting towards advanced formats. Around 70% of installed capacity and over 57% of capacity is based on TOPCon technology, followed by monocrystalline and thin-film technologies account for about 2% each.

In cell manufacturing, monocrystalline technology accounted for over 57%, followed by TOPCon at over 39%.

Regionally, Gujarat dominates with 45% share in both module and cell manufacturing capacity, followed by Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu in modules, and Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in cells.

# After resilient FY26, war clouds gather over India's FY27 growth outlook

KULDEEP SINGH  
New Delhi, March 31

THE INDIAN ECONOMY demonstrated resilience in FY26 amidst high US tariffs and geopolitical developments, with estimates indicating a robust real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 7.6%, according to official advance estimates. Upward revisions of growth estimates for FY26 and FY27 by major rating agencies boosted confidence.

This performance strengthened India's position as the fastest-growing major economy globally, driven primarily by strong domestic demand — particularly healthy private consumption and sustained government capital expenditure — and supportive policy measures. External challenges from US tariffs tested the economy's mettle, and the West Asia war posed stiffer challenges as the year drew to a close.

The National Statistical Office's Second Advance Estimate pegged real GDP growth at 7.6% for FY26. Fitch Ratings recently raised its forecast to 7.5%, citing resilient consumer spending and infrastructure push despite a slight slowdown in early 2026. Domestic demand remained the cornerstone, with private final consumption expenditure holding steady as a key driver, supported by rural recovery from favourable monsoons and Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate rationalization in September 2025.

Structural contributions were broad-based, economists said. Inflation stayed largely benign for much of the year, with headline CPI averaging low levels amid subdued food prices, though pressures began building toward the end of FY26 due to global energy developments. Fiscal consolidation remained on track, aided by buoyant tax revenues and credit rating

Compounding the pressure was the escalation of conflict in West Asia, particularly involving Iran, which disrupted energy supplies and pushed up global crude oil prices. This late-year development raised concerns over input costs, logistics, and inflationary spillovers. Economists highlighted risks to the current account deficit, corporate margins in energy-intensive sectors, and overall sentiment. Guzaar Sen Gupta, Chief Economist at IDFC First Bank, said the West Asia crisis is unlikely to have any notable impact on the FY26 GDP growth numbers but it will be felt in FY27 Q1.

Looking ahead to FY27, rating agencies and banks project a moderation in real GDP growth to the 6.5-7.1% range. ICRA has forecast 6.5%, lower than the previous estimate of 7.1%, citing elevated energy prices, potential supply disruptions from West Asia, and a wider current account deficits key dampeners, even as lower GST rates, policy rate cuts, and farm sector support bolster consumption.

Fitch anticipates around 6.7% GDP growth in FY27. Crisil offers a relatively optimistic 7.1%, citing resilient private consumption and a mild pickup in private capex. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Finance recently cautioned a "considerable downside" risk to the FY27 GDP growth estimate amidst the West Asia conflict. The government projected FY27 GDP growth estimate to a range of 7% to 7.4% on February 27.

The West Asia conflict also poses a risk to the current account deficit. A \$10 per barrel rise in crude could widen the current account deficit by 0.3-0.5 percentage points from trade disruptions, though services exports and domestic buffers helped cushion the blow.

# Iranian crude heads to India after hiatus

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
New Delhi, March 31

INDIA'S FIRST IRANIAN crude oil cargo since 2019 may be headed towards a port in Gujarat, according to shipping tracking data.

Indian refiners have been looking to purchase a few cargoes of Iranian oil on water following the recent sanctions waiver by Washington.

"The Indo-Iranian oil trade has flickered back to life. Following the US administration's decision to grant a 30-day window for Iranian oil on the water"

due to regional conflict, the vessel Ping Shun is now en route to Vadinar (in Gujarat) with 600,000 barrels of crude. This is the first such delivery since May 2019 and comes at a critical time for Indian refiners facing tightening inventories," said Sumit Ritolla, Lead Research Analyst, Refining and Modelling at commodity market analytics firm Kpler.

While the identity of the buyer is unknown, Vadinar is home for 20 million tonnes a

year oil refinery of Russian oil giant Rosneft-backed Nara Energy. It also is the landing point for crude oil that goes to hinterland refineries such as Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL).

India's oil ministry has so far maintained that techno-commercial feasibility will drive the decision on resuming buying Iranian crude.

Historically, India was a major buyer of Iranian crude,

importing significant volumes of Iranian light and heavy grades due to strong refinery compatibility and favourable commercial terms.

Following sanctions tightening in 2018, imports ceased from May 2019, with volumes replaced by Middle Eastern, US and other grades. At peak, Iranian crude accounted for 11.5 per cent of India's total imports. India used to buy 518,000 barrels per day of Iranian oil in 2018, which slowed to 268,000 bpd between January and May 2019 when the US granted waivers to a few buyers.

# Opinion

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1, 2026

## Law without law

Draft amendments blur legal boundaries by binding advisories and widening control over user content

**T**HE LATEST DRAFT amendments proposed by the ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY) seek to do two things at once: give legal force to government advisories issued to social media platforms, and expand the regulatory net to user-generated content by effectively recasting users as akin to publishers and news platforms. Both moves raise concerns that go beyond compliance and point to a stretch in both legislative intent and legal design. At the heart of the proposal is an attempt to make advisories, clarifications, and standard operating procedures binding by linking them to due diligence obligations under the Information Technology Act. This creates a pathway where failure to comply with an advisory could result in the loss of safe harbour protection. In effect, what has traditionally been non-binding guidance is sought to be elevated into enforceable obligation.

Advisories, by definition, are not law. The parent statute empowers the government to frame rules within defined limits; it does not envisage a regime where executive communications can acquire binding force without legislative backing. If such a shift is considered necessary, it ought to be anchored in an Act of Parliament rather than introduced through subordinate legislation that expands the scope of the parent law. The stated objective appears to be speed, particularly in responding to deepfakes, misinformation, and harmful content. That concern is legitimate. But the means chosen remain questionable. Faster response mechanisms, clearer statutory rules, and improved institutional coordination can achieve similar outcomes without blurring the distinction between law and guidance. Embedding advisories within the legal framework risks creating ambiguity around their scope, frequency, and enforceability, while concentrating discretion within the executive.

Equally significant is the definitional expansion embedded in the draft. By bringing user-generated news and current affairs content within the regulatory ambit, the framework moves towards treating individuals—bloggers, video creators, or even professionals posting on platforms—as a class closer to publishers. It widens the field of regulation to include ordinary users engaging in commentary, analysis, or dissemination of information online. The implications for speech are difficult to ignore. Even without explicit censorship provisions, the framework creates conditions for indirect restriction. Platforms, faced with the prospect of liability, are likely to over-comply, leading to quicker and broader takedowns. For users, this translates into a narrower space for expression, particularly on issues that may be politically or socially sensitive.

There is also recent precedent to consider. The withdrawn Broadcasting Services Bill had proposed to bring online creators within a licensing or pre-certification framework, drawing criticism for potential censorship. The present draft, while different in form, appears to revive elements of that approach through another route—by tightening intermediary obligations and indirectly shaping what users can publish. The route may have changed, but the underlying impulse appears similar. This is not to suggest that regulation is unwarranted. The existing framework under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, already enables content takedowns, grievance redress, and oversight in cases affecting sovereignty, security, and public order. Additional layers that stretch beyond the statute risk creating legal vulnerability and regulatory uncertainty. The draft has been opened for public consultation until April 14, providing an opportunity for reconsideration. The task is to address emerging digital risks without diluting legal boundaries. Conflating advisories with law and extending regulatory reach to ordinary users risks doing both, and calls for careful course correction.

## Ecoterrorism is coming from the White House

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP calls environmentalists "terrorists." Yet he is responsible for destroying more oil and gas infrastructure, and possibly more fossil-fuel demand, than the most optimistic ecoterrorist could in his wildest dreams.

By going to war with Iran, the president, who has been openly hostile towards the clean-energy transition, may unintentionally turn out to be one of its greatest allies. At a White House event last week unveiling new agricultural initiatives (and a website called, for some reason, Only Farms), Trump railed against environmental regulations that, he said, had inflicted grave harm on farmers and the country. "The environmentalists, I mean, they are terrorists," he said.

Even as he spoke, dozens of oil and gas fields, pipelines, refineries, and export terminals lay dormant across West Asia, thanks to the war. Trump and Israel launched more than a month earlier. This infrastructure will take years to fully restore.

Iran has responded by also clamping down on the Strait of Hormuz, cutting off over 20 million barrels per day of global oil and refined-products supply, along with a fifth of the world's supply of liquefied natural gas. Stockpile releases, re-routing oil through pipelines to the Red Sea, and other emergency offsets have made up some of that shortfall. But the world is still 12 million barrels a day shy of the amount of dirty fuel with which its economy has grown accustomed.

The longer the war continues, the more economically painful the loss of those barrels will be. After governments have exhausted emergency relief measures, the next strategy is squeezing demand for oil. This process has already begun in Asian and African economies that depend most heavily on fuel from West Asia. Like the demand and destruction that accompanied the outbreak of Covid, this will grow and spread around the world as long as the proximate cause—in this case, the energy shock caused by the Iran war—persists. The risk is another global recession. And, just like Covid's brief plunge in economic activity and greenhouse-gas emissions, the Iran war's hit to energy demand won't be permanent. As long as oil and gas are still scarce, the next steps for people and governments to explore energy alternatives.

In many cases, unfortunately, they'll fall back to burning coal, still an accessible and localised fuel. But in many other cases, they'll turn to the renewable sources that are proliferating exponentially. Far more of those are available, and at much cheaper prices, than during the oil crisis of the 1970s, which first shocked the world into recognising the need for alternatives. And the economic security renewables provide in this world of uncertain geopolitics is sure to herald a new wave of investments into the sector in fossil-fuel-poor economies. "The main message is that we're going to get the energy transition forced on us in a very painful way that's going to happen very quickly," Jeff Currie, chief strategy officer of energy pathways at Carlyle Group Inc., told *Bloomberg News*.

That can't be the outcome Trump expected or wanted when he launched this war. More than simply calling environmentalists bad names, he spent the first year of his presidency vigorously attacking environmental regulations, clean energy, and climate science. Every member of his cabinet signs loudly from the same hymn sheet. Ironically, Trump's war has revealed just how unaffordable fossil fuels can get, and how elusive his desired "energy dominance" is when a country remains tied to globally traded fuels. It's silly to talk of silver linings given the war's cost in human casualties and economic and geopolitical stability, besides the environmental scars inflicted by oil and gas burning across the region. In no way could you call this war "worth it." Far better that it ends today. If it must go on, we have to hope it will at least hasten a new global energy system that makes future wars over oil and other resources less likely.



MARK GONGLOFF  
Bloomberg

**T**HE CONSTITUTION MANDATES setting up a Finance Commission (FC) at five-year intervals to recommend the allocation of tax resources between the Union and the states, and between the states. The FC submits its recommendation to the Union government, and these allocations determine the states' fiscal health and expenditure commitments.

Each Commission sets out its own methodology for allocation vertically and horizontally to provide adequate resources to the states in terms of their constitutional obligation of functions and availability of resources. Three principals have usually governed the Commissions—equity, efficiency, and adequacy. Prior to the 16th FC, there have been different sets of opinions on the primacy that should be accorded to these parameters while allocating weights to the identified criteria. It was generally argued that the earlier commissions have accorded higher weights to equity considerations. The 12th FC, for the first time, considered some kind of equalisation of per capita revenue expenditure of the states on two key social services—education and health. Later FCs avoided that route of equalisation of expenditure on a sector or all across, but were usually biased in favour of equity considerations. None of the earlier FCs, therefore, considered contribution to GDP of a state, which could be considered a surrogate measure of the efficient use of resources.

The 16th FC suggests an alternative classification of horizontal devolution criteria. This divides them into need-based, cost disability-based with population under need-based criteria, and infrastructure distance under cost disability criteria; and tax effort and fiscal stability under efficiency-based criteria. This classification could have been subsumed under the one based on equity and efficiency, since need-based and cost disability-based criteria can be included under equity. However, the 16th FC has, for the first time, tried to balance the equity and

## TAX RESOURCE GRANTS

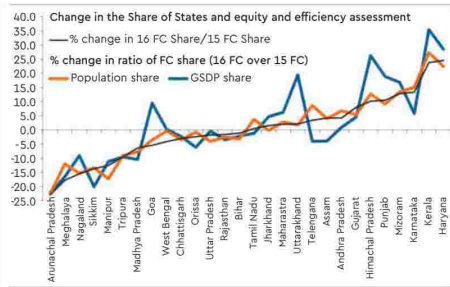
UNDER 16TH FINANCE COMMISSION, MORE POPULOUS STATES WITH LOWER PER CAPITA INCOMES HIT ADVERSELY

# A compromise in equity bias

**R GOPALAN MC SINGHI**

The authors are former civil servants

## TRANSFER TRENDS



efficiency criteria by allocating specific weights to the contribution of the state to national GDP and growth.

We have used two parameters to look at that perception of balancing equity and efficiency. The first is the change in a state's share in allocation based on the ratio of the share to population according to the 16th FC (2021-22) over the ratio of the share as per the 15th FC (2016-17). The second is the change in the state's share in allocation based on the ratio of share in GDP for the 16th FC (average of 2021-2024) over the share for the 15th FC (average of 2016-2019). An increase in the ratio for the more populous states would indicate continuing with the equity bias and an increase in the ratio of more prosperous states indicates a shift towards

efficiency. The results are displayed in the accompanying graphic.

Three things become clear. First, out of 28 states, 14 have witnessed a decline in their share of interstate shares. The decline varies from 22.9% for Arunachal Pradesh to a moderate decline of 1.1% for Bihar. An equal number of states have witnessed an increase in their allocated share, with a high of 24.5% for Haryana and a moderate 0.4% for Tamil Nadu. Second, when changes to shares relative to the share of population are considered, 15 states have witnessed a decline and 13 states an increase. Kerala is the biggest gainer with an increase of 27.2%. Equity consideration has seen a compromise. States with relatively lower population growth have also witnessed an increase in the ratio of

transfers. Third, the efficiency criteria has played a major role in shifting of relative shares in favour of better-off states. Kerala, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand emerge as major gainers, with moderate gains accruing to Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. The four smallest states in area have been losers. More populous states with lower per capita incomes such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and smaller Northeastern states have been affected adversely.

Another important recommendation from the 16th FC is siding away with state-specific revenue deficit grants, affecting them in multiple ways. Some view this as redefining fiscal federalism; others view it as ignoring the mandate of the Constitution to provide adequate resources to states so that they meet their revenue expenditure commitments. Since FCs usually review the revenue and expenditure of the states normatively, there is neither profligacy nor inefficiency and moral hazard. The 16th FC has also not assessed the impact of their recommendations on state finances, as projections of revenue and expenditure after award is not indicated. Of the nine states which depend on central transfers (these being more than two-thirds of their total revenue), seven would face moderation in tax transfers. Of these, states who have a dependency ratio of less than one-third, eight of them (except Goa) have witnessed an increase in share of central tax transfers. The 16th FC has mentioned that these states will improve efficiency in revenue collection and expenditure management, but it cannot be achieved immediately. Currently, nearly two-thirds of tax revenues accrue to the Union and another 20% is allocated through the inter-state Goods and Services Tax Council. The remaining 15-20% taxes are the states' domain. There are no significant leakages or untapped potential which could lead to a quick turnaround. A one-size-fits-all approach may put some states—the smaller ones, ethnically different, and border states—in stress, which needs to be addressed separately.

# Ripple effects of West Asia conflict



**N CHANDRA MOHAN**

The writer is an economics and business commentator based in New Delhi

India and the rest of the world are bound to be adversely affected if the month-long war drags on, notwithstanding the so-called pauses for a diplomatic off-ramp

**T**HE PROSPECT OF the Indian—indeed the rest of the world's—economy being adversely impacted by the raging West Asia conflict that has entered its fifth week is definitely not good news. The economy is being subject to supply-side shocks as happened with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine four years ago. Just like back then, energy prices have skyrocketed and there is the spectre of a full-blown global food crisis if the ongoing conflict is protracted. Although energy prices moderated within a year of the war in Ukraine, the targeting of oil and gas facilities together with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz in West Asia has triggered the biggest supply disruption and energy security threat in history, according to the International Energy Agency.

Despite parallels, there are major differences with regard to the global food crisis as well. With the Ukraine war, prices of wheat and other essentials spiralled up due to disruption in the Baltic Sea region that hindered exports from Ukraine and Russia. This threatened the food security of the Global South but these adverse risks abated in a year. The West Asian conflict portends a crisis in fertiliser production that hits the global food system if it goes on much further. The Strait of Hormuz is a vital artery for natural gas supplies to produce nitrogen fertilisers and sulphur that is used to make phosphatic fertilisers. Prospects of shortages and

higher costs are bound to impact forthcoming global harvests if vital inputs continue to be blocked in the region.

India is majorly affected by this month-long conflict due to its interdependence with West Asia. The region meets 40% of its oil and 80% of its gas requirements. There are also trade and investment relationships that are bound to be disrupted by the war. One of India's largest trading partners is the United Arab Emirates and a free trade deal with the Gulf Cooperation Council is being negotiated. The deepest linkage, however, is the presence of a 10 million-strong diaspora who work in these countries and send home \$3.1 billion annually in remittances—a major source of support for India's external accounts. If the war drags on, there is the prospect of such transfers diminishing if large numbers of such workers are forced to return home.

But for now, it is the energy shock—with Brent prices remaining above \$100 a barrel from the second half of March—that is rippling through swathes of Indian industry that depends on exports to the Gulf and other markets, according to a five-part series done by *Financial Express*. High crude prices have led to surging

costs for leather exporters based in Tamil Nadu as they feed directly into prices of chemicals and textiles needed for processing. Fuel shortages have forced wide-spread production cuts in the ceramic hub of Gujarat and metal clusters of micro, small, and medium industries in Pune and Ghaziabad. Costlier oil has jacked up raw material prices for manufacturers of plastics, synthetic textiles, and other items, forcing shutdowns.

The uptick in Brent spot prices due to rising geopolitical tensions in West Asia since end-February marks a reversal of a steady downward trend that has seen them decline by one-fifths in 2025. Since mid-March, they remain at \$100 plus a barrel after Israel struck Iran's South Pars gasfield and Tehran retaliated shortly thereafter with an attack on Qatar's liquefied natural gas facility at Ras Laffan. Markets remain jittery after President Donald Trump's statements that he would like to take over Iranian oil—as he did with Venezuela after capturing its president—and would obliterate its power facilities if the ongoing pause on the US's strikes does not result in a deal.

The prospect for costlier oil is bad news for India as it imports 88% of its

energy requirements, which would widen its trade deficit and push up domestic prices. As these imports have to be paid for in US dollars, this would result in further downward pressures on the rupee that is testing lows of ₹95 to a dollar. India must enhance its energy security by building reserves that can take care of disruptions, at least over the short term. The government stated that the country's oil stocks, mostly with the domestic oil companies, were enough for 74 days. The strategic reserves, however, are modest with just six days of crude stocks and must be built.

Above all, the policy imperative must be to aim for greater self-sufficiency through higher domestic oil and gas production over the medium term. Unfortunately, this is not happening, as domestic crude production is steadily falling over time. To be sure, the ruling dispensation is seized of this imperative and is incentivising domestic producers and global giants for exploration and production by enacting the Oilfields (Regulation and Development) Amendment Act, 2025. The eleventh round of the open acreage licensing policy has just been launched, which together with the earlier tenth round, opens up 262,817 square kilometres for exploration. India needs to go all in to boost domestic production to be resilient in coping with energy shocks in the future.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Rupee depreciation

Apropos of "The blunt fix" (*FE*, March 31), the rupee has been depreciating for more than a year and the ongoing war has only aggravated it. Reasons such as a widening trade deficit, US trade tariffs, and withdrawal by foreign institutional investors are attributed to the fall. A few sectors benefit, but it pinches importers heavily. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) stepped in and shelled out dollars from its built-

up reserves. Though it is a temporary measure, it comes at the cost of hard-earned reserves. The RBI putting a cap on the daily limit on net open forex position is appreciable, but it could have been introduced much earlier to regulate banks' arbitrage trades. Firm fiscal policies, sustained economic growth, robust GDP growth, overall increase in industrial production, and a stronger balance-of-payments position would arrest rupee depreciation. —RV Baskaran, Pune

### Fulfil potential

Apropos of "A race against time to embrace quality" (*FE*, March 31), India's demographic dividend—arguably one of the most formidable globally—constitutes its most consequential instrument for long-term economic ascendancy. However, this potential demands deliberate and time-bound policy intervention. We must channel this demographic reservoir into the manufacturing sector, fostering skill

development, industrial capacity, and seamless integration into global supply chains. Delayed or inadequate utilisation could erode India's competitive advantage, especially as other economies reposition themselves. Harnessed judiciously, this youthful energy can catalyse industrial transformation; neglected, it may result in a squandered historic opportunity. —N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bangalore

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## Clouded year ahead

Economic conditions have changed since February 1

The new financial year starts under skies that are considerably more overcast than when the Union Budget for 2026-27 was presented on February 1. The central government's fiscal arithmetic was designed in a moment of relative calm: The inflation rate was benign and growth in gross domestic product (GDP) was projected at over 6.5 per cent. The Budget was thus able to retain the government's approach to pump-priming capital expenditure while also signalling debt reduction. In the weeks that have passed since then, however, these assumptions may no longer hold. The most destabilising development is, of course, the expanding conflict in West Asia, driving up the price of crude oil. A barrel of Brent crude oil cost just over \$70 when the United States and Israel began their assault on Iran; it has since reached \$110. The price of the Indian basket of crude oil is considerably higher than that, given the country's dependence on Gulf sources. Volatility will continue for the foreseeable future, now that Iran has laid claim to the right to stop any transits through the Strait of Hormuz, and the Houthis rebels in Yemen have resumed their campaign against shipping in the Red Sea. This will also impact broader trade flows.

Multiple sectors will come under pressure, complicating the government's plans for the year. Higher energy prices do cause generalised inflation, and the depreciation of the rupee at such moments causes imported inflation. But there are more granular impacts to be considered. The scarcity of particular inputs will have a cascading effect through specific important industries. Fertiliser production depends upon the availability of gas, for example, and shortages during the forthcoming sowing season will have a multiplier effect on costs, inflation, and living standards. Labour-intensive sectors such as textiles use polyester, which is dependent on ethylene glycol, and that is Hormuz-linked. The capital-goods backbone of the economy is steel, which requires limestone flux, and almost four-fifths of that comes through a single port in the Gulf. Such slowdowns will not only have a macroeconomic impact on cost-push inflation and growth but will also increase demands on the state for protection or subsidies.

The government has already acted to insulate consumers and oil companies from some of the effects of this crisis, limiting the pass-on effects of the global increase in fuel costs. But this is unsustainable in the longer term, and some fiscal effects can already be predicted. Special additional excise duty has been reduced, with a consequent hit to the exchequer of ₹1.3 trillion-1.7 trillion if maintained for the course of the year. While the Budget arithmetic included some space for exigencies, reductions of this size—especially if accompanied by other forms of relief as the crisis draws on—will make meeting the fiscal-deficit target of 4.3 per cent of GDP difficult. The broader debt-consolidation agenda is already complicated by the fact that the base of such targets, India's nominal GDP, has been revised downwards in the new GDP series.

Further, if high prices begin to course through the economy, threatening to breach the Reserve Bank of India's inflation target of 4 per cent considerably, then it may have to adjust monetary policy—and the growth slowdown that follows will further impact government revenues and their ability to meet fiscal targets. It would be prudent for the government to acknowledge that its assumptions have shifted materially since the Budget. Transparent mid-course corrections, a vigilant eye on the fiscal arithmetic, and a calibrated approach to crisis relief may well be called for over 2026-27.

## Fractured future

MC14 exposes the limitations of WTO

The 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) of the World Trade Organization (WTO)—in Yaoundé, Cameroon—ended without agreement, underlining deeper structural problems that endanger the future of multilateralism. The most visible flashpoint was the moratorium on e-commerce duties. Since 1998, members have agreed not to impose Customs duty on electronic transmission, which comprises everything from software downloads to streaming. Today, that seemingly technical issue has become a proxy for a larger divide. The United States (US) and other advanced economies want a permanent extension to ensure predictability in the digital trade. India and several developing countries argue that such a move would result in large revenue losses and constrain policy space.

In this regard, India's concerns are not misplaced. As digitisation deepens, revenues on physical goods may erode, and governments will need alternative fiscal tools. There is also genuine ambiguity over what constitutes "electronic transmission" and whether the moratorium covers content or just the medium. These are unresolved questions with real economic implications. At a time when coalitions are fluid and issue-based bargaining is the norm, isolation weakens negotiating leverage. The collapse of talks was not driven by India. The sharper clash was between the US, pushing for a longer extension, and Brazil, which blocked any consensus over frustrations on agriculture. The episode shows how negotiations are now linked across issues and how major players are willing to block agreements.

On the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement, India's position is harder to defend. Though the country has argued that it risks expanding the WTO's scope beyond its core mandate, the agreement focuses on investment transparency, simplifying procedures, and regulatory coherence. These are measures that India needs to improve its investment climate. Opposing its incorporation into the WTO framework on procedural grounds, particularly because it is a plurilateral initiative, risks appearing overly rigid. The concern that plurilateral agreements could dilute multilateralism is understandable. But with over 120 members backing the IFD, blocking it does little to strengthen the system; it only sidelines India from shaping its evolution. A more pragmatic approach would be to engage, negotiate safeguards, and ensure that development concerns are built into the framework.

The larger takeaway from MC14 is the fragmentation of global trade governance. Developed economies are pushing new rules on digital trade and investment. Developing countries are defending policy space and negotiating unfinished agreements, along with special and differential treatment. Bridging this divide through consensus is becoming difficult. Compounding this is the weakening of the WTO's standing itself. The continued blocking of appointments to the Appellate Body by the US has rendered the enforcement mechanism ineffective. Rules without enforcement have reduced the system's credibility and even effectiveness. Thus, the WTO continues to function in a limited sense, monitoring trade policies and providing a forum for discussion, but its core role as a rule-making body is under strain. A lot will depend on how developed countries, particularly the US, take the rule-based trading regime forward. Since countries are getting integrated through free-trade agreements, India will also have to move in this direction. It has concluded some important agreements in recent months and needs to build on the momentum.



## Priced out of India's digital revolution

Subsidising smartphone production while taxing consumption is slowing demand

India's economy has been on the ascendant over the last decade, driven by large-scale, digital-first policy reforms. These well-thought-out strategic interventions have led to the creation of an ecosystem that empowers citizens.

The Jan Dhan Yojana has brought more than 570 million previously unbanked citizens into the formal financial system, laying the foundation for the "JAM trinity"—Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and mobile—enabling direct benefit transfers and reducing leakages in welfare delivery. The Unified Payment Interface (UPI) has widened digital penetration across India by nudging millions towards digital payments. The removal of goods and services tax (GST) on individual insurance premiums is helping India move towards becoming an insurtech nation. Tying this together is affordable connectivity. India has one of the lowest mobile data costs globally, providing internet access to vast segments of the population.

Through all this, India has built one of the world's most ambitious digital public infrastructures. However, the effectiveness of this framework rests heavily on smartphones that facilitate these transactions. Smartphones have seen a steady decline in sales. In Q4 of 2025, smartphone shipments fell by 7 per cent year-on-year, as rising input prices contributed to a decline in sales. Now, rising memory costs, rupee depreciation, and an 18 per cent GST are pricing millions of Indians out of the digital economy.

### The issue is structural, not cyclical

Three forces have converged in 2026 to create what the industry is calling a black swan moment for mass-market smartphones.

Global Dram (dynamic random-access memory) prices have surged by more than 50 per cent quarter-on-quarter in Q1 2026. NAND flash (non-volatile memory) prices have risen by 80-90 per cent. For an

entry-level device, memory now accounts for 43 per cent of the total bill of materials cost, driving a 25 per cent increase in production costs in a single quarter, according to Counterpoint Research.

Simultaneously, the rupee has depreciated about 5 per cent against the dollar over the past year, increasing imported component costs. Add to that an 18 per cent GST, the highest smartphone tax rate among major emerging economies. As a result, a sub-₹10,000 phone now costs 25 to 35 per cent more. India manufactures about 110 million smartphones annually, largely in the sub-₹20,000 segment. A demand collapse now threatens the economics of production lines across the country.



DEBASHISH PANDA

### This is an infrastructure issue

The smartphone is now part of basic economic infrastructure. A farmer in Vidarbha uses his phone to check mandi prices before selling his produce. A dairy cooperative member in Anand receives payments and accesses her bank account through it. A daily-wage construction worker in Patna authenticates Aadhaar for rural job scheme wages. A student in rural Odisha accesses the DIKSHA e-learning platform by the National Council of Educational Research and Training.

Tier-2, Tier-3, and rural India now account for over 70 per cent of new smartphone adoption and more than half of India's internet users. Around 30 per cent farmers use smartphone; self-employed workers (58 per cent of India's workforce), account for 30 to 40 per cent. For them, the sub-₹20,000 smartphone is key to livelihood.

### The fiscal argument runs both ways

For GST rate changes, the focus is on immediate revenue loss. In smartphones, the multiplier effect matters. First-time users enter the formal digital economy—driving UPI transactions, e-commerce pur-

chases, fintech credit uptake, and spending on data and digital services, all generating tax revenue.

A modest 5 per cent price reduction could add up to 3 million units annually in the sub-₹20,000 segment. The initial GST impact can be offset through downstream digital activity within three to five years.

### The PLI paradox

There is a policy contradiction. The government has invested heavily in making India the world's second-largest smartphone manufacturer, with production at ₹5.45 trillion in FY25. Exports have crossed ₹2 trillion.

Production-linked incentive (PLI) works on the supply side, incentivising manufacturers to produce in India. Demand depends on whether Indians can afford to buy those phones, which is shaped by GST. Today, the government subsidises production through PLI while taxing consumption at 18 per cent. As volumes fall in the sub-₹20,000 segment, manufacturing economics weaken; Indian manufacturing competitiveness depends on strong domestic demand.

### The ITC challenge and its solution

Any honest treatment of this issue must acknowledge a technical complexity. Domestic smartphone manufacturers accumulate significant input tax credits (ITCs), estimated at 15-17 per cent, against which they offset their output GST liability. A rate reduction on output, if not accompanied by a mechanism to address this ITC position, could create an inverted duty structure that disadvantages domestic manufacturers.

This is a solvable problem. The appropriate accompanying measure is a streamlined ITC refund mechanism for domestic manufacturers in the sub-₹20,000 segment, a provision already available under GST law for inverted duty situations. A GST rate reduction paired with accelerated ITC refunds delivers consumer affordability without penalising domestic manufacturers.

### What policy can do

Three interventions deserve serious consideration. The first is a two-stage GST correction: An immediate reduction from 18 per cent to 15 per cent on smartphones priced below ₹20,000, paired with a GST ITC refund to deliver price relief without creating duty inversion.

The second is extending PLI support to the sub-₹20,000 segment, where value addition is weakest.

The third deserves particular attention because the funding mechanism already exists. The government's Digital Bharat Nidhi, a designated fund for digital inclusion, can provide an option for a direct consumer subsidy on sub-₹20,000 smartphones without requiring fresh budgetary allocation.

China's 2024 experience is instructive. A direct 15 per cent consumer rebate on devices below 6,000 RMB delivered measurable demand stimulus while supporting domestic manufacturing. An Indian equivalent, targeted at sub-₹20,000 devices and delivered through existing retail and e-commerce infrastructure, could be deployed faster than a GST Council revision. The fund exists. The need is documented. The policy decision now presents a clear opportunity to accelerate growth and unlock demand at scale.

The author is former chairman of Irdai and former Secretary of the Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Finance. The views are personal.

## Custodian, not owner or promoter

Bombay House, the headquarters of the Tata Group built in 1924, continues to be a historic landmark for corporate India. But the core of the Tata Group at Fort in South Mumbai—witness to thousands of critical meetings over the decades—may now be in the midst of clearing the air over leadership uncertainties in the salt-to-software conglomerate.

The context here is a board meeting of Tata Sons on February 24, when Tata Trusts Chairman Noel Tata raised questions related to losses in some Tata entities, mainly in the semiconductor, aviation, and e-commerce businesses.

Noel Tata, who became chairman of Tata Trusts in 2024, sought to link the financials of the Tata Group with any decision on extending the term of N Chandrasekaran (or Chandra) as Tata Sons chairman. Noel Tata's intervention on the subject of Chandra's extension in the February 2026 meeting was contrary to the unanimous stand taken by Tata Trusts in July 2025 on the matter. July last year, Tata Trusts, including Noel Tata, had recommended a third five-year term for Chandra as chairman of Tata Sons while battling for continuity in leadership at a time when the group was foraging into transformational business.

Following the unexpected turn of events, it may help to take a closer look at what Tata Trusts, its trustees, its chairman, and the nominee directors stand for vis-à-vis Tata Sons. Tata Trusts, which owns a majority stake of 66 per cent in Tata Sons, the holding company of the conglomerate, is the promoter of the group. However, trustees of public charitable trusts, such as Tata Trusts, are described as custodians and not owners, irrespective of family name. So, no individual in Tata Trusts is an owner or a promoter.

Tata Trusts is a group of public charitable trusts,

which are different from family trusts in the case of global philanthropies. As per regulations, Tata Trusts is governed by the Maharashtra Public Trusts Act, which confers no distinct authority to the chairman of Tata Trusts.

That brings us to these questions: Who is the Tata Sons chairman answerable to? And what power does the Tata Trusts chairman have in determining the Tata Sons chairman's appointment, tenure or termination? The chairman of Tata Sons is answerable to the board of directors of the company and is also accountable to the principal shareholder—Tata Trusts.

According to Article 121A of the Tata Sons Articles of Association (AoA), key board decisions of Tata Sons require the affirmative vote of directors nominated by Tata Trusts. This allows Tata Trusts to vote over major matters, including strategic plans, investments and top leadership changes such as the appointment and removal of Tata Sons chairman.

To put things in perspective, in the current scenario where Noel Tata has raised questions about Chandra's performance as Tata Sons chairman before granting him a third term, any review of the unanimous decision taken by Tata Trusts trustees in July 2025 must also require the unanimity of the trustees. The only occasion that was put to a vote in Tata Trusts was the removal of a nominee director in September 2025. Following that, there are only two nominee directors on the Tata Sons board—Noel Tata and industrialist Venu Srinivasan, vice-chairman of Tata Trusts. One-third of the total number of Tata Sons board members, currently six, can be Trusts nominees.

It's important to highlight that Tata Trusts chairman does not enjoy any special rights that are

different from other trustees. While Cyrus Mistry's ouster as Tata Sons chairman in 2016 is widely seen as a call taken by then group emeritus chairman and Tata Trusts trustee Ratan Tata, insiders explain the process as a "unanimous" decision by Tata Trusts in the following manner: Ratan Tata had convened a meeting of the trustees and obtained their unanimous approval for the next step of removal by the Tata Sons board. The impression is that Ratan Tata's position as a former Tata Sons chairman for more than two decades gave him a "unique standing".

In terms of authority, there is another oddity in the current situation. After the Cyrus Mistry saga, article 118 of the AoA was amended to provide that the same person cannot be chairman of both Tata Sons and Tata Trusts. The amended article did not mention that a Tata Trusts chairman cannot be inducted into the Tata Sons board. But, it was unusual when Noel Tata, soon after becoming the chairman of Tata Trusts, got inducted into Tata Sons as a nominee director.

Historians point out the last individual promoters of the Tata Group were Sir Ratan Tata and Sir Dorabjee Tata, who had no heirs and whose liquidated assets form the core of the two trusts (by their names) that now own Tata Sons. More recently, Ratan Tata may have felt that "the family" should find a place in the Trusts, but businesses were intended to be free of Trusts' control.

While the leadership issues may get sorted in the upcoming board meetings of Tata Trusts and Tata Sons, listing of the holding company of the Group on stock exchange should potentially resolve the bigger question on ownership and control. If Tata Sons is listed, the special vote rights of Tata Trusts, under Article 121A, may be a thing of the past, thereby removing many of the current ambiguities. Once that is done, Bombay House can get back to business as usual and Tata Trusts can focus more on charitable activities.

## Why we need tech sovereignty



AJIT BALAKRISHNAN

temporary world, public discourse about this topic is presented more diplomatically.

This brings us to the essence of this book: It directly addresses issues such as technology's role in preserving a country's sovereignty, the various interest groups involved in this tussle, and the various forms these issues take. And all of this in a mere 180-page paperback.

To start with, this book points out that technological sovereignty is essential for a nation's economic independence and, as an example of this, describes how, during the Kargil War of 1999, India discovered that it could not use the mapping technology that the country had licensed and found that the only way out was to develop its own satellite navigation system. The author also describes some of

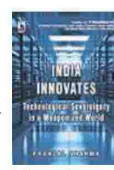
the dilemmas India faces in this regard. Our neighbour, China, for example, used its domestic technology skills to create what is popularly known as "the Great Firewall", a filtering and blocking regime that separates its own mainland internet traffic from global platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia. This is what allowed domestic Chinese companies such as Tencent's WeChat, Alibaba, Baidu and TikTok to dominate the domestic Chinese market as well as keep the data within the country.

The author also points out that China has, in its Made in China 2025 project, set the target of replacing foreign players across 10 strategic sectors, from semiconductors to robotics and medical devices, and the author spells out the specific ways the Chinese government is supporting the

domestic efforts.

On another front, the author describes how India does almost nothing to "ring-fence" its domestic data. Almost all data centres, particularly the hyper-scaled ones that operate in India are foreign-controlled, even when they are hosted within India.

Some action, says the author, is underway to ring-fence India's domestic data, and he gives the examples of the Reserve Bank of India requiring that data, such as Indian users' UPI data, be stored only in India. Similar efforts are underway to ensure that Indian government data is stored by Indian Cloud providers within India, as well as "critical personal data". The author also points out the dangers and processes of "Data Colonisation". Data



India Innovates: Technological Sovereignty in a Weaponized World by Pranjal Sharma Published by Vikas Publishing 208 pages ₹399

colonisation, he points out, is not just about privacy; it's about power, inequality, and who controls the rules of the digital world, "turning human life into a resource to be mined and controlled by a few".

The author devotes chapters specifically analysing the roles of such things as "Rare Earths", "Navigation, Space and Shipping", "Digital Infrastructure", "AI and GenAI", and "Defence and National Security", and the challenges India faces in these areas.

The author goes beyond startups and "jugaad". He covers: Government systems, manufacturing and infrastructure, healthcare and agriculture and emerging technologies. This makes the work feel more like a macro-economic map of change, not just a busi-

ness book. The book is also grounded in India's realities, with a large work-force entering jobs each month, and the fear of job loss due to automation and the need for inclusive growth. This nuance is important—and rare.

He describes (and praises) some of the areas where good work is being done. He points out that the Union Budget 2026 has "doubled down on efforts to allow adequate funds for tech sovereignty". India has also announced the India Semiconductor Mission 2.0, with a focus that goes beyond assembling and manufacturing. He also describes the good work being done by the Bangalore-based startup, Sarvam AI, which has introduced two new homegrown large language models, and he correctly points out that this could be a turning point for India's AI ambitions. All in all, this book deserves to be required reading for almost all levels of policymakers.

ajitb@rediffmail.com



The Free Press Journal Founder Editor: S Sadanand

# Census will bring clarity

India's long-delayed census, set to begin today, is a reminder that even essential institutions can be paused, but not postponed indefinitely. This will be the 10th census in the country's history and the eighth since Independence — a continuity that reflects both administrative strength and democratic necessity. Originally due in 2021, the exercise was deferred because of the Covid-19 pandemic and related disruptions. Its resumption now is not merely procedural: it is foundational. By March 2027, governance in India will once again rest on updated, empirical data rather than extrapolations and guesswork. In a country as vast and diverse as India, planning without reliable numbers is akin to navigating without a compass. That the census will be conducted digitally this time is a matter of justified pride, marking a significant step forward in both scale and sophistication. It also underscores India's growing capacity to harness technology for large-scale public administration and data-driven decision-making.

*By bringing empirical clarity to these debates, the census can help replace rhetoric with reason*

The transition to a digital census is more than a technological upgrade; it signals a shift in how the state engages with citizens. Leveraging India's extensive mobile network that is the envy of even developed nations, individuals will, for the first time, be able to submit their own details using the mobile number of the head of the household or spouse. This participatory approach could improve accuracy and reduce delays, even as trained enumerators will continue to verify and validate the information collected. The questionnaire — comprising 33 queries ranging from housing conditions to asset ownership — seeks to build a granular picture of Indian life. Notably, the inclusion of caste data, last comprehensively collected in 1935, marks a potentially transformative moment. For decades, public policy has relied on outdated figures and rough estimates to address deeply contested questions of representation and resource allocation. By bringing empirical clarity to these debates, the census can help replace rhetoric with reason, though it will undoubtedly require careful handling to avoid political misuse.

The importance of the census, an institution with roots stretching back over two millennia to ancient empires, cannot be overstated. In modern India, it is the backbone of governance, guiding everything from infrastructure development to welfare schemes. When resources are limited, their allocation must be informed by evidence: which regions still lack electricity, where educational deficits persist, and how economic disparities are distributed. The new data will also illuminate demographic trends, including the uneven success of family planning initiatives across regions. Such insights are indispensable for shaping future policy. In the end, the census is not just a count of people; it is a mirror held up to the nation. The clearer the reflection, the better equipped India will be to address its challenges and realise its aspirations.

# A war without a compass

As reports suggest, US President Donald Trump now wants Arab states to share the financial burden of the US-Israel war against Iran. What this framing ignores is a simpler truth: the world is already preparing for a conflict he initiated in concert with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — and the bill has been mounting by the day. In India, queues for LPG cylinders are lengthening, with black-market prices reportedly tripling or even quadrupling. Fuel-linked inflation looms, threatening to ripple through transport, food, and household budgets. In Australia, at least two provinces have withdrawn free public transport as fuel costs surge. Even in the United States, the average gasoline price has crossed \$4 a gallon for the first time since 2022. From Indonesia to Kuwait, lives have been lost — peacekeepers, migrant workers, ordinary citizens caught in a widening arc of instability which has left few countries untouched.

More troubling is the absence of clarity about purpose. The rationale for the war appears to shift with the political winds: from regime change in Iran to talk of collecting nuclear warheads. Such moving goalposts erode credibility and deepen global unease. Even close allies are asking tough questions. Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has publicly queried the objective of the campaign. Within the US administration itself, dissent is visible. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard has indicated there is no imminent nuclear threat from Iran — an assessment that should, by any measure, temper the rush to escalate. Yet the narrative of an urgent nuclear danger from Tehran persists, seemingly less as an evidence-based conclusion and more as a post hoc justification. Wars fought on elastic premises tend to expand in scope while shrinking in legitimacy.

The rhetoric has now turned openly punitive. Threats to destroy Iran's oil infrastructure and water desalination facilities if critical sea lanes are impeded signal a willingness to impose long-term suffering on civilians for short-term strategic ends. Such measures would set back reconstruction for decades and blur the line between military necessity and collective punishment. History has judged harshly those who embraced such doctrines, and it is unlikely to be kinder now. The imperative, therefore, is urgent and unambiguous: de-escalation. A ceasefire, back-channel diplomacy, and a return to verifiable, multilateral frameworks are the only credible paths forward. The global economy cannot absorb a prolonged shock; nor can fragile regions withstand the spillover. Peace, in this moment, is not idealism — it is the only realistic policy.

Guest Column SHIVAPRASAD KHENED

The debate over social media has entered a new phase. Karnataka's Chief Minister, in his recent budget speech, announced restrictions on social media use for children under sixteen, citing digital addiction and psychological harm from excessive online exposure. Reports indicate other states are contemplating similar measures. These discussions aren't isolated. Globally, governments grapple with the same issues: Australia has enacted strict laws barring minors from social media, while European nations like France and the UK debate comparable policies. The concerns — mental health crises, cyberbullying, and sleep disruption — are valid and backed by studies from organizations like the Pew Research Center, which show teens spending over seven hours daily on screens.

Anyone familiar with social networks knows the flood of forwards, unverified claims, and sensational opinions that dominate feeds. Platforms like WhatsApp and X (formerly Twitter) are often blamed for misinformation — "WhatsApp University" captures the chaos of viral hoaxes that sway elections and incite violence, as seen in India's 2020 Delhi riots. In such a climate, calls to ban or regulate seem inevitable and politically savvy. Leaders score points by promising protection. Yet, a deeper question lingers: Is the platform the villain, or how we wield it? Social media isn't inherently toxic. Amid torrents of trivia — cat videos, conspiracy theories, and rage bait — one finds nuggets of value: TED Talks clips, citizen journalism from conflict zones, or live ISRO rocket launches. These remind us the medium is neutral, like a knife that can harm, or cut bread. Responsibility falls on users, creators, and gatekeepers.

History echoes this. Gutenberg's printing press in 1440 democratized knowledge, sparking the Renaissance and Reformation. Books proliferated, literacy soared from 10% to near-universal in Europe over centuries. But it also unleashed superstition-filled pamphlets, witch-hunt propaganda, and Martin Luther's inflammatory tracts that fuelled wars. Critics decried it as Satan's tool, yet it was never banned. The tech-enabled, so-called adiabatic through literacy; diversity and censorship laws that evolved into free speech protections.

This pattern repeats. Radio spread Hitler's message in 1930s Germany but also FDR's fireside chats uniting America. Television amplified McCarthyism yet delivered civil rights coverage that galvanized change. Today, social media follows suit. In India, where 500 million users make it the world's largest market, platforms host NASA's black hole visuals, Nobel Laureates debunking myths, and Discovery

values, power-sharing. Michael Burgess notes it's no mere mechanism — it's institutionalised division. Core-periphery lines must hold; states must manage concurrency without intrusion. Think polyphony: Harmonious, independent voices from the centre, states, and locals. Yet democracy's erosion — V-Dem's 2025 report flags one-third of humanity in autocratic backslide — dims federal shine. Federalism is a daily plebiscite: honest talk, good-faith fights. Judge by users, not abuses. It's normative, enabling policy labs, like Kerala's health model or Gujarat's industry push. But India risks a "monochromatic wasteland", per analysts. Prime ministerial rule centralises; institutions wobble amid paralysis and silence. Missing: Plumbing — oversight bodies. Persuasion and gatekeepers sustain it, yet independents like CAG and the Election Commission are defanged, tilting to the Centre. Separation of powers becomes party lines; bureaucrats pledge allegiance to rulers. "Double-engine" governments mock federalism — Heather Gerken calls it treating opposition

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Long overdue, indeed**  
The census has been overdue from 2021 and is to be conducted at last. Our favourable demographic pattern augurs well for production of goods and services and with a declining child dependency ratio, this would boost savings and investment. There are also challenges such as lack of employment, educational and health status of the population and most importantly the skill development of the labor force. We need to draw up the right economic policies through timely data acquisition as equations go off set by ageing population.  
**R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai**

**Drug-free India**  
The vision of a drug-free India requires the concerted efforts of the government, civil society, and citizens alike. While the task ahead is formidable, the government's commitment to root out this menace is a step in the right direction. By implementing stringent laws, enhancing education and awareness, providing

# In the debate over social media ills, let's not shoot the messenger

The medium is neutral, like a knife that can harm, or cut bread — responsibility falls on users, creators, and gatekeepers



Channel reels on wildlife. During COVID-19, ISRO shared satellite data on migrant movements, aiding relief efforts. The same Twitter that spreads rumours carries verified health updates from the ICMR.

The real challenge isn't banning but enriching the ecosystem. India, with two-thirds of its 1.4 billion people under 35, relies on digital gateways for news — 80% of youth get info from Instagram and YouTube, per a 2024 ORF report. Governments produce troves of public-funded content: NITI Aayog surveys, UGC research papers, and DRDO innovations. Yet these languish in silos — PDFs on obscure sites

seen only by elites. A 2023 RTI revealed 70% of ministry reports garner under 1,000 views annually. Social media offers a fix. Imagine ministries partnering with influencers for Reels explaining farm laws or climate data. Universities could run TikTok series on ancient history, making the Vedas viral. Public institutions — ISRO, IITs, ICMR — could hire young creators to translate reports into infographics. Pilot programs exist: The UK's NHS uses TikTok for mental health tips, reaching 1.5 million teens. In India, MyGov's Instagram experiments boosted engagement by 300%. Scaling this democratises knowledge taxpayers

fund, counters fakes with facts, and engages digital natives.

Educators and scholars must join. Rather than shunning "frivolous" platforms, they could post threads on quantum physics or election data, like physicist Sabine Hossenfelder does on YouTube. Platforms' algorithms reward quality: thoughtful content gains traction, as seen with Vsauce's 20 million subscribers teaching science playfully.

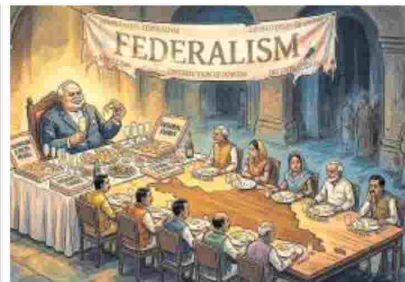
Navigating this requires discernment, like Marie Curie's radium hunt. She sifted 8 tons of pitchblende for a gram of the element, enduring burns and poverty. Social media demands similar effort: curate feeds, verify sources via Alt News or Boom Live, and seek signal amid noise. Tools like NewsGuard rate site reliability; browser extensions flag fakes.

Ultimately, digital culture mirrors us. If millions peddle lies, toxicity thrives — as in the 2024 US elections, flooded with deepfakes. But shared wisdom prevails elsewhere: Brazil's fact-checkers on WhatsApp curbed Bolsonaro-era misinformation. In India, the task transcends regulation and elevates use. Governments must seed quality content, not just police it. Don't shoot the messenger — arm it with better messages.

Shivaprasad Khened is a veteran science communicator and museum professional based in Mumbai.

# 'Bread and circuses' endures in our champagne-pizza federalism

Nationalists favour central lodges, scorning devolution. Yet federalism incentivises a 'race to the top'; it fosters choice and averts Leviathan



states as "theirs", not "ours". One-size-fits-all policies — like GST tweaks without state buy-in — undermine it.

Robust federalism needs architecture: Fed incentives, not conflicting signals. Nationalists favour central lodges, scorning devolution. Yet federalism incentivises a "race to the top" — Telangana's pharma hubs inspire Tamil Nadu. It fosters choice and experimentation, and it averts

Leviathan. Modi's tenure dismantles this scaffolding, per critics.

India lacks federal culture; citizens must embrace it. "Cooperative federalism" is a rhetorical sleight of hand — like Magritte's "This is not a pipe". Erosion stems from executive tyranny, or "referee capture" (Levitsky-Zibart). States cry foul: Funds withheld, like Karnataka's drought phials ignored. The Centre acts as an invasive weed, states powerless.

Global lessons abound. US federalism strains under Trump-era central grabs, yet states like California lead on climate. Canada's "executive federalism" balances via summits. Brazil's states innovate amid corruption. India could revive via NITI Aayog reforms: Mandatory state consultations, fiscal equity, and an autonomous Finance Commission.

Rebuild with ethics, maps, and sturdy boats — institutional gardening. Revive Planning Commission-like forums without central bias. Empower governors neutrally. Judicial oversight on fund delays. Party decentralisation: BJP and Congress should foster state chapters. Citizen education: School curricula on federal roles.

Predatory "cooperative federalism" blends president-PM powers; states, bludgeoned limbs, obey. Journey to champagne-pizza federalism — flashy events (G20 summits) over substance — must halt. True federalism: Symphonic, not solo. India rebuilds by nurturing states as partners, not subordinates.

The author comments on global affairs.

Dear reader, We are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to letters@fpj.co.in with the title of the letter in the subject line. Using snail mail? Send your letters to The Free Press Journal, Free Press House, 215 Free Press Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai 400021.

**Cool plan(e)t**  
April 1, known as April Fool's Day, is marked by playful pranks and practical jokes. The custom continues across schools, offices and homes, with students, colleagues and families taking part. But instead of fooling people, the day could promote a greener message. Planting a sapling can turn it into an "April Cool Day", encouraging environmental responsibility. Let us not fool the Earth, but take small steps to make it a cooler and better place.  
**Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai**



**Save the Himalayas**  
Since time immemorial the mighty Himalayas have nourished the vagaries of time, protecting Mother Earth from climatic conditions and providing a delicate balance to our ecosystem. However, recent decades have witnessed rampant human activity that is causing incalculable damage. Uttarakhand is a source of major Indian rivers that cater to the needs of a majority of Indian population; the snow-clad Himalayas provide a mesmerising crowning beauty, offering a serene environment. But recent trends like uncontrolled building activity highlight the growing danger to its existence. Together with the Western Ghats, the Himalayas are the highest risk-prone areas, owing to unsustainable development projects damaging the fragile ecosystem. A multi-disciplinary approach towards a thorough understanding of local ecologies and mandatory environmental checks must precede commercial projects.  
**Vijay Singh Adhikari, Nainital**

rehabilitation services, strengthening law enforcement and fostering international cooperation, India can create an environment that is hostile to drug abuse.  
**Mahi Khandelwal, Ujjain**  
**Change in mindset required**  
A paradigm shift in parental mindset is crucial for the well-being of our children. Presently, parents overwhelmingly prioritise prestigious institutions like

the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), or aspire to high-ranking positions such as Collectors or District Magistrates for their children. Unfortunately, this places tremendous pressure on youngsters, regardless of their individual aptitudes, forcing them to endure the rigorous and exceedingly stressful process of entrance and competitive examinations. Tragically,

some individuals, unable to bear this examination burden, choose to end their lives. Unless there is a proportional increase in job opportunities within and outside the country, we risk more qualified individuals becoming disheartened and seeing a surge in suicide rates. Our nation needs not only engineers, doctors, IAS, and IPS officers but also scientists, lawyers, accountants, journalists, and professionals from

diverse disciplines, all of which offer excellent prospects. Instead of fixating on a select few professions, parents should foster an environment that encourages their children to explore these varied fields of study. By doing so, they can help alleviate the immense pressure placed on their children and promote a more balanced approach to education and career choices.  
**Subhash Jain, Muzaffarpur**

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Amending IT Rules

Govt must adopt a cautious approach

THE Union government's proposed amendments to the Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021, reflect a significant shift in India's digital regulatory arena. Primarily, the changes aim to compel intermediaries to comply with a broad array of government-issued advisories, guidelines and standard operating procedures as a condition for retaining safe harbour protections under Section 79 of the IT Act. While the intent of ensuring a "safe, trusted and accountable Internet" is laudable, the mechanism risks upsetting the delicate balance between regulation and freedom.

The most contentious part of the draft is the expansion of executive authority. By making compliance with non-statutory instruments such as advisories and clarifications mandatory, the government will effectively grant itself sweeping powers without clear legislative backing. This can create a regulatory grey zone. The fear, as highlighted by votaries of digital rights, is not unfounded: ambiguity in rules often leads to excessive caution, which can stifle free speech. The proposed widening of content oversight is also worrisome. Bringing intermediaries and even user-generated news content under the purview of an Inter-Departmental Committee is a step toward tighter scrutiny of online communication. Treating everyday users and influencers on a par with digital news publishers in terms of compliance obligations could lead to complications. While accountability is necessary, particularly in this era of misinformation and fake news, the lack of transparent checks and balances in such oversight mechanisms could lead to arbitrary decision-making.

At the same time, the government's concerns are not devoid of merit. The rapid proliferation of AI-generated deepfakes presents a genuine threat to public trust and social stability. However, combating deepfakes and harmful content should not come at the cost of undermining fundamental digital freedom. Ultimately, effective regulation must be rooted in clarity, proportionality and accountability. India's digital future depends on cautiously preserving the openness that has made the Internet a vital space for expression and innovation.

## Liberty vs marriage

Law must recognise evolving relationships

TWO recent rulings of the Allahabad High Court have exposed the uneasy fault line between personal liberty and the institution of marriage. In one case, the court observed that a consensual live-in relationship between adults, even if one partner is married, is not a criminal offence. In another, it refused protection to such a couple, holding that the legal rights of a spouse cannot be undermined in the name of individual freedom. The apparent contradiction is, in fact, a reflection of a deeper legal vacuum. Indian law has moved, albeit cautiously, towards recognising live-in relationships as part of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution. Yet, it continues to accord primacy to marriage as a legally enforceable institution, carrying rights and obligations that cannot be casually set aside. The result is a patchwork jurisprudence where courts decriminalise relationships but hesitate to legitimise their consequences.

This tension is not merely legal; it is social and moral. Marriage in India remains both a contract and a deeply embedded social norm. But the reality of modern relationships is far more fluid. Individuals do move on — sometimes without formal closure — and the law cannot remain blind to this lived reality. Denying protection or recognition does not dissolve such relationships; it merely pushes them into vulnerability and legal uncertainty. What is needed is not judicial inconsistency but legislative clarity. A framework that balances marital rights with individual autonomy is long overdue. It must acknowledge that while marriage deserves protection, personal liberty cannot be held hostage to it indefinitely.

Ultimately, the law must reflect a simple truth: when relationships break down, allowing individuals the dignity to move on is not a threat to social order. It's a necessary adaptation to it.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 1926

## 'United' Nationalist Conference

WE have already had something to say about the method by which signatures to the manifesto convening the above conference were obtained. At least one very prominent Indian, as we know, signed the manifesto under the mistaken impression that it was to be a conference of all parties, and not a conference of all parties minus one, and that one generally believed to be the strongest and most powerful party in political India at present. What Mr. C. Y. Chintamani evidently omitted to make clear was that it was not so much a conference for uniting all parties in the fight against the government as for uniting all parties in the fight against the Swarnaj party. It was, in short, an electioneering move on the part of certain leaders of certain political parties who felt that alone they would be powerless against the Swarnaj party and that their only chance of successfully contesting the elections lay in pooling their resources and presenting a united front to the party. For our part, if we could feel sure that there was any chance of the several non-Swarnajist parties really forming themselves into one single party in opposition to the Swarnaj party on the basis of principle, policy and programme, then much as we ourselves desire the formation of one single political party in the country, the party of the motherland, in opposition to the government, we should welcome the present endeavour because two main parties are, in our present conditions, better than a multiplicity of small and, therefore, weak parties.

AJIT RANADE  
NOTED ECONOMIST

IMAGINE spending the best years of your life — from the age of 22 to 29 — in a waiting room. You are educated, ambitious and capable. But the job that you are waiting for has odds worse than a lottery. So, you study harder, make an attempt once more, and wait again. Meanwhile, you peers elsewhere are earning, saving, climbing career ladders, getting married, starting families. You are doing none of that. You are preparing for the next exam.

This is the lived reality for an estimated 1.1 crore young graduates in India today. The fifth edition of the 'State of Working India' report, published last month by Azim Premji University, reveals a startling statistic: 67% of all unemployed youth aged 20-29 are graduates.

In 2004, graduates constituted just 32% of the unemployed youth cohort. Their share in the youth population has itself risen from 10% to 28% over these two decades. But employment has not kept pace. Between 2004 and 2023, India produced roughly 50 lakh graduates every year. Only 28 lakh graduates found employment annually, and a mere 17 lakh entered salaried work. The arithmetic of national waste is stark.

The overall unemployment rate among all graduates aged 22 to 29 is as high as 33%. Yet this rate drops to below 4% after the age of 30. Something happens around 30 to dissolve what had been an acute crisis just years earlier. What happens is not success. It is resignation. Young men eventually succumb to economic pressure, marriage obligations, or parental urgency and accept whatever work is available, however dead-end. Young women, by contrast, often exit the labour force altogether, retreating into unpaid domestic care work. The data shows this starkly: male unemployment falls because

## Life in a waiting room

Why 11 million educated young Indians are squandering their most productive years



SHORTFALL: The Indian economy is failing to create enough good jobs. REUTERS

men find some job; female unemployment falls because women stop looking for it.

Why do millions of graduates spend the prime years of their lives in this limbo? The answer lies in a national calculation, which is ultimately socially ruinous. The private sector offers starting salaries that have barely moved in two decades. In 2011, a young male graduate earned about Rs 21,800 a month. By 2023, this figure had fallen to Rs 19,573. That is a drastic drop, and when adjusted for inflation, it is disastrous.

No wonder those educated youth don't miss out on joining the private sector treadmill of entry-level jobs. A government job is a different story. A government driver, by comparison, may earn four times his private sector counterpart. A government clerk enjoys health cover, a pension, iron-clad job security, and social prestige. No wonder the aspiring graduate chooses to wait.

This wait takes a specific and peculiar form: the endless preparation for competitive government examinations. A study by Kunal Mangal of Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPS) data found that in 2018-19 Group-A recruitment in 2018-19 drew 13.7 million applicants, nearly four times the next largest recruiter in the state. About 80% of all unemployed individuals in Tamil Nadu were simultaneously preparing for a TNPS exam.

When the state imposed a partial hiring freeze between 2001

A government clerk enjoys health cover, a pension, iron-clad job security and social prestige. No wonder the aspiring graduate chooses to wait.

and 2006, vacancies fell by 86%, but exam applications actually rose by 7%. Preparation for a government job was crowding out private sector employment.

This pattern is not peculiar to Tamil Nadu. It is seen across states. The government exam has become India's great waiting room.

The private sector, meanwhile, offers a treadmill at the entry level, not a career. The Economic Survey 2024-25 noted that only 8.25% of graduates work in roles aligned with their qualifications. Nearly half are in elementary or semi-skilled work — jobs that require a degree for eligibility but deliver no skill development, no learning by doing, no career progression. Between 2012 and 2019, India's GDP grew at 6.7% annually while employment grew at 0.1%. Of 83 million jobs added between 2021-22 and 2023-24, nearly half were in agriculture. Labour laws, rather than protecting workers, encouraged employers to substitute casual

and contract labour for permanent employment.

The gender dimension of this crisis deserves special attention. For young women, the problem is not just unemployment but ensure. Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data confirms that educated women in their early 20s report high unemployment, signaling a genuine desire to work. But by their late 20s, instead of finding employment, they exit the labour force. Marriage expectations and the assumption that domestic care falls entirely on women extinguish participation.

The waste is particularly stark in medicine: women constitute 51% of each incoming medical batch, yet only 17% of practising doctors are women. In rural areas, just 6%. Half the talent, trained at the taxpayer's expense, simply disappears. These non-practising women doctors represent a big loss to society.

Now consider the perverse policy feedback loop. Governments, sympathetic to the plight of unemployed graduates, respond with cash transfer schemes and subsidised coaching for competitive exams. This fiscal expenditure, though well-intentioned, tightens the budget constraint — which, ironically, leaves the government with less room to hire. Vacant Central government posts more than doubled between 2014-15 and 2021-22, from 4.21 lakh to 9.64 lakh. The subsidy deepens the exam-lottery culture; the hiring freeze defeats the purpose.

State governments that subsidise UPSC coaching are, in a sense, funding the lottery queue while letting the prize shrink.

The consequences for India's reservation policy are painful. Affirmative action can only function if the government is actually hiring. When recruitment slows, reserved posts go unfilled. Scheduled Caste employees in the Central government fell by 47% in absolute numbers between 2003 and 2021. The very communities that reservation was designed to lift — Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs — see their representation erode. When one generation gains a government post, the next climbs higher; that intergenerational ladder breaks when the post is never filled. It is no coincidence that the scarcity of government posts has intensified demands for reservation from communities not traditionally covered, such as Marathas in Maharashtra or Gujjars in Rajasthan. Conflict over the reservation share is, at its root, a symptom of an economy failing to create enough good jobs.

The policy prescription follows from the diagnosis. Reduce search friction through better labour market information, job portals and portable apprenticeship schemes that benefit both employers and workers. Fix skills mismatch through employer-driven, not certificate-driven, training. Critically, reduce the enormous premium on government employment through rationalised pay, fixed-term contracts and wider staffing structures.

Unemployment support must be conditioned on an active job search, not passive waiting. And remove structural barriers that push women out of the workforce, with support like creches, flexible work arrangements and safety in commuting.

Even million educated young Indians are squandering the most productive years of their lives in a lottery they will almost certainly lose. The waiting room has become an end in itself. That is a waste of individual lives and of public investment in education. We cannot afford to let our demographic dividend rot in a coaching class or a waiting room.

Courtesy: The Billion Press

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

No country has ever succeeded by treating a large part of its population as second-class citizens — Raghuram Rajan

## The gentle joy of being befooled

IP ANAND

MARK Twain wryly remarked, "April 1, All Fools' Day, is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the other three hundred and sixty-four." Ironically, at a time when deception through fake news and online fraud is rampant, the gentle spirit of April Fools' Day — once marked by playful pranks and shared laughter — has nearly faded into oblivion.

There were times when April 1 possessed an innocent charm. Harmless hoaxes briefly turned ordinary people into cheerful victims and willing participants in collective amusement. One famous prank broadcast by the BBC announced that the iconic Big Ben would replace its traditional hands with digital displays, gifting the originals to the first four callers. A flood of calls followed. When the truth emerged, the callers did not fret or fume, but laughed at themselves. It was a day that allowed people to celebrate the comic side of life.

The young and the old awaited the day planning mischief meticulously. Sweets were often prepared with playful surprises — too salty, too sour or unexpectedly bitter — only to provoke laughter. I recall a neighbour distributing saffron-coloured *laddoos* on the pretext of celebrating her brother's engagement. Temptation triumphed over caution: I swallowed one eagerly, only to discover that it dyed my mouth crimson red. My embarrassment became everyone's delight, including eventually my own.

Self-reminders rarely worked. Once at school, I was told that the shooting of a Pakistani film, *Satt Saalgiyan*, was underway near my town. Convinced, two classmates and I hunkered school and cycled miles in excitement, only to return exhausted and disappointed. The next day, we were greeted with cheerful chants of "April Fools!" We had little choice but to laugh along.

Alas, such laughter is lost. We may be fooled more often than ever before, yet laugh far less. Earlier, laughter was the only trick; today's tricks are calculated and harmful. Fake news distorts truth, cyberfraud drains savings and scandals erode trust. Suspicion has replaced simplicity, and cynicism often overshadows cheerfulness. That is why the spirit of April 1 deserves revival — not as a licence for deceit, but as a reminder of harmless humour and the humility of laughing at ourselves. As Robert Frost remarked, "If we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane."

In a world burdened with tension and mistrust, perhaps we need a day that allows us to laugh at ourselves and rediscover the innocent delight of being befooled and being befooled. A society that laughs together quarrels less, and one who can laugh at himself is rarely defeated by despair.

The writer is a retired associate professor based in Jagadhri

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Law must evolve with time

Refer to 'Caste bias persists after conversion'; indeed, it is a sociologically flawed premise that religious conversion helps in overcoming the caste barrier. The ground reality across villages and towns belies this claim as Dalit converts to Christianity or Islam continue to endure stigma, exclusion and humiliation. By denying them protection under the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, the ruling reinforces injustice rather than correcting it. Caste is a lived social reality, not merely a theological construct. The law must evolve with time and change in social system to ensure dignity, equality and justice for all.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

## Change mindset on caste

Apropos of 'Caste bias persists after conversion', changing one's religion does not automatically erase deep-rooted social prejudices like caste discrimination. Despite legal safeguards and social reforms, individuals continue to face exclusion and inequality even after conversion. It is important for society to understand that true change requires a shift in mindset, not just identity. Education, awareness and strict implementation of laws are essential to eliminate such bias. Only through collective efforts can we build a caste-free society.

VAIBHAV KOCHAR, RAJPURA

## UPSC preparation not wasted effort

Apropos of 'The cost of India's UPSC fixation', the issue is not that failed aspirants become disillusioned; it is that alternative pathways to dignified professions become narrow. Sincere preparation for the UPSC exam — even when it does not culminate in selection — is not a wasted effort. The pilgrimage, if one may say so, lies in the journey, not merely in the destination. The solution is to create alternative institutional pathways — in research, entrepreneurship, state services, public policy — that are credible, financially viable and socially respected.

KBS SIDHU, BY MAIL

## Defence policy needs a relook

Refer to 'Modern warfare exposes India's defence shortcomings'; in the current scenario, Iran is putting up a brave fight against the two most powerful nations — US and Israel — using missiles and drones. However, India is procuring a large number of fighter jets to optimise its depleted squadron strength, which might become obsolete. As regard the pension bill, the axe should not fall on armed forces' veterans. Hundreds of MPs and thousands of MLAs draw hefty salaries and perks and pension just after a five-year term, even multiple pensions. This and other wasteful government expenditure need to be curtailed.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

## Corruption deeply rooted

Apropos of 'Vanishing paddy': missing paddry worth crores highlights the prevailing systemic corruption rooted deeply in our system. The desire for riches is making people hollow in intellect and wisdom. The discrepancy appears to be more in the nature of the crime rather than gross negligence. Lodging of an FIR only after pressure from farmer groups points at collusion. Independent committees comprising farmers and other members from civil society can be formed on a yearly basis to keep a check on crop preservation and to detect irregularities.

NEHA SAINI, CHANDIGARH

## China, the invisible stakeholder

With reference to 'Pak's Dar to visit China for strategic dialogue'; China has high stakes in Iran. China is a major economic partner of Iran and the biggest purchaser of Iranian oil and is a major supplier of arms to Iran. Although China has not come openly in support of Iran, it is an open secret that behind the scenes China has been providing vital sensitive information to Iran to hit US targets. So any negotiation by US with Iran will be incomplete if Chinese interests in Iran are not taken care of.

ASHOK BAHL, KANGRA

# Pakistan's high stakes in mediating Iran crisis



**NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN**  
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST

INDIA has focussed much attention in recent days on Pakistan's role in efforts to end the US-Israel war on Iran. Pakistan, working with Egypt and Türkiye, appears to have carried messages between the Iranian leadership and the US. The process is clouded by uncertainties.

On the one hand, the US is asserting that the two sides are close to a deal even as Trump also continues to say preparations are on for a ground invasion. On the other hand, Iran, which has presented a 15-point list of demands, says there is no deal yet. The war may or may not end soon.

In India, Pakistan's role has evoked two kinds of reactions — outrage that Pakistan could assume any role of importance in the world, and following from this, the second reaction — the dismissal or mockery of the role Pakistan is playing. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar went so far as to describe the role as that of a 'dalaal'.

For the record, India has not called any of the others — Oman, Türkiye or Egypt —

who tried or are trying to mediate as *dalaals* or dismissed their efforts as *dalaali*. Nor has any Indian official used that word for anyone else trying to defuse any other crisis in the world. For instance, Norway's role in West Asia in the 1990s.

Will the government add 'dalaal' to the list of alleged wrongs that India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru committed when he waded into the Korean War in 1950?

Why do countries offer themselves as mediators? For Norway, which hosted the Nobel Peace Prize and played a major role in seeking settlement to the Israel-Palestine conflict and later in Sri Lanka mediation is a prestige project, through which it seeks more leverage in the world. Credibility is important for such efforts, and in its interventions, Norway projected itself as an honest broker. It is another matter that those efforts failed.

Nehru believed his peace efforts in the Korean War would prove that non-alignment had the power to bring the two superpower blocs closer. Pakistan, which has been associated with hosting Osama bin Laden and other notorious terrorist groups, senses an opportunity for image repair.

In a conflict like the one raging in West Asia, whose impact is being felt across the whole world, every country wants the war to end. Some believe they have what it takes to



**EFFORT:** As a mediator, Pakistan senses an opportunity for image repair. REUTERS

knock sense into the warring sides. Pakistan is uniquely positioned for such a role among the countries that are facing several second-order consequences of this conflict. Apart from the impact on its already fragile economy, Pakistan shares a nearly 1,000-km border with Iran on its southwestern flank. Some 20% of Pakistanis are Shia, religiously affiliated to the Iranian state. Shias are the country's largest majority. What happens in Iran reaches into Pakistan. The assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by US-Israel set off deadly violence in Pakistan's predominantly Shia areas, and protests across all its cities.

The Balochistan province of Pakistan borders Baluch regions in Iran. Any US-Israeli

India's strategic environment is changing rapidly once again, underlining Delhi's diplomatic loneliness that began with Operation Sindoor.

attempt to involve this Sunni minority in regime change or a ground invasion of Iran would have repercussions on the Pakistani side of the border. Pakistan is also beholden to the Sunni monarchies who rule the Gulf states and whose petrodollars bail out its economy from time to time.

If the war continues, Pakistan's 'strategic mutual defence agreement' with Saudi Arabia, signed last year, could compel it to put boots on the ground against Iran. It can do this only at its own peril. The reported Saudi prodding of the US that it cannot walk away until Iran is conclusively defeated increases that risk. Pakistan, thus, needs the war to end in its own interests.

Every country can pitch itself as a mediator in a conflict, provided it is fully trusted by all

parties in the conflict, and has the consent of all parties to intervene. Since the start of this war, Islamabad has walked a shaky tightrope between Iran, with which it keeps mostly cordial but careful ties, and US President Donald Trump, with whom Pakistan's de facto leader Field Marshal Asim Munir has a special relationship.

Unlike the Gulf countries, it does not host US bases. Moreover, as a nuclear-armed state, it carries heft in the Islamic world. China has also backed its effort.

The entire project may fail, given the unpredictability of Trump and with Iran not giving in on its conditions. But fear of failing has never come in the way of mediation. Last weekend, the foreign ministers of Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye met in Islamabad, signalling a serious effort by this Islamic quadrilateral for a diplomatic intervention in the war, which is now in its fifth week.

If Israel does not play spoiler — according to a Reuters report, it was asked by the US, on Pakistan's request, to stand down from a planned assassination of Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi and Speaker Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf — and the new quad's efforts progress, Pakistan may host peace talks.

The last time Pakistan played the role of international facilitator was for the US-China detente. Coming during the throes of Pakistan's

failing attempts to hold on to East Pakistan and India's involvement in the Bangladesh liberation war, Henry Kissinger's secret visit from Islamabad to Beijing in July 1971, announced by President Richard Nixon soon after his return, shocked India as much as the rest of the world. The rapprochement was among the drivers of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation the same year giving Delhi the confidence for its December 1971 military campaign that led to the final breakup of Pakistan and the liberation of Bangladesh.

India's strategic environment is changing rapidly once again, underlining Delhi's diplomatic loneliness that began with Operation Sindoor. Mocking Pakistan for its efforts to make peace does not help India at all. Impressing domestic constituencies with word play may be politically satisfying. But as other commentators have noted, it shows up Delhi in poor light, as more bitter about Pakistan than interested in the peace in West Asia.

In its own interests, and in this year of India's BRICS leadership, Delhi would have been so much better served by declaring that it backs all efforts to restore peace, irrespective of which country is involved, instead of mocking Pakistan's efforts. After all, India stands to benefit along with the rest of the world, if these efforts succeed.

# Short service, long neglect



**LT COL GURPRAKASH SINGH VIRK (RETD)**  
EX-JAKLI OFFICER & ADVOCATE

INDIA'S armed forces are one of the most respected institutions in the nation, built on discipline, sacrifice and honour. Yet, within this proud structure exists a silent contradiction — one that affects thousands who once wore the uniform under the Short Service Commission (SSC). Their contribution is unquestionable, but their treatment post-release raises uncomfortable questions of policy, equity and national foresight.

If the country is to optimise both its military strength and socio-economic potential, Short Service must be reimagined — not as a temporary arrangement, but as a strategic national asset. The issue is neither new nor unknown. Since the promulgation of Army Instruction AI 11/S64, which ambiguously stated that 'pension under consideration orders will be issued separately', a policy vacuum has persisted. For over six decades, this assurance has remained largely unfulfilled, leaving SSC personnel in a state of uncertainty.

This gap has not gone unnoticed. Courts, including the Supreme Court and various high courts, have increasingly been called upon to intervene. Recent judicial pronouncements — particularly those granting relief by notionally treating certain categories as deemed to have completed 20 years of service — have exposed the deeper malaise. These judgments reflect prolonged executive inaction.

The core issue is not limited to gender or specific cases. It is a systemic neglect of the SSC cadre itself.

Short Service entrants volunteer in the prime of their youth. They undergo the same rigorous training, carry the same responsibilities and face the same operational risks as their permanent commission counterparts. For five, 10, or 14 years, they serve with unwavering commitment.

Yet, upon release, they step into an uncertain civilian landscape — often without pension, without full healthcare benefits and without a structured resettlement pathway. The absence of these basic assurances creates financial insecurity as well as a sense of institutional indifference.

One of the starkest manifestations of this disparity is in the access to the Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme (ECHS). While regular retirees enjoy comprehensive healthcare coverage, SSC veterans often face restrictions or exclusion.



**ASSET:** Those who have worn the uniform, even briefly, carry with them values the nation cannot overlook. PFI

This has led to ongoing litigation, including writ petitions in high courts.

Healthcare cannot be selectively granted. It is an extension of the nation's obligation to those who have served. Any deviation from this principle undermines both constitutional values and institutional credibility.

A common argument against extending pensionary benefits to SSC personnel is fiscal burden. However, a closer examination reveals the opposite. Regular commission personnel typically serve 20 years or more and draw pension for life. In contrast, SSC personnel serve for shorter durations and then transition into civilian careers, where they continue to contribute economically through taxes, enterprise and professional engagement.

Granting pro-rata one rank

The treatment of Short Service Commission officers post-release raises uncomfortable questions of policy, equity and national foresight.

one pension (OROP) to SSC personnel would involve a lower per capita pension outgo while generating long-term economic gains. It creates a dual-benefit model — reduced pension liability and increased national productivity. In essence, the SSC becomes not a cost centre, but a force multiplier.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the SSC model lies in its potential to produce disciplined, skilled and motivated individuals at a relatively young age. Released in their 30s or early 40s, they are ideally positioned to contribute meaningfully in civilian sectors. From corporate leadership to public administration, from entrepreneurship to internal security, their training and experience are invaluable. Yet, in the absence of structured support, much of this potential remains underutilised.

A well-designed resettlement framework can transform this transition into a national advantage.

India lacks a comprehensive legal structure to address the resettlement and welfare of Short Service personnel. Existing schemes are fragmented and lack enforceability. An armed forces resettlement and welfare Act is needed — one that provides statutory backing to key provisions, such as:

- Pro-rata OROP for all SSC personnel
- Universal and non-discriminatory access to ECHS
- Structured resettlement programmes aligned with national employment policies
- Late entry into government and public sector roles
- Recognition of military rank and experience in civilian hierarchies

Such a framework would ensure fairness and enhance institutional efficiency.

Beyond policy and economics lies a more fundamental issue — the moral contract between the nation and those who serve it. When a young individual joins the armed forces, there is an implicit assurance of dignity, fairness and respect — not just during service, but also beyond. Any perception of neglect erodes this trust and, by extension, affects morale and motivation.

The growing discontent among SSC veterans calls for introspection and corrective action. The transformation of Short Service into a national

asset requires a shift in perspective. It demands that policymakers move beyond incremental adjustments and adopt a holistic approach.

Key steps in this direction include:

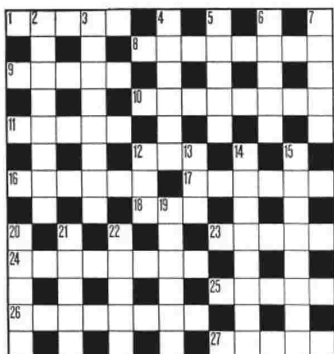
- Addressing the long-pending ambiguities of AI 11/S64
- Extending pro-rata pensionary benefits
- Ensuring parity in healthcare and welfare schemes
- Institutionalising resettlement through legislation
- Recognising SSC personnel as equal stakeholders in national defence

These measures are not radical — they are rational. The need for a youthful, agile military force is matched by the need for skilled human capital in the civilian domain. The SSC model, if properly structured, can serve both objectives. It can provide the armed forces with flexibility and vitality while simultaneously enriching the civilian workforce.

Military rank and honour earned during Short Service should be a lifelong asset, not a post-service liability. Those who have worn the uniform, even for a limited tenure, carry with them values that the nation cannot afford to overlook. It is time to move from ad hoc measures to institutional reform and from ambiguity to assurance.

Making Short Service a national asset is not just in the interest of those who serve; it is in the interest of India itself.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Stylishly fashionable (5)
  - Do something thoroughly (2,2,4)
  - Resentment (5)
  - Display of force (3,5)
  - At no time (5)
  - Church bench with back (3)
  - Fine lustrous wool fabric (6)
  - Portuguese Atlantic islands (6)
  - To inflame (3)
  - Renown (5)
  - Put (mis)leading touches to (5,3)
  - Local city of jubilation (5)
  - People of no importance (5,3)
  - Wretched (5)
- DOWN**
- Formal male evening dress (5,3)
  - Given extra motive power (6,2)
  - Courteous (6)
  - Sit up (5)
  - Unanimous (5)
  - Limbsless reptile (5)
  - A light stroke (3)
  - Road (3)
  - To such an extent (2,4,2)
  - Start time for military operation (4,4)
  - Burning (2,4)
  - Grossly stupid (5)
  - A painting done directly on wall (5)
  - Wretched (5)
  - Mature (5)

**Yesterday's Solution**  
**Across:** 1 By surprise, 6 Bass, 10 Milan, 11 Dishonour, 12 Insecure, 13 Bleak, 15 Product, 17 Dreaks, 19 Innards, 21 Blossom, 22 Extra, 24 Situated, 27 On the rack, 28 Year, 29 Nile, 30 On one's toes.  
**Down:** 1 Bump, 2 Splendid, 3 Rince, 4 Redoubt, 5 Suspense, 7 At one, 8 Strike dumb, 9 Sombrero, 14 Upside down, 16 Unabated, 18 Desperado, 20 Sustain, 21 Betoken, 23 Total, 25 Abyss, 26 Oms.

## SU DO KU

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

## YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

## CALENDAR

- APRIL 1, 2026, WEDNESDAY**
- Shukla Shukla 1948
  - Chaitra Shukla 11
  - Chaitra Purnasite 19
  - Hijri 1447
  - Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 7:07 am
  - Vidisha Yoga up to 2:51 pm
  - Ultraharigiri Nakshatra up to 4:18 pm
  - Moon in Virgo sign

## FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	17
New Delhi	34	18
Amritsar	28	16
Bathinda	27	16
Jalandhar	28	16
Ludhiana	31	15
Bhivani	32	20
Hisar	32	17
Sirsa	31	18
Dharamsala	24	11
Mernali	18	08
Shimla	23	11
Srinagar	21	08
Jammu	30	17
Kargil	15	05
Leh	14	03
Dehradun	30	16
Mussoorie	22	12

# Strive to ensure better results from ECMS

THE Union Government's warning to companies over the Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme (ECMS) has come not a moment too soon. The approved projects must set up and incorporate in-house design capabilities in India, Electronics & Information Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has observed. In addition to the earlier approvals of 46 applications for Rs 54,567 crore, his Ministry has approved 29 more proposals under ECMS with projected investment of Rs 7,104 crore and projected production of Rs 84,515 crore. These approvals are expected to generate 14,246 direct employment opportunities. But the Minister is "not very happy with the progress." His expectation is understandable as the government is "not getting support from industry." He wants the indus-

try "to do more." Vaishnaw looks forward to the industry redeeming its pledge to start a collective effort toward in-house design, but there has been no progress in this direction. He has beseeched the electronics component-manufacturing industry to develop structured programmes to achieve Six Sigma manufacturing quality, which can be scaled up across all companies, especially among micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) approved under the scheme. According to Investopedia, Six Sigma is a set of techniques and tools used to improve business processes.

It was introduced in 1986 by engineer Bill Smith while working at Motorola. Six Sigma practitioners use statistics, financial analysis, and project management to identify and reduce defects and errors, minimise variation, and

increase quality and efficiency. It is perhaps the first time in recent memory that an economic minister has so clearly voiced frustration and irritation with the response of India Inc. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, and other senior government functionaries have harangued the domestic industry to invest more, especially against the backdrop of huge infrastructure funding and a spate of reformist measures. But the government must also try to find out the cause of apathy of investors. Understanding this is essential, because without diagnosing the root causes, policy interventions risk missing their mark. One factor is global competitiveness. Electronics manufacturing operates within deeply integrated global value chains dominated by countries like

China, South Korea, and Taiwan. These ecosystems benefit from decades of investment, established supplier networks, and economies of scale that are difficult to replicate quickly.

Regulatory and structural challenges also play a role. While India has made significant strides in improving its business environment issues such as land acquisition, compliance burdens, logistics inefficiencies, and policy unpredictability still persist in certain areas. Access to technology and talent is another critical constraint. Developing in-house design capabilities is not merely a matter of allocating funds—it requires a robust ecosystem of engineers, designers, research institutions, and industry-academia collaboration. Risk aversion within Indian industry is also worth examining. Histori-

cally, many firms have preferred low-risk, asset-light business models, focusing on trading, assembly, or services rather than on deep manufacturing. Furthermore, the structure of incentives themselves may need closer scrutiny. While schemes like ECMS offer financial support, companies often evaluate the total ecosystem—policy stability, infrastructure reliability, supply chain depth, and export facilitation—before committing resources. If any of these elements are perceived as weak or uncertain, incentives alone may be inadequate to attract investment. In short, bridging the gap between policy intent and industry response requires a more nuanced approach, continuous interaction with all stakeholders, and immense patience. The onus is on all stakeholders.

## LETTERS

### CJI should have called for a vibrant legal structure

THIS is further to your editorial 'Indian soldiers fight two battles—military and civil.' The concern of the Chief Justice of India, Surya Kant for the Indian army, in providing more legal proximity is commendable but then, this is the right of every citizen of the country to have an easy approach, access and adequate confidence in the country's legal procedure and system. Justice Kant's observations about the inadequacies of military courts must be taken with a pinch of salt—since these courts confine mainly to departmental and regimental discipline issues rather than venturing in the civil domain of legal purview. The CJI should have spoken about improving the legal structure, while disposing of the cases that are pending for decades across High Courts and the Supreme Court.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

### Army persons remain trapped in outdated dual-justice system

THIS refers to your editorial 'Indian soldiers fight two battles—military and civil.' India's armed forces personnel remain trapped in an antiquated dual-justice system where military discipline and civilian law operate in conflicting orbits. When service members face legal vulnerabilities during their tenure, the state's failure to provide adequate protection becomes a fundamental breach of social contract. The Chief Justice's intervention signals what Parliament has long ignored: soldiers cannot be expected to defend the nation while their families struggle through bureaucratic labyrinths for basic legal recourse. Establishing a dedicated military courts system with transparent jurisdiction and accessible legal aid would transform this dysfunction. Until we acknowledge that safeguarding those who protect us constitutes constitutional obligation, we merely pay lip service to national gratitude while permitting institutional injustice to persist.

Babu Krishna, Bengaluru-560051

### Conversions don't always bring dignity

THE article 'Neither executive nor legislature understands judiciary' (THI March 31) rightly highlights the tension between institutions, but an often-ignored consequence of legal and political battles over religion and conversion is borne by the poorest communities. Converts from sanitation and cleanliness communities frequently end up on the losing side, socially and legally. The example of Lalbegi Muslims in Punjab shows how conversion does not always bring dignity or mobility and sometimes results in loss of affirmative action benefits. Policymaking must recognise these ground realities, not just constitutional theory.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak, Haryana

### Traffic chaos in Hyd needs urgent attention

HYDERABAD'S growing traffic congestion has become a major concern for daily commuters. Unplanned expansion, increasing number of vehicles, and weak enforcement of traffic rules have made travel stressful and time-consuming. Peak hours often witness severe jams, leading to loss of productivity and increased pollution. Despite several measures, the situation remains largely unchanged. Authorities must act decisively by improving public transport, ensuring better traffic management, and strictly implementing rules. Immediate and practical solutions are the need of the hour.

Mohammed Naseeruddin Qadri, Hyderabad

### TG's elder care law is a brave step

THE country has a specific law ensuring care of the elderly—the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act. It is binding on all neglected parents to apply to a tribunal constituted by the state government. While the Central law is wider in its application, the Telangana law is applicable specifically to employees. The Central law is stronger as it bars civil courts from granting any injunction against the order passed by the tribunal. The Telangana Employees Accountability and Monitoring of Parental Support Bill, 2026 has been passed by the Telangana government, broadly in line with the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. The key difference is that the new Bill expands the scope of the law to include private employees, in addition to government staff and elected representatives. Apart from salary deductions, Telangana has gone a step further by proposing an institutional mechanism to ensure effective enforcement. In essence, Telangana's parental support law represents a bold attempt to address a painful reality of modern society: the neglect of elderly parents. Its spirit deserves appreciation, for it seeks to uphold a moral principle that has long been central to Indian culture. Yet the success of such legislation will depend not merely on strict enforcement but on thoughtful implementation, administrative sensitivity and complementary social policies. If handled carefully, the initiative can serve as both a legal safeguard and a reminder that progress should never weaken the bonds that sustain families and societies.

Yash Pal Rathan, Jalandhar-144001

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### 'Demand for high-performance work-spaces rising in India'

BENGALURU: Haworth, a leading provider of design-led workplace solutions, is strengthening its growth strategy with a focus on expanding its distribution network and strengthening local supply chain capabilities, as demand for high-performance workspaces continues to rise across India. The company has built a strong presence through its experience and design centres in Bengaluru, Mumbai, Delhi/NCR, Chennai and Hyderabad, supported by a robust manufacturing facility in Chennai. This setup enables faster delivery, greater customisation, and improved responsiveness to client requirements. India's importance in Haworth's global strategy is reinforced by the expansion of Global Capability Centres and multinational operations, which are driving demand for sophisticated, experience-led work environments aligned with global standards.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# City kids hope warmongers will turn a new leaf

## WAR IS AN UNFOLDING OF MISCALCULATIONS

DR HYMA MOORTY

WAR is an intense armed conflict between governments or organized groups, characterized by extreme violence and destruction and often of long durations. It is a state of profound social disruption, which impacts the global economy.

The most surprising part of these remarks is that they have not been made by any war veteran, expert in international affairs or those following the ongoing West Asia crisis.

I heard these observations from my young friends at the gated community where I reside. Their agitated discussions and heated debates drew me closer to where they were taking stock of the chaos and turmoil in the world caused by the US-Israeli attack on Iran.

Mind you, there was no hanky-panky stuff but an intelligent articulation on the current situation, especially the gas and fuel crisis that is wreaking havoc in the world, including in India.

I was impressed by their knowledge. The 10-year-old Ashish mentioned that someone had termed it as

a 'manmade crisis.' This I learnt was a remark made by his father while watching the developments on a news channel. His dad had recently refuelled his car and didn't face any issues, but he was talking of the long queues at petrol bunk, while on his way home from office.

On noticing me, the 'group' leader, 12-year-old 'Amanna' came to me and made a pertinent remark that was symbolic of her team's humane approach to the developments across the globe. She said that they were not worried about the fuel crisis as such but were concerned about the agony of children affected by the war.

They all had watched a viral video showing kids crying and desperately searching for their parents, and watching the destruction of buildings, the frightening sirens and blazing fire all around. They condemned bombing of schools, hospitals and killing innocent children, which, they said, were 'cowardly' acts and the perpetrators 'inhuman'.

The group was visibly moved when describing a girl clutching a damaged teddy bear, looking for her



Peaceful co-existence is possible and is within man's reach. Many countries have demonstrated this with rare panache. But then such complicated issues may be beyond the comprehension of these kids. The kids' questions, innocent curiosities and their agony made one to ponder deeply. Greed and ego-ridden mindsets can trigger conflicts, whether it's about resources, power, influence or one-upmanship. Selfishness can lead to conflicts when countries prioritize their own interests over global well-being.

mother in the rubble, which they contended was heart-breaking as kids needed their parents for emotional support and protection.

Every war is a war against children. War does not determine who is right, but only what is left. War is a form of madness.

A little one came forward and asked me whether these

warring men had hearts. When children commit mistakes or something wrong in school, they are punished. His innocent doubt was why do these men (barbarians) go unpunished for such heinous crimes?

Rishi, a 14-year-old, who took pride in introducing himself as the future soldier of this great country, spoke

about the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindhor. He pointed out that, in stark contrast, India only targeted terrorist hideouts and did not harm civilians nor had they bombed any infrastructure.

Rishi boldly declared that there is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people. In an emotion-ridden tone, he asked me, 'Madam can anything be worse than a man having the right to kill me because he lives in a better place and his ruler has a quarrel with mine, though I have not quarrelled with him?'

In a soldier-like reaction, he declared that war is an act of 'unpardonable violence pushed to its utmost limits. His agony was why these warmongers were not categorised as murderers and duly punished? History, he said, proves that war results in immense suffering, death and destruction, each of catastrophic proportions.

For a moment I was wowed by the 'young adult's' deep sense of pragmatic reasoning. When it was Rishi's turn to express her feelings, she wondered why countries refrain from focusing on activities that

can bring a smile to the face of their people.

It's a complex issue. I agree, but often it comes down to interests, resources and power dynamics. But she had a very valid point—sovereignty and peaceful co-existence are possible and are within man's reach. Many countries have demonstrated this with rare panache. But then such complicated issues may be beyond the comprehension of these kids.

The kids' questions, innocent curiosities and their agony made one to ponder deeply. Greed and ego-ridden mindsets can trigger conflicts, whether it's about resources, power, influence or one-upmanship. Selfishness can lead to conflicts when countries prioritize their own interests over global well-being.

Can't the entire humanity focus on making the world a better place? Makes you wonder what the world would be like if leaders prioritized collective good.

Seeing these kids' humanity and empathy for fellow-citizens, made me realise that India's future is in safe hands.

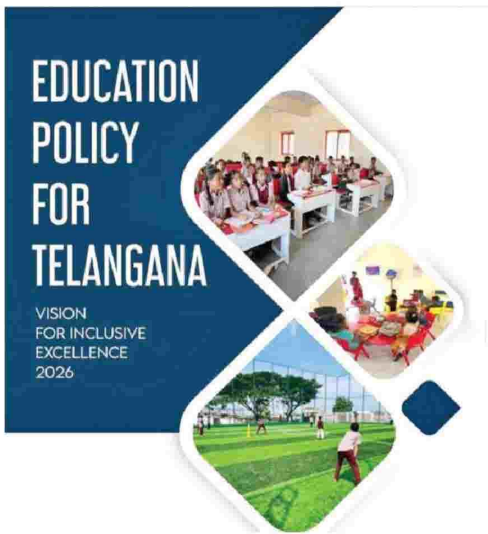
# Reform or repackaging? Need to rethink TG's education policy

ADAMA SRINIVAS REDDY

THE Telangana Education Policy (TEP) presents itself as a bold step toward "inclusive excellence" and holistic education. It draws rhetorical legitimacy from global frameworks like the Delors report, signalling a progressive vision. Yet, a closer reading reveals a troubling contradiction: the policy appears less concerned about rebuilding public education as a democratic space and more with reshaping it along market-driven lines.

At the heart of the policy lies an unexamined assumption—that private schooling signifies quality. Over the past decades, public education has been weakened through underfunding, administrative neglect and a steady erosion of public trust. This has pushed middle-class families toward private schools. Instead of reversing this trend, the TEP interprets it as a reflection of "people's aspirations" and seeks to align government schools with private models. In doing so, it risks legitimising a hierarchy that it ought to dismantle.

The proposed Telangana Public Schools (TPS) system exemplifies this shift. The policy envisions that, over time, schooling will be organised into three categories—small government schools, TPS institutions and private schools. Parents, it is argued, will make informed choices, with TPS emerging as the preferred option. This is presented as a move toward a common school system.



The TEP's push for English-medium instruction from the earliest years raises another concern. While it reflects parental aspirations, it overlooks a well-established pedagogical principle—that early learning in the mother tongue is essential for conceptual understanding. Making English the default medium can deepen linguistic and social inequalities.

experience offers a cautionary tale. Reforms such as the No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top in the United States, as well as similar policies in England, led to teaching being narrowly focused on test performance, shrinking the curriculum and eroding teacher autonomy.

In contrast, high-performing systems such as Finland and Canada followed a different path. They ensure rigorous quality through teacher preparation and professional licensing at the entry stage, and then rely on trust, peer collaboration and continuous development—not constant surveillance through tests. The lesson is clear: accountability built on measurement alone weakens education; accountability grounded in professionalism strengthens it.

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Taken together, these elements point to a deeper shift in the role of the state—from a provider of equitable public education to a regulator of a competitive education market. This is not merely a technical change; it is a redefinition of what education is meant to be.

If Telangana is serious about inclusive excellence, it must move in a different direction. Strengthening neighbourhood public schools, ensuring equitable resource allocation, respecting linguistic diversity and treating teachers as professionals rather than subjects of constant measurement is essential. Accountability must be rooted in trust, peer engagement and institutional reflection—not in narrow metrics and rankings.

Education cannot be reduced to numbers, targets and consumer choice. It is, fundamentally, a good public space where democratic values are nurtured and social divisions are bridged. Any reform that loses sight of these, can deepen the very inequalities it seeks to overcome.

(The writer is a faculty member at Kakatiya Government College (Autonomous), Hamamkonda)

The supply of green ammonia by domestic first to Indian fertiliser companies will only begin after three years, and from then onwards for 10 years. We all believe that by the time it comes in, the difference should come down quite significantly  
-Bhimder Singh, IFFCO Director

**BIZ BRIEFS**

**Xiaomi opens service centres**

Smartphone maker Xiaomi announced the expansion of its Premium Service Centre network with launches across 15 new cities in India. This marks the second phase of Xiaomi's plan to establish 100 Premium Service Centres nationwide. The expansion reinforces Xiaomi's value-for-experience strategy, with a strong focus on delivering a more accessible, reliable, and seamless after-sales experience for customers, the company said. The company unveiled its centres in Vijayawada, Amritsar, Bhubaneswar, Indore and Coimbatore, with Kolkata set to go live soon.

**MSE's new appointments**

MSE announced the successful completion of the appointment of Market Makers for its equity segment. This development is expected to strengthen market depth, support efficient price discovery, and enhance the overall trading experience. Effective April 1, 2026, MSE will initiate liquidity enhancement measures as part of its continued efforts to deepen market participation and create a more vibrant trading ecosystem. These steps reflect MSE's ongoing commitment to fostering a transparent, efficient, and competitive marketplace for all stakeholders.

**Affordplan, AHPi-TN in pact**

Affordplan and the Association of Healthcare Providers (India) Tamil Nadu Chapter announced a strategic collaboration aimed at improving the efficiency of healthcare supply chains across Tamil Nadu. Through a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), members of the AHPi-TN will gain access to Affordplan's Procurement and Optimization Platform called Proclax, a platform designed for product and price discovery in the pharmaceutical and medical device sectors.

**Truecaller user base at 500 mn**

Truecaller, a global platform for safe and trusted communication, announced that it has surpassed 500 million users worldwide, marking a significant milestone in the company's mission to build trust in communication. The platform continues to see significant user growth, adding over 50 million users in 2025 alone.

**Wow! Momo's campaign**

Wow! Momo has launched the Indian Momo League (IML), a nationwide campaign built around this match season, aimed at converting match-time viewership into high-frequency consumption and higher average order value. Anchored in the thought "Har city ka apnamomo", the campaign brings together city fandom, product innovation and real-time engagement. The brand, which operates over 800 stores across 80+ cities, is leveraging this match season as a high-intent consumption window to drive incremental demand across dine-in, takeaway and delivery.

**Oil surge may dampen India's FY27 growth: EY**

**EY OUTLOOK**

- GDP growth may drop by 1 percentage point in FY27
- Inflation could rise by 1.5 percentage points
- Oil dependency (90%) makes India highly vulnerable
- Core sectors like chemicals, cement, textiles at risk

rising by nearly 1.5 percentage points, according to an EY report. The EY Economy Watch report noted that sectors such as textiles, paints, chemicals, fertilisers, cement and tyres, many of them employment-intensive, are likely to face direct disruptions. Any hit to jobs or incomes in these sectors could weaken overall



demand, compounding the impact on growth. India remains particularly vulnerable due to its heavy dependence on energy imports. The country imports nearly 90 per cent of its crude oil needs and relies significantly on natural

gas and fertilisers from abroad. As a result, shocks to global energy markets tend to ripple across the economy through strong linkages with production and consumption.

The report highlighted that the conflict has already disrupted global crude oil markets, affecting supply chains, storage, transportation and pricing. Even if tensions ease soon, normalisation may take time. "If the disruption continues through FY27, India's GDP growth could fall by around 1 percentage point, while CPI inflation may rise by about 1.5 percentage points from baseline estimates of 7 per cent growth and 4 per cent inflation," EY said.

**NEW DELHI**

INDIA'S economic growth could take a hit in FY27 if the ongoing Middle East conflict continues, with real GDP projected to slow by about 1 percentage point and retail inflation

**Manipal with Salesforce to drive varsity transition**

**HANS BUSINESS HYDERABAD**

SALESFORCE, an AI CRM service provider has announced a collaboration with Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), to modernise its Student Life Cycle Management (SLCM) platform and accelerate its transition to an AI-driven university. This collaboration will enable the deployment of AI-powered academic systems across academic and administrative ecosystems, enhancing how the institution engages with students, faculty, and operations at scale.

MAHE will leverage Agentforce, Data 360, MuleSoft, and Tableau to accelerate its shift from traditional systems to AI-driven operations. This forms part of academy's strategic AI programme—a strategic initiative conceptualised and led by MAHE to deploy AI agents across academic and administrative systems and drive institution-wide transformation.

The academy operates a complex academic ecosystem, supporting over 40,000 students from 60 nations across multiple campuses. Agentforce Education will unify the entire student lifecycle—from admissions and enrollment to academic progress and alumni engagement—providing a 360-degree view of the student journey.

**Vir Vikram Yadav is new DGCA chief**

**NEW DELHI**

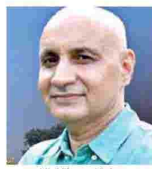
IN a major bureaucratic reshuffle, the government has appointed Vir Vikram Yadav as the new Director General of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), replacing Faiz Ahmed Kidwai.

Yadav, who is currently serving as Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, will now head India's aviation regulator at a time when the sector is expanding rapidly.

With rising air traffic, growing airline fleets and increased focus on safety, his role is expected to be crucial in ensuring stronger regulatory oversight. Meanwhile, Kidwai has been moved to the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) as Additional Secretary.

He had taken charge as DGCA chief in January 2025 and served in the role for a little over a year. The reshuffle comes at a critical juncture for the aviation sector. The DGCA is closely monitoring airline safety, fleet expansion, airport infrastructure and compliance with regulations as both domestic and international air travel continue to grow.

The regulator plays a key role in maintaining air safety standards, issuing licenses and ensuring operational efficiency across the aviation ecosystem. Along with this change, the government has announced



Vir Vikram Yadav

several other senior-level appointments. Puneet Kansal has been named Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Civil Aviation, while Mona K. Khandar has been appointed Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

Gyanendra D. Tripathi will take charge as Additional Secretary in the Department of Agricultural Research and Education and will also serve as Secretary of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research.

Vishal Gagan has been appointed Secretary of the Central Information Commission in the rank of Additional Secretary, and N. Gulzar will serve as Member Secretary of the National Capital Region Planning Board under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Diwakar Nath Misra has been appointed Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Power, while Debashish Prusty will take on the role of Additional Secretary in the Department of Financial Services under the Ministry of Finance.

**Changes in tax provisions notified; to be effective from today**

**NEW DELHI**

THE government has notified the Finance Act 2026, paving way for effecting changes in tax provisions. This Act gives effect to financial proposals of the central government for 2026-27, a gazette notification dated March 30 issued by the Ministry of Law and Justice said. "The following Act of Parliament received the assent of the President on March 30, 2026 and is hereby published for general information," it said. Last week, Parliament approved the Finance Bill 2026 with the Rajya Sabha returning it to the Lok Sabha with a voice vote, complying with the budgetary exercise for the next fiscal year starting April 1.

The Lok Sabha had passed the bill on March 25, along with 32 amendments. The

**IndiGo appoints IATA chief William Walsh as CEO**

The appointment comes less than three weeks after the sudden exit of Pieter Elbers

**NEW DELHI**



William Walsh

THE country's largest airline IndiGo on Tuesday announced the appointment of William Walsh, a pilot and current chief of the global airlines' grouping IATA, as its next CEO.

The appointment comes less than three weeks after the sudden exit of Pieter Elbers against the backdrop of massive operational disruption at the airline in December last year.

An airline industry veteran, Walsh, popularly known as Willie, was formerly CEO of British Airways and IAG (International Airlines Group, a holding company, which owns Aer Lingus, British Airways, Iberia, Level and Vueling).

Announcing the appointment of Walsh as the CEO, which is subject to regulatory approvals, IndiGo, in a re-

lease, said his tenure at IATA comes to a close on July 31 and is expected to join no later than August 3.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) is the global grouping of airlines, including IndiGo, Air India, Air India Express and SpiceJet. The appointment of Walsh was approved by the board of InterGlobe Aviation on Tuesday.

As IndiGo CEO, Walsh will be responsible for the overall management and strategic direction of the airline with a focus on transformational initiatives to strengthen the operational performance, advance the company's network and commercial strategy while enhancing customer experience.

"He will work closely with the board and the leadership team to rightfully position IndiGo as it scales up to the next phase of its growth," the airline said.

Walsh will also be among the few CEOs who are also pilots. Only a handful of people who were pilots have helmed an Indian airline. He will be the third foreign CEO for IndiGo, which started operations in August 2006.

As the IATA chief, Walsh is known to express his views in a frank and direct manner. IndiGo Managing Director Rahul Bhatia described Walsh as an "iconic and accomplished aviation leader".

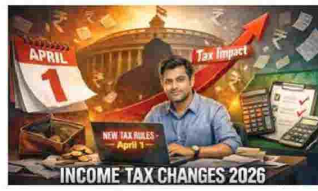
**Yami is brand face for Phillips kid hygiene campaign**

**HANS BUSINESS HYDERABAD**

RECOGNISING the gap in infant hygiene, Philips is bringing a science-led perspective to a conversation long shaped by habit. Backed by a recent survey and real-world evidence, the brand highlights that sterilisation offers a more reliable approach to infant hygiene. The survey found that the Philips Avent Steriliser delivers up to 2X better germ protection compared to boiling, along with fewer reported illness episodes among infants, reinforcing a science-backed approach to safer feeding hygiene.

As a part of this initiative, Philips announced the launch of a new campaign today highlighting the importance of sterilisation as an essential step in infant care, along with onboarding acclaimed actor and new mother Yami Gautam Dhar as the brand ambassador for the campaign in India, bringing a relatable and heartfelt voice to the narrative.

The campaign also draws on a deep-rooted cultural insight in India: the tradition of protecting children from the evil eye (nazar). Across regions, parents follow customs such as using salt, chillies, or applying a black tilka to ward off evil eye (buri nazar). In modern times, parents even use evil eye bracelets or use evil eye stickers on their children's photos while posting on social media.



Rajya Sabha returned the bill after a brief discussion, and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman replied to queries raised by members. The Union Budget 2026-27 envisages a total expenditure of Rs53.47 lakh crore, an increase of 7.7 per cent over the current fiscal year ending March 31. The total capital expenditure proposed for the next fiscal year is Rs12.2 lakh crore. It proposes a gross tax revenue collection of Rs44.04 lakh crore and a gross borrowing of Rs17.2 lakh crore.

The fiscal deficit for FY27 is projected at 4.3 per cent of GDP, lower than 4.4 per cent in the current fiscal. As per the provisions of Finance Act, a flat 12 per cent surcharge will be levied on capital gains earned by individual or corporate shareholders by selling shares in the buyback offer of companies from April 1.

**Centre scraps 11 critical mineral block auctions**

**NEW DELHI:** The government has cancelled the auction of 11 critical and strategic mineral blocks which were put on sale in the sixth round on account of poor investor response and lack of qualified bidders.

The development comes as a setback to the government's efforts to ramp up domestic exploration and production of critical minerals amid global supply chain disruptions. In an annual notice, the mines ministry said that the auction process for 5 mineral blocks was cancelled since no bids were received.

The notice further said the auction process of five other mineral blocks was annulled as there were less than three technically-qualified bidders. Besides, auction process for Boku Rare Metal Block, West

Bengal was also annulled. The mines ministry had in September last year launched the sixth tranche of auction for 23 critical mineral blocks spread across 13 states. The auction included 19 composite licence (CL) blocks and four mining lease (ML) blocks in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana, and West Bengal.

**Gold loans shine, lead retail credit expansion**

**NEW DELHI:** Gold loans have emerged as the leading segment in India's retail credit market, accounting for loan volumes at 36 per cent and around 40 per cent by value, driven by rising gold prices and increasing consumer preference for secured borrowing, a report said on Tuesday.

The report by TransUnion CIBIL showed that the surge has been supported by a sharp increase in ticket sizes, with the average gold loan amount rising significantly over the past two years to around Rs 1.9 lakh in the December 2025 quarter.

The report also noted that the consumer market indicator (CMI) -- a major gauge of credit market health -- rose to 102 in the December 2025 quarter, up from 97 a year ago and 100 in the preceding September quarter which is the third consecutive quarter of improvement.

**Sebi cracks down on Elitecon over 'rosy' financial claims**

**NEW DELHI**

MARKETS regulator Sebi has barred Elitecon International Ltd, its Promoter and Managing Director Vipin Sharma, and four others from accessing the securities market over alleged manipulative activities and misleading disclosures.

In an interim ex-parte order passed on Monday, Sebi directed the impounding of alleged unlawful gains of about Rs 51.26 crore from Sharma and four other entities.

Additionally, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said it will conduct a detailed investigation into the case and appoint an internal auditor. The action follows a probe into trading in the scrip of Elitecon International, where the regulator found prima facie evidence that the company and its insiders misled investors by suppressing material information about its operations and financials, while simulta-



neously offloading shares at inflated prices.

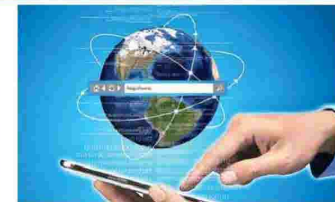
Sebi alleged that the company suppressed material information to present a misleading picture of its financials and operations. It noted that while positive disclosures were made, certain adverse developments, including GST-related proceedings, were not adequately communicated to investors.

**INDIA'S DATA APPETITE GROWS AS 5G NEARS HALF OF TRAFFIC**

AI, streaming and gaming fuel sharp jump in mobile consumption

**HARD DATA**

- Average monthly data usage: 31 GB/user (2025)
- 5G traffic share: 47% of total
- 5G data growth: +70% YoY
- Total data traffic: 27 EB/month



year to 12.9 exabytes (EB) per month. As a result, 5G now accounts for nearly 47 per cent of India's overall mobile broadband traffic. The increase in consumption reflects growing demand for data-intensive applications such as AI-driven services, 4K video streaming, and cloud gaming. Over the past five years, average monthly data usage per user has grown at a compound

annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18 per cent.

Overall mobile data traffic in India crossed 27 EB per month in 2025, registering a CAGR of 21.7 per cent over the same period. India now ranks among the top global markets, with the second-largest 5G subscriber base, second-highest 5G data consumption, and second-largest Fixed Wireless Access (FWA) user base.

The transition to 5G is being accelerated by a ten-fold rise in shipments of budget smartphones priced below \$100, with over 90 per cent of all smartphones shipped during the year supporting 5G. Looking ahead, India's 5G subscriber base is projected to cross 1 billion by 2031, signalling continued momentum in the country's digital transformation.

# The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from  
the Friends of India - founded 1818

# Gandhi and Science~I

## Cold Chain Gap

**A**cross parts of rural India, an unusual crop is quietly redrawing the economics of farming. Dragon fruit, a climbing cactus once considered exotic, is being adopted not out of novelty but calculation. It offers something traditional crops increasingly cannot: predictable cash flow, lower water dependence, and reduced disease risk. But the real significance of this shift lies less in what is being grown, and more in how farming decisions are being made.

A new kind of farmer is emerging - one who thinks less like a cultivator bound by inheritance and more like an investor managing a portfolio. Land, water, and labour are being reallocated with an eye on return, resilience, and market timing. This is a marked departure from the crop patterns that have historically dominated Indian agriculture, where continuity often outweighed profitability. In that sense, the rise of dragon fruit signals the slow financialisation of farming at the grassroots.

Yet this transformation runs into a familiar structural ceiling. India has rarely struggled with production. From milk to rice, the country has demonstrated an ability to scale output when incentives align. The weakness has consistently appeared after the harvest. High-value crops demand high-quality handling - grading, storage, transport, and timely market access. Without these, the price premium collapses before it can reach the farmer.

This is where the comparison with countries like Vietnam becomes instructive. Vietnam did not become a global powerhouse in dragon fruit merely by growing more of it. It invested in integrated supply chains, export-oriented standards, and logistics networks that preserve value across distance. The fruit arrives in foreign markets not just intact, but competitive.

India, by contrast, risks creating pockets of overproduction without the systems to absorb or export it efficiently. The result is a paradox: farmers shift to higher-value crops, only to remain trapped in low-value realisations. The bottleneck is no longer agronomic knowledge; it is infrastructure.

There is also a subtler implication. As more farmers adopt a market-driven approach, agriculture itself begins to detach from tradition. Crop choices are no longer dictated by what the land "has always grown," but by what it can profitably sustain. This redefines land from a cultural inheritance into an economic asset - something to be optimised rather than preserved.

The danger is that policy has not fully caught up with this transition. Support systems remain geared toward staples, even as farmers experiment with high-value horticulture. Without parallel investment in cold chains, decentralised storage, and export facilitation, the current momentum may stall.

Dragon fruit, then, is not the story. It is the signal. It points to a farm sector in transition, more analytical, more market-aware, but still constrained by old inefficiencies. If India wants this shift to endure, it must move its focus beyond the field. The future of farming will not be decided by what grows, but by what survives the journey to the market.

## Choked

**T**he world tends to think of oil as the bloodstream of the global economy. But the current disruption around the Strait of Hormuz reveals something more unsettling: it is not just energy that flows through this narrow passage, but the hidden chemistry of modern life itself.

When tankers stop moving, the immediate effect is predictable - fuel prices rise. What is less visible, and far more dangerous, is the cascading breakdown of supply chains built on petrochemicals and industrial gases. Fertilisers, for instance, are not merely agricultural inputs; they are time-sensitive enablers of food security.

A missed application window in March or April is not a delay - it is a lost harvest. Countries already operating on thin margins, from South Asia to parts of Africa, will feel this first and hardest.

But the crisis does not stop at food. The shutdown of helium production in Qatar introduces a striking paradox of the 21st century economy: some of the most advanced technologies depend on the most obscure materials.

Helium, largely invisible in public discourse, is essential for semiconductor manufacturing and medical imaging. Without it, the cost of everything from smartphones to MRI scans rises - not because demand has surged, but because a single upstream input has vanished.

This is the true nature of modern vulnerability. Globalisation has not merely interconnected markets; it has concentrated risk. Critical supply chains now run through a handful of geographic chokepoints and specialised production hubs. The Gulf region's role in petrochemicals illustrates this perfectly. These derivatives underpin pharmaceuticals, plastics, and industrial processes. When supply is disrupted, the effect is not confined to factories; it travels directly into hospitals and households.

For a country such as India, which positions itself as a pharmaceutical powerhouse, the implications are particularly complex. Producing a fifth of the world's generic medicines is an advantage only as long as upstream inputs remain stable. Disruptions in Gulf exports or air cargo hubs such as Dubai International Airport expose how dependent even diversified economies remain on fragile external nodes.

There is also a geopolitical undercurrent that cannot be ignored. As traditional suppliers falter, others - most notably Russia - may step in to fill the gaps in fertiliser and commodity markets. This is not just an economic adjustment; it is a reconfiguration of influence, where supply scarcity translates into strategic leverage.

What emerges from this moment is a sobering lesson. The global economy is not resilient by default; it is efficient by design. And when efficiency is stretched across narrow corridors like Hormuz, it becomes a liability. A disruption in one place no longer causes a local shock - it triggers a chain reaction across sectors, timelines, and borders.

This is not simply a story of war or energy. It is a reminder that the architecture of globalisation, once celebrated for its seamlessness, is now revealing its fault lines, one chokepoint at a time.

**Meghnad Sahasaw Gandhi** and his opinions are entirely different. Saha believed that the primary task of science in India was in 'weeding out medieval passion' and training the populace for a proper grip and sufficient operation of the beauty and power of science. According to Saha, though scientists had as little regard for Gandhi's economic and social theories as the Russians have for Tolstoy, Gandhi's views on science were important historically for the role he played in formulating the ideology of science policy in free India



Noakhali effort 1946, had confronted his own serious disagreements with some of Gandhi's experiments which led to his departure from Gandhi's camp. Bose unwittingly cast Gandhi as a political and religious person alone instead of a scientist. This image of Gandhi portrayed by Bose was similar to Einstein's views that Gandhi was a saint and politician who was well versed with the art, not the science of peace.

Many other scholars' opinions about Gandhi's views on science were similar to those of Huxley. They charged Gandhi with an attitude that was revivalist and hostile to modern science. Some scholars believe the Gandhian view, unlike that of Vivekananda, is primarily spiritual and ignores the material foundations of Indian civilisation. Their presentation conforms to the spiritual Gandhi ignoring the fact that the spirit and practice of the khadi movement was primarily grounded in the material culture of Indian civilisation. Others try to fit Gandhi into standard models of science and find him lacking in modern experimental methods.

The response by Indian scientists to Gandhi, on the other hand, shares none of this discomfort. Meghnad Saha, for instance, saw Gandhi's science as entirely different. Saha believed that the primary task of science in India was in 'weeding out medieval passion' and training the populace for 'a proper grip and sufficient operation of the beauty and power of science'. According to Saha, though scientists had as little regard for Gandhi's economic and social theories as the Russians have for Tolstoy, Gandhi's views on science were important historically for the role he played in formulating the ideology of science policy in free India.

Opposing Huxley's views, many scientists argue that studies on Gandhi have largely focused on his political philosophy with little reference to his views on science, and that Gandhi had a distinct theory and practice

of the scientific experiment as well as a scientific explanation that pre-supposed the equality of man and nature. One scholar argues that Gandhi was not opposed to technology per se but to technocracy, which was a condition that created a hierarchical relationship between man (those who possess technology) and man (those who do not), and man and nature.

Sahasrabudhe whose work exclusively focuses on what he terms the 'science question' argues that there is little work from the Gandhian angle on science though a lot has been written on his opposition to machinery. He sees Gandhi's 'life work' as paving the way for a new dynamic theory of man-man and man-nature relations that do not separate fact from value. Viswanathan says that Gandhi, who was one of the most inventive scientists of the swadeshi era, had to subvert or transform science, playfully and politically. According to him, Gandhi's view was a fluid science of resistance in order to escape the modern West.

There is enough evidence of Gandhi expressing himself directly on the subject in many of his other writings, namely, his Collected Works and his autobiography, My Experiments with Truth.

"The modern civilisation, instead of doing good to humanity, has encouraged mass destruction and frightful disputes between capital and labour" (CW 1: 189-90). "The wonderful discoveries and the marvelous inventions of science are, after all, an empty boast" (CW 3: 414). These statements indicate Gandhi's strong views on science very early in his public life. Gandhi felt that the prevailing practice of science had defects but this was

not necessarily intrinsic to the scientific quest, nor was such a condition irremediable warranting a total rejection. Gandhi believed that the scientific enterprise should undergo a course correction.

This qualified criticism becomes clearer in his response to members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science who visited South Africa in 1904. Gandhi suggested that the Association should meet in India and be renamed as the 'British Empire Association for the Advancement of Science'. According to Gandhi, it would be greatly to the advantage not only to India, but the Association as well (CW 5: 46).

The scientist, Gandhi believed, was to benefit equally from interaction with the colonies and its subjects. Gandhi emphasized that progress of science must lead to progress in morality. He often quoted the scientist Alfred Wallace to argue that people's moral sense had in no way improved as a result of scientific discoveries, nor had it reduced hatred and injustice (CW 12: 146; 16: 106-08 and 18: 235-36). During the Non-Cooperation movement of 1919-20 and the popularization of khadi, Gandhi clarified that he had no intention to put back the hand of clock of progress (CW 19: 241; 21: 114). In his letter to Daniel Hamilton in respect of the khadi movement, Gandhi said that "India need not to be industrialized in the modern sense of the terms, but India's need is to introduce the human spirit among the man behind the machinery" (CW 28: 188).

"Visitation in my opinion is the blackest of all the blackest crimes that man is at present committing against God and his fair creation. We should be able to refuse to live if the price of living be the torture of sentient beings" (CW 19: 357-58). For Gandhi, the real challenge of science lay in carrying out experiments not on the 'other' - the colonised, the excommunicated brothers, or the dumb creatures - but on the self. Gandhi exhorted science students to work with their hands, as science was one of the few things that involved accuracy of thought and accuracy of handling (CW 29: 326-7).

Gandhi's position on science was not for empty revivalism. For example, Gandhi supported the Ayurvedic system and medicine. But he was not happy with the Ayurvedic physician because there were not many discoveries and inventions as against Western physicians and surgeons. He advocated the need to revitalise and reform the self-referential tradition from the inside and not by a more competitive and organised system from the outside. An in-depth analysis of the detailed correspondence he had with individual practitioners, would reveal that he wanted them to undertake research taking a few satyagrahi scientists amongst them. He even offered himself and his own institutions as sites for experimentation.

(To be concluded)

**I**n academia, critics have expressed different opinions about Gandhi's views on science. One of the reasons may be that Gandhi himself had contemplated the concept of machinery, the machine age and modern civilization differently at different times. Literary reviews of Gandhi also reveal that his views on science rarely find mention. While Nehru's views on science have been quoted extensively, Gandhi has not received any scholarly attention.

Analyses of direct references to science in Gandhi's discussions with co-workers or talks with fellow countrymen strengthens the existing critique of modern science and corrects the situation of indifference, if not negation, of Gandhi's views on science. In this paper, an attempt has been made to answer some of Gandhi's critics who saw his views as retrograde, equalising the focus in response to Huxley's views, end up furthering the divide between the so-called personal view of Gandhi and the public view of the Congress. Nehru's views acknowledged Gandhi's ability to mobilize people and rally them around the call for freedom. Introduction of the charkha, according to Nehru, was consequently important for its immediate economic and instrumental value in achieving freedom. Nehru made a clear divide between Gandhi as a science person and Gandhi as a religious man.

Nirmal Kumar Bose, as part of Gandhi's

## INQUIRER

## Deepening water crisis

**W**hile the world is currently reeling from an oil price shock, experts have warned for decades that the next global conflict will be fought over water. In the Philippines, however, the scarcity of this important natural resource has been ongoing for generations, with 40 million Filipinos still having no access to potable water. That is a third, or approximately 34 percent of the estimated 117 million population.

What should be even bigger concern is the increase in "groundwater-stressed" areas across the country, which has jumped from nine in 1998 to 26 today, according to data from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

This suggests that even more Filipinos will face dwindling access to critical water reserves that are essential to life and sustain our national food security. Adding to the stress on the country's water resources is El Niño later this year.

Last week, acting Environment Secretary Juan Miguel Cuna said that 15 of the country's major river basins "are being pushed to their absolute limits." His statement that the country is now in a crisis where "wells are running dry" and "agricultural applications are stalling" does not offer a positive outlook.

"We are currently facing what we call water bankruptcy - a structural imbalance where our consumption far outpaces the ability to replenish the tank," Cuna had said.

The DENR estimates that around 2520 billion in investments is needed to bridge the gap in basic water access nationwide, particularly in areas where prices of potable water are high because of the distance covered in their delivery.

Inquirer columnist Joel Butran recently wrote about how enviable is in countries like Germany, where the quality of tap

water is even higher than that sold commercially.

In the Philippines, on the other hand, tap water is deemed not safe for drinking, so much so that supplying potable water has become a huge business.

The ubiquitous presence of mineral water stations everywhere proves this, but also means that this has become a necessary expense for Filipinos instead of being a public service provided by the government. The expense may be minimal for others, but it could take a chunk from the living expenses of the poor.

The DENR, however, has admitted that one of the biggest challenges it faces in making water accessible is the lack of funding. Environment Undersecretary Carlos Primo David lamented that the government's fiscal resources in the past few years have been "very narrow" and the agency could only ask a "small amount"

from the Department of Budget and Management. Doesn't this reflect the importance, or lack of, that the government has placed on the conservation and management of this natural resource? This is unacceptable when studies have long pushed the government to pay attention to the issue.

A 2004 book "Winning the Water War," by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies and the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development notes that "Projections up to 2025 show that the Philippines will still have the highest withdrawal as a percentage of annual water resources among Southeast Asian countries."

Even back then, it already warned that the country must prepare a water resources management plan "as water withdrawal will sooner or later catch up with the available water supply, given current trends."

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

## Timely

**Sir,** The Supreme Court's ruling that Scheduled Caste benefits will not be available after conversion (March, 25) is timely, it should give quietus to the demand made by several people who were born SCs, but got converted to other faiths, ostensibly due to caste discrimination, though in many cases, monetary and other inducements are allegedly involved.

The ruling is based on the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 which names the castes, races or tribes to be considered SCs, provided the individuals are practising Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism. These groups enjoy several constitutional and statutory protection and benefits like reservations, as a legal and economic remedy for the historical stigma of untouchability suffered by them.

For some of them to get converted into supposedly egalitarian faiths like Christianity



and Islam and then claim SC protection and benefits, would be akin to 'having the cake and eating it too'. It would also amount to their enjoying double benefits - those arising out of their caste by birth and those conferred on religious minorities by the government.

Yours, etc., V. Jayaraman, Chennai, 26 March.

## Continuity

**Sir,** This refers to the editorial "Tactical Pause" (March 25). The piece rightly points to the risks of calibrated escalation and the illusion of control in a tightly linked global

order. What is concerning is how easily strategic signaling can spill into economic instability, especially through energy markets and supply chains that affect countries far removed from the conflict.

India and similar economies must respond with foresight rather than reaction. Building strategic petroleum reserves, diversifying energy sources, and strengthening regional trade buffers are immediate priorities. Equally important is a consistent diplomatic stance that supports de-escalation while safeguarding national interests.

Backchannel engagement and multilateral forums should be used more actively to reduce uncertainty. Short pauses in conflict may ease tensions briefly, but they cannot substitute for sustained dialogue. Policymakers must plan for continuity, not momentary relief, in an increasingly fragile geopolitical climate.

Yours, etc., Abhama Barathi, Chennai, 25 March.

## Bottleneck

**Sir,** This refers to the editorial "Tactical pause" (March 25). The outcome of this entire war undoubtedly hinges on the strategic control of the Strait of Hormuz. It is Iran's trump card. It is now becoming abundantly clear that the US was pushed into this war by opportunistic conditions in Iran flung by Israel even though Iran posed no imminent threat to America. While other American presidents exercised caution each time Benjamin Netanyahu pressed them to engage in war, Trump succumbed due, in no small measure, to the influence of his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Iran now has the strategic advantage in the court of world opinion. While each side is rife with its own propaganda, it is the bottleneck caused by a stubborn geopolitical reality which is going to call the shots for any future peace overtures.

Yours, etc., Animesh Rai, Noida, 25 March.

Himachal is paying for India's excesses

PRANALI CHOWDHARY AND NIMISH SINGH

Traditionally, the days following Holi mark a gradual shift in weather as winter gives way to the summer months. Climate change has upended such traditions of slow transition. Already, there are reports that Himachal Pradesh is set to witness a much hotter March in 2026, with minimum and maximum temperatures staying above normal. Further, the state will experience below-normal rainfall. This is part of a consistent trend: In 2025, Himachal Pradesh endured one of its most disruptive climate years. Monsoon rainfall ran nearly 46 per cent above normal. Cloudbursts, floods and landslides claimed over 360 lives and caused losses exceeding Rs 4,000 crore. Months later, December recorded just 0.1 mm of rainfall, the driest in more than a century. Within a single year, the state swung from deluge to drought. For this western Himalayan region, climate extremes are no longer aberrations. They are reshaping fiscal planning, infrastructure design and administrative priorities. The irony? Himachal Pradesh contributes less than 1 per cent of India's greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, it absorbs the negative effects of climate change disproportionately. However, such negative effects won't be limited to just this 'mountain state'. Chief Minister Sukhraj recently said that any form of disruption to the Himalayas would result in serious consequences for the nation as a whole. He was speaking on the occasion of a report launch, 'Scientific Assessment of Tackling Non-CO2 Emissions: Pathways for Himachal Pradesh'. Focus on non-CO2 emissions such as methane, black carbon and HFCs is in line with policy and governance attention steadily shifting towards ways to achieve faster, near-term mitigation of climate change. Methane and black carbon influence temperature and air quality over shorter timeframes than carbon dioxide. In mountain systems, black carbon deposited on snow reduces reflectivity and accelerates melt. Methane contributes to near-term warming and to ground-level ozone formation. Much of this pollution travels from outside the state, yet its impacts are intensely local - on crops, hydrology and public health. For Himachal, this linkage is practical rather than abstract. The state has more than 10 GW of installed hydropower capacity. River flows determine electricity output, irrigation supply and household water access. Faster melt alters seasonal flow patterns and complicates reservoir management. Managing non-CO2 emissions therefore connects climate mitigation with water security and energy stability. Sectoral data indicates where action can be embedded within existing policy frameworks. Livestock accounts for the majority of methane emissions, even as animal husbandry anchors rural incomes. Balanced feeding, improved fodder management and breed optimisation reduce methane intensity per unit of milk. When aligned with milk procurement systems, efficiency gains can raise farm income without expanding herd size. Manure-based biogas systems add another channel, lowering household fuel costs while producing organic fertiliser. In this sector, mitigation and income enhancement reinforce one another. Transport represents a second pressure point. Rapid vehicle growth, tourism mobility and freight movement increase emissions of nitrogen oxides and particulate matter. Steep gradients and congestion amplify per-vehicle emissions in hill towns. Electric buses and fleet renewal programmes are under way, but their impact depends on charging infrastructure, grid reliability and coordinated mobility planning. Industrial activity will expand with economic growth. Effective enforcement of pollution-control systems, including scrubbers and continuous monitoring can reduce sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter even as output rises. Cleaner back-up power through solar and storage reduces reliance on diesel generator sets, which otherwise elevate particulate and black carbon emissions. Waste management presents a targeted opportunity. Emissions are modest in aggregate but concentrated in districts such as Kangra and Mandi. Segregation at source, composting and biometanation reduce methane while easing landfill pressure. Because these emissions originate from identifiable urban clusters, administrative accountability is feasible. Residential cooking illustrates how transition can work. Expanded LPG access has lowered household particulate exposure. Sustaining linked dynamics offers a practical pathway to moderate near-term warming while protecting agricultural productivity. Himachal is absorbing climate shocks despite its limited emissions footprint. Its experience raises a broader national question. Climate policy often measures success through aggregate carbon reduction. Mountain regions require an additional metric: reduction of near-term warming drivers that intensify glacier melt, disrupt hydrology and degrade air quality within years rather than decades. Himachal cannot control global emissions. But it can influence the pace at which local risk accumulates. Acting on methane and black carbon is one of the few levers capable of delivering climate stability, air-quality improvement and rural income gains within the present decade, a rare convergence in an era of escalating extremes.

These gains requires refill affordability in cold districts and reliable last-mile delivery in remote terrain. As household emissions decline, policy focus shifts toward transport, industry and diesel backup systems. The challenge now is integration. Livestock reform sits within rural development. Transport electrification falls under mobility and energy departments. Waste management rests with urban local bodies. Yet climate risk cuts across each of these domains. Embedding measurable non-CO2 reduction targets within sectoral planning would align adaptation and mitigation within the same fiscal cycle. The scientific case for this alignment is strengthening. For example, rising temperatures accelerate ozone formation from nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds, intensifying heat-air quality co-exposure in valley regions. Heat stress and pasture decline can also increase methane intensity in livestock systems. Addressing these

linked dynamics offers a practical pathway to moderate near-term warming while protecting agricultural productivity. Himachal is absorbing climate shocks despite its limited emissions footprint. Its experience raises a broader national question. Climate policy often measures success through aggregate carbon reduction. Mountain regions require an additional metric: reduction of near-term warming drivers that intensify glacier melt, disrupt hydrology and degrade air quality within years rather than decades. Himachal cannot control global emissions. But it can influence the pace at which local risk accumulates. Acting on methane and black carbon is one of the few levers capable of delivering climate stability, air-quality improvement and rural income gains within the present decade, a rare convergence in an era of escalating extremes.



Front page of The Statesman dated 01 April 1926

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 01 April 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

WITH the first suggestion of legislation or other action likely to operate disadvantageously to European interests in India there is always much activity on the part of protesting individuals and invariably one of the first questions asked is 'Can not the European Association do something?' In the past the association has played a prominent part in securing and safeguarding the rights of civilians but if recent events in Calcutta are to be taken as a correct reflex of public opinion its usefulness is in danger. After a series of sparsely attended after dinner meetings the time was altered to the early evening to meet the objections of one section of the membership and every member received a personal letter from the chairman calling attention to the change. The speaker advertised was Mr. Santosh Kumar Basu, a professor Swarajist but a sane thinker and an earnest worker in the city's interests. When the meeting opened the attendance was about twenty and half an hour later it did not exceed forty, including pressmen and officials of the association, despite the fact that the meeting was open not only to members of the association but to any European. Should this state of apathy continue and those who give time and labour to the association decide to relinquish a thankless task there will be no cause for surprise, but those whose indifference kills the organisation will speedily regret the power they have lost.

News Items

ELECTRICITY BILL'S PROGRESS COMMONS PASS THE SECOND READING

LONDON, MAR. THE Labour amendment for the rejection of the Electricity Bill and urging nationalisation instead was defeated in the House of Commons to-day by 325 votes to 127, after which the Bill passed its second reading. No Conservative voted against the Government, but after the second reading was adopted, 45 dissentient Conservatives supported a motion that the Bill be referred to a Select Committee which would involve prolonged enquiry. The Government opposed the motion, which was rejected by 416 votes to 45. - Reuter.

NOAKHALI SCHEMES IMPROVING PUBLIC HEALTH AND SANITATION

NOAKHALI, MAR. IT is understood that in consultation with the Assistant Director of Public Health, Bengal, who came here recently, the Health Department of the District Board has formulated a scheme in connexion with the question of public health and sanitation of the district. It is proposed to divide the district into nine circles and to place each circle under a qualified sub-assistant surgeon, with a staff consisting of a vaccinator and a sanitary officer. The whole scheme is estimated to cost about Rs 19,000, one-third of which will be paid by the Board and the balance, it is expected, will be contributed by the Government from the provincial revenues.

TORNADO HAVOC

400 FAMILIES RENDERED HOMELESS

MADARIPUR, MAR. A SEVERE tornado which passed over Pakhira, Khoajpur, Barerchar, Gobindpur, Jafraji and other villages in the Madaripur sub-division last evening has rendered about 400 families homeless. Thatched roofs were blown away and several boats capsized in the River Ariakhalh. The casualties have not yet been ascertained.

FRANC MOVEMENTS

FRENCH FIRMER: SLUMP IN BELGIAN

LONDON, MAR. FRENCH francs in London were more steady to-day, closing at 141 3/4, on the strength of the progress of the Finance Minister's new taxation heavy selling, opening at 126 1/4 and closing at 131 1/2 - Reuter's Special Service.

US may be losing the war that matters

BAMO NOURI AND INDERJEET PARMAR

THE language of power often reveals more than it intends. In a rare moment of candour on March 7, the US president, Donald Trump, described the confrontation with Iran as 'a big chess game at a very high level... I'm dealing with very smart players... high-level intellect. High, very high-IQ people.' If Iran is by Trump's own admission, a 'high-level' opponent, then the sudden revival of a 15-point plan previously rejected by Iran a year ago suggests a disconnect between how the adversary is understood and how it is being approached. It's a plan already examined in negotiation by Iran and dismissed as unrealistic and coercive. Despite this, the Trump administration is once again framing the 'roadmap' as a pathway to de-escalation. Tehran has once again dismissed the gambit as Washington 'negotiating with itself' - reinforcing the perception that the US is attempting to impose terms rather than negotiate them. The US president is right about one thing - Iran is not an opponent that can be easily dismissed or overwhelmed. Trump's own description is a tacit acknowledgement that this is a far more capable and complex adversary than those the US has faced in past Middle Eastern wars, such as Iraq. And that is why the odds are increasingly stacked against the United States and Israel. This conflict, reflects a familiar but flawed imperial assumption:

that overwhelming military force can compensate for strategic misunderstanding. The US and Israel appear to have misjudged not only Iran's capabilities, but the political, economic and historical terrain on which this war is being fought. Unlike Iraq, Iran is a deeply embedded and adaptable regional power. It has resilient institutions, networks of influence and the capacity to impose asymmetric costs across multiple theatres. It knows how to manage maximum pressure. The most immediate problem is lack of legitimacy. This war has authorisation from neither the United Nations or, in the case of America, the US Congress. Further, US intelligence assessments indicate Iran was not rebuilding its nuclear programme following earlier strikes - contradicting one of Washington's justifications for war. The resignation of Joe Kent as head of the National Counterterrorism Center on March 17, was even more revealing. In his resignation letter Kent insisted that Iran posed no imminent threat. This effectively collapses one of the original narratives underpinning the US decision to start the war - a further blow to legitimacy. A majority of Americans oppose the war, reflecting deep fatigue after Iraq and Afghanistan - hardly ideal conditions for what increasingly looks like another 'forever war' in the Middle East. Current polling shows Trump's Republicans trailing the Democrats ahead of the all-important midterm elections in November. The war is both militarily uncertain and politically unsustainable. International

allied support is also eroding. The United Kingdom - often trumpeted as Washington's closest partner - has limited itself to defensive coordination, while Germany and France have distanced themselves from offensive operations. European allies also declined a US request to deploy naval forces to secure the strait of Hormuz. This reflects not just disagreement, but a deeper loss of trust in US leadership and strategic judgement. US influence has long depended on legitimacy as much as force. That reservoir is now rapidly draining. Global confidence is falling, while images of civilian casualties - including over 160 schoolchildren killed in an airstrike on the first day of the war - have shocked international onlookers. Rather than reinforcing leadership, this war is accelerating its erosion. Israel faces a parallel crisis of legitimacy - one that began in Gaza and has now deepened. The war in Gaza severely damaged its global standing, with sustained civilian casualties and humanitarian devastation drawing unprecedented criticism, even among traditional allies. This confrontation with Iran compounds that decline. Striking Iran during active negotiations - for the second time - reinforces the perception that escalation is preferred over diplomacy. The issue is no longer just conduct, but credibility. The conduct of the war compounds the problem. The assassinations of Iranian leaders, framed as tactical victories, are strategic failures. They have unified rather than destabilised Iran. Mass pro-regime demonstrations

illustrate how external aggression can consolidate internal legitimacy. The issue is no longer just the conduct of the war, but the credibility of the conflict itself. Regardless of how impressive the US and Israeli military are, it doesn't compensate for reputational collapse. When building support for a conflict like this - domestically and internationally - legitimacy is a strategic asset. Once eroded across multiple conflicts, it is extraordinarily difficult to rebuild. Rather than stabilising the system, US actions are fragmenting it. Allies are distancing themselves, adversaries are adapting, and neutral states are hedging. The most decisive factor may be economic. The war is already destabilising global markets - driving up oil prices, inflation, and volatility at levels that combine the effects of 1970s and Ukraine war oil shocks. This is a war that cannot be contained geographically nor economically. The deployment of 2,500 US marines to the Middle East (and reports that up to another 3,000 paratroopers will also be sent), reportedly with plans to secure Kharg Island - and with it Iran's most important oil infrastructure - would be a dangerous escalation. For Gulf states, the assumption that the US can guarantee security is increasingly questioned. Some states are reportedly now looking to diversify their partnerships and turning toward China and Russia, mirroring post-Iraq shifts, when US failure opened space for alternative powers. Wars are not won by destroying capabilities alone, but by destroying sustenance and

legitimate political outcomes. On both counts, the US and Israel are falling short. Iran, by contrast, does not need military victory. It only needs to endure, impose costs, and outlast its adversaries. This is the logic of asymmetric conflict: the weaker power wins by not losing, while the stronger one loses when the costs of continuing become unsustainable. This dynamic is already visible. Having escalated rapidly, Trump now appears to be searching for an off-ramp - reviving proposals and signalling openness to negotiation. But he is doing so from a position of diminishing leverage. In contrast, Iran's ability to threaten energy flows, absorb pressure, and shape the tempo of escalation means it increasingly holds key strategic cards. The longer the war continues, the more that balance tilts. Empires rarely recognise when they begin to lose. They escalate, double down, and insist victory is near. But by the time the costs become undeniable - economic crisis, political fragmentation, global isolation - it is already too late. The US and Israel may win battles. But they may be losing the war that matters: legitimacy, stability and long-term influence. And, as history suggests, that loss may not only define the limits of their power, but mark a broader shift in how power itself is judged, constrained, and resisted.

(The writers are, respectively, Honorary Research Fellow and Professor in International Politics, City St George's, University of London. This article was published on www.theconversation.com)

Crossword | No. 293421

Crossword puzzle grid with clues and solutions. Includes 'Yesterday's Solution' and a list of clues for the current puzzle.



### Editor's TAKE

## Beyond the claim of a Naxal-free India

While security gains signal real progress, the deeper ideological roots and governance gaps endure, reminding us that the solution lies beyond statistics

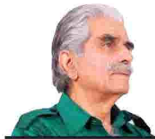
March 31, 2026 – the date the Central government set in 2024 – is now in the past. India is not yet free from Naxalism. No doubt the Government has done an incredible job of containing Naxalism and bringing down civilian casualties and violence, but it is yet to be eradicated completely. The promise of a "Naxal-free India" is yet to be realised. In the Lok Sabha, Amit Shah declared that the country had effectively been freed from Naxalism. Yet, beyond the rhetoric, the reality is more complex. While a large number of Naxalites have laid down their arms and the infamous Red Corridor has been cleared of Naxals' sway over land and people, it is still present, albeit with a weak presence in pockets of central India, particularly in parts of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. The security operations have been very successful, and the Naxals are on the back foot. Infrastructure has improved, and the Naxals are finding it difficult to get new recruits as older ones are surrendering in large numbers. What has led to this decisive victory is not just security operations but a calculated approach combining force with development – roads, telecom connectivity, banking access, and welfare delivery – which has substantially shrunk the Red Corridor.

The Indian state has succeeded in regaining territorial and administrative control in most of the insurgency-hit areas. However, the complete eradication of Naxalism is yet to be attained. Naxalism was not a simple law-and-order situation. It was rooted in basic questions of land, livelihood, and injustices in the country's most poverty-stricken areas of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh, mostly inhabited by Scheduled Tribes living in abject poverty. Shah's assertion in the House – that poverty followed Naxalism, not the other way around – is rather oversimplifying a complex socio-economic reality. Tribal displacement, forest rights, skewed development, and unresponsive local governance continue to create fertile ground for discontent. While security forces may clear territories, the absence of sustained institutional presence – schools, healthcare, fair markets – can allow alienation to fester. If the gains made by security forces are to become permanent, these issues must be addressed immediately before another wave of this ideological war hits the region.

Moreover, counter-insurgency, especially one with deep social roots, demands consensus and continuity. The Government must incorporate the suggestions of Opposition parties and take them into confidence while waging a war on its own soil. When the discourse becomes combative rather than collaborative, it risks reducing a national challenge to a partisan contest. Rehabilitation programmes for former cadres must be strengthened to prevent relapse, and a drive must be undertaken to win hearts and minds through education, dialogue, and cultural integration, not just security dominance. Finally, the narrative itself needs recalibration. Declaring victory may be politically expedient, but it can breed complacency. The guns may have fallen quieter, but the battle of ideas – and of justice – remains unfinished.

## Balen Shah unveils 100-reform agenda

Nepal has entered a dramatic new political phase, marked by an unprecedented crackdown on corruption and a generational shift in power. Prime Minister Balen Shah has already signalled that the new regime intends to match rhetoric with action



ASHOK K MEHTA

The assault on corruption and misgovernance has begun in Nepal. On March 28, in the first high-voltage act of PM Balen Shah, the government ordered the first-ever arrest of a former PM, KP Oli. I have been witnessing the entire election process in Nepal. To recap, elections were held on March 5; by 6/7 March it was eminently clear that the four-year-old Rashtriya Swatantra Party had swept the poll in both First Past the Post (FPTP) and Proportional Representation (PR) of Nepal's mixed electoral system.

But it was only on March 25, that the seniormost lawmaker of the dissolved House, Nepal Congress's Arjun Narasingh KC (NC coup-maker Gagan Thapa's father-in-law), was sworn in by President Ram Chandra Poudel as lawmaker. The next day, 274 of 275 lawmakers, including RSP chairman Rabi Lamichhane, who is out on bail on charges of corruption, were sworn in by Narasingh KC. From Shah's body language and protocol (Lamichhane was the last to arrive at the lawmaker oath-taking), it appeared that he recognised Lamichhane as the senior party colleague. Lamichhane proposed Shah as the leader of the parliamentary party. Despite speculation about a personality clash, leadership friction, and buzz about power-sharing, the December 28, 2025 Seven Point Agreement between Lamichhane and Shah contains no ambiguity about separation of power. Once Lamichhane is cleared of legal baggage, how he will be accommodated in the cabinet, if at all, remains a question mark. Four-times PM Prachanda of the Nepal Communist Party also took oath, as three former PMs were missing, not given a ticket, while two others lost the election badly, including four-times PM KP Oli (ousting by the Gen Z revolt), whose popularity plummeted from 'I love KP Oli' to 'Oli Chor Desh Chhod'. On March 27, at 12.34, with astronomical precision, former rapper and Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah took oath from Poudel as Vedic priests and Buddhist monks chanted hymns and verses at Shital Niwas, Poudel's residence. Manual counting of two sets of votes, including in remote areas, took three weeks – a process which can be compressed.

Meanwhile, the outgoing Sushila Karki interim government released three reports, including the Judicial Commission recommendations by Gauri Bahadur Karki on the investigation of the 7/8 September Gen Z revolt resulting in 77 deaths and arson and looting worth USD 5 billion. Kantipur TV severely criticised the Karki Commission report as 'selective justice' (the report was first leaked by Jan Astha magazine) for excluding events and accountability for arson on September



**BALEN SHAH'S TEAM HAS SET AN AMBITIOUS DEVELOPMENTAL AGENDA OF 100 REFORMS. THE GOVERNMENT'S FOCUS WILL BE INWARD-LOOKING, ATTEMPTING TO MAKE LIFE MORE CONVENIENT FOR ORDINARY NEPALESE AS NEPAL WILL SHORTLY EXIT FROM BEING A LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRY**

The writer, presently in Nepal, is a retired Major General, who served as Commander, IPKF (South), Sri Lanka

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8, which implicated Shah and Lamichhane. The profile of the new House is stunningly different from any in the past except in 1960, when NC had a two-thirds majority in the 10-month-long trust with democracy. RSP will have 182 lawmakers, two shy of a two-thirds majority, but no representation in the National Assembly or in any of the seven provinces. The second-largest party, NC, has 38 seats, with the rest of the opposition aggregating 55 seats. Communists and Madhesis are wiped out; only 15 per cent of lawmakers in the last House will be present in the new House; 96 are women, the highest number ever (37 per cent), with 37 per cent of the House being below 40 years of age. The 2015 Constitution, widely criticised for failing to provide a majority government, has enabled RSP to do precisely that. Since 1990, 33 governments have been formed, mainly coalitions, but since 2015, fractured coalitions. The 15-member Council of Ministers, including five women, is the smallest ever but has one big surprise: Gen Z leader Sudan Gurung, who brokered Shah's entry into RSP, as Home Minister. None in the Shah team has been a minister before, including Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle, who has been in the Planning Commission of Nepal. Lack of experience may not be a handicap to their performance.

Most helicopter commentators are reimagining Nepal's foreign policy. They say while a non-ideological and post-Communist government will present opportunities to external forces for expanding their political space, the RSP government will be able to expand its strategic autonomy. This is the first foray into foreign relations of a brand-new party since 1951. Fly-by wire experts are misreading geography and forgetting a historic net set by the founder of modern Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1746: that Nepal is a pebble between two giant stones. Landlocked Nepal has two borders – with

China and India. The US and EU are two other external players. Every government in Nepal has invoked King Shah's legacy using terms like 'balanced diplomacy' and Nepal 'acting as a bridge between China and India'. RSP is calling it a 'vibrant bridge'. The focus, as before, is on economics and 'developmental diplomacy'. In its manifesto, RSP has merely changed the semantics of foreign policy.

An old tradition of ambassadors and eminent citizens congratulating the newly elected Prime Minister and his Council of Ministers is being maintained. While the Indian ambassador, Naveen Srivastava, who will be leaving shortly, was leading the queue, the new Chinese ambassador Zhang Maoming not only shook Shah's hand but engaged in a long conversation and handed over a letter inviting him to visit China. Which country, China or India, Nepal's PM visits first is a very big issue. Every foreign policy move of this non-ideological PM and government will be carefully dissected to identify the tilt. For China, with Communist and Left lawmakers numerically reduced from 110 in the old House to 42 members at present, this is a cause for concern. Balen Shah's team has set an ambitious developmental agenda of 100 reforms. The government's focus will be inward-looking, attempting to make life more convenient for ordinary Nepalese as Nepal will shortly exit from being a Least Developed Country.

Home Minister Gurung, who was the de facto leader of Gen Z and negotiated a number of agreements with the Karki government, is determined to prosecute the crusade against corruption, and already some former ministers have been arrested, and public response has been highly positive. Former PMs Oli, Deuba, Prachanda, and some ministers will spend nervous nights as old files are dusted and closed cases reopened.



Farmers carry harvested bottle gourds on a boat through the River Ganga, in Prayagraj. PHOTO: PTI

### DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

### 2ND OPINION

The air during the past few days has been heavy with tension and unease, with several regions witnessing rising geopolitical strain and strategic posturing. Visuals of escalating military movements, political warnings, and media debates have stirred memories of past conflicts. The whole world watched in shock as visuals emerged of missiles being fired from both sides of the region. There were a lot of deliberations among nations who were in support of this attack as well as among nations who were against this attack. However, the fact remains that the entire world lives under the shadow of nuclear threat, and this compels every nation to build up heavy stocks of weapons of mass destruction in the name of self-defence and security. In the present world many people consider survival and security as prime values. They argue that if a person does not survive, then what value

## Is fear driving the world order?

the other values have for him. In a similar vein, they further argue that if a person lives in a state of constant insecurity and fear, then what is the charm, the joy, the fun or the zest in living? Because the quality of life of a man in fear is like that of a man in a state of suspended animation and it's not at all cherishable, relishable, enjoyable or valuable. On the other hand there are other people who question the contention of the former kind of people.

The questions they raise are that 'after all what is the purpose of survival?' & 'what is the goal of life?'. Further they ask 'what do we want to achieve by living or while living?'. They argue that the difference between a human being and an animal is narrowed down to zero if a man also, like other animals, is concerned primarily and mainly about his physical survival only. They feel that there should be some higher and nobler aim of human existence & that there should be something more worthy for humans to be achieved. Arguing thus, they ask: If personal survival is the main value, then why do military men endanger their own survival or sacrifice their life at the battle-front in order to keep intact the sovereignty of the nation? Again, why did the heroes of Indian Freedom Struggle happily embrace death for the sake of independence of their motherland?

Why did kings in the olden times, give up their palaces and bodyguards and go to the forest in pursuit of truth, endangering their life, knowing well that there were tigers

and lions there? With these questions in mind, they further argue that why should man have fear if he has moral and spiritual strength and has good relations with all the human beings? Because fear, they assert, arises from guilt-consciousness, suspicion or enmity. So, man should be free from these negativities rather than have additional negative tendencies or emotion, namely fear because one's survival should normally be an assured thing if one's actions are in harmony with other beings, with the environment and with the moral and physical laws.

Each one of us must understand that our life and death, or survival and happiness, are governed by the law of karma. If our karma is good, we should be free from fear? Death will come to all one day, so there is no reason to live in fear. The world remains peaceless because mankind has not realised that the race for military power, weapons and domination of others is driven by religious bigotry, greed for power and revenge. Man forgets that the power of arms or money, without the power to control one's own mind and senses, leads only to turmoil. Lasting happiness depends not on dominating others but on mastering one's own negative traits. If man does not destroy the demons of hate, anger and war with love and brotherhood, those demons will ultimately destroy mankind.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

### BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY IN UNCERTAIN MODERN TIMES

Appropos "Balancing work and family in an age of uncertainty" (March 31, 2025), the dilemma is instantly familiar. Technology, once a promise of freedom, has become a tether, pulling professional demands into kitchens and living rooms. The glow of a screen now competes with the warmth of family conversation, and the result is often silence punctuated by alerts.

Work no longer ends at the office door; it follows us home through emails, messages and virtual meetings. While technology has increased efficiency and flexibility, it has also quietly eroded the boundaries between professional and personal life. Many families now share the same space but not the same time or attention, which slowly

weakens emotional connections. The latest rate of disruption is not measured in fuel prices alone but in the erosion of human presence. Global instability may raise costs, yet the greater expense is paid in neglected relationships and emotional distance within families. The cure is not elaborate: reclaiming rituals of togetherness, whether through shared meals, evening strolls, or candid conversations. These small acts restore equilibrium, reminding us that resilience is cultivated at home. Balancing work and family is less about juggling hours than about choosing priorities, and the choice to be present remains the most valuable investment of all.

VEDA CHIDANAND | BENGALURU

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### War over oil interests

American President Donald Trump has created an energy crisis globally by attacking Iran. Now he is showing arrogant behaviour by threatening Iran with widespread destruction of its energy resources if a deal is not reached soon.

He wants to seize Kharg Island, Iran's main oil terminal in the Persian Gulf. The American President has even threatened desalination plants that supply drinking water. It is ironic that a Nobel Peace Prize seeker is acting recklessly by indulging in war. The irrational, illogical, unrealistic, arbitrary and aggressive attitude of Trump has not only put Iran in trouble but also those countries that buy oil from it. He should stop keeping his eyes on Iran's oil reserves; otherwise, he will lose charm and reputation among his followers and countrymen due to his desperate and dictatorial attitude.

The President of the world's strongest economy should maintain cordial relations with other countries and work towards global stability rather than threatening the destruction of civilian infrastructure. A ceasefire is the need of the hour to bring life back to normal and restore stability in the region.

ABHILASHA GUPTA | MOHALI

### Fuel policy raises concerns

The ongoing conflict in West Asia has driven international crude oil prices to at least \$115 a barrel. The rupee-dollar exchange rate is rising and has crossed ₹95 to a dollar. The weakening rupee is contributing to the highest cost of imports.

In response, the Central government has cut the excise duty on petrol and diesel by 710 per litre each, supposedly to ease the burden of spiralling crude oil prices on the common man. However, current pump prices, and by extension retail prices, remain unchanged.

In the Union Budget 2026, revenue from Union Excise Duties is estimated at ₹3.89 lakh crore. Due to the downward revision of excise duty, budgetary revenue is expected to decrease significantly. Consequently, the central divisible pool for distribution to the States is likely to shrink. Analysts suggest that the duty cut may have aimed to maintain the earnings of oil marketing companies in the public sector and petroleum refiners and retailers in the private sector.

HARIDASAN RAJAN | KERALA

### Red terror nearly ended

Home Minister Mr Amit Shah's statement that the 'shadow of red terror has been lifted' will be greeted with cheers by the nation, with the announcement coming a day before the deadline of March 31, 2026 set by the BJP government for its eradication.

Naxalism was born in 1967 as an offshoot of the CPI(M), with the goal of overthrowing the Indian government through armed insurgency and guerrilla warfare to establish a Maoist communist state. It sought to redress the grievances of the poor and landless farmers by eliminating feudal exploitation, redistributing land to them and destroying democratic institutions to establish a new state governed by the proletariat.

Though the aim was utopian, the means adopted were senseless violence, with Naxalites carrying out several attacks against security forces and killing prominent politicians like Congress leader VC Shukla in 2013.

V JAYARAMAN | CHENNAI



# Kuwait: Nation Chooses Peace, Encounters Harsh Consequences

Kuwait calls on Iran to cease its attacks on the GCC and Arab states — not in the language of ultimatum, but in the language of reason. The path to security in this region does not run through missiles and drones

**FIRST Column**



**MISHAL MUSTAFA AL-SHAMALI**

On this solemn occasion, we extend our deepest condolences on the passing of Indian national Santhansa Krishnan, who tragically lost his life while carrying out his professional duties at a power generation and water distillation facility in the State of Kuwait. We convey our heartfelt sympathies to his family and loved ones during this difficult time and wish a swift and full recovery to all those injured in the incident. The loss of innocent life underlines the human cost of instability and reinforces the urgency of restoring peace.

The State of Kuwait maintains a balanced and cautious position on the ongoing conflict in the region. It has consistently opposed escalation and any form of confrontation that leads to destruction and human suffering. Kuwait is not a party to military conflicts between nations; rather, it remains firmly committed to preserving the security and stability of the Gulf, the broader region, and the international community. This principled stance reflects Kuwait's longstanding belief that dialogue, diplomacy, and mutual respect must guide international relations.

Kuwait reiterates its strong condemnation of the Iranian aggressions witnessed over the past month against Kuwait, as well as against other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab nations. These actions constitute a flagrant violation of Kuwait's sovereignty and a clear breach of international law, humanitarian principles, and the United Nations Charter. Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity is not optional - it is a foundational principle of the international system.

In this context, the State of Kuwait affirms its inherent right to self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This right is exercised in response to clear and repeated acts of aggression, and always within the framework of international law. Kuwait remains committed to taking all necessary measures to safeguard its territory, citizens, and residents, while avoiding escalation and maintaining a responsible and measured approach.

Kuwait has consistently and transparent-



**THE WORLD IS WATCHING. AND THE WORLD MUST SPEAK — CLEARLY, COLLECTIVELY, AND SOON. AT THIS CRITICAL JUNCTURE, THE PATH FORWARD MUST BE GUIDED BY RESTRAINT, RESPECT FOR SOVEREIGNTY, AND A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO DIPLOMACY. THE STAKES ARE TOO HIGH — FOR THE REGION AND FOR THE WORLD — TO ALLOW ESCALATION TO DEFINE THE FUTURE**

The writer is the Ambassador of the State of Kuwait to India

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ly communicated to the Iranian authorities that it will not permit its territory or airspace to be used as a platform for launching attacks against Iran. Despite these assurances, hostile actions have continued. Iranian aggression against Kuwait and neighbouring countries has manifested through the launch of ballistic missiles and drones targeting civilian infrastructure. These attacks have resulted in tragic loss of life, destruction of residential areas, and widespread damage to essential facilities.

Critical civilian infrastructure has been directly affected, including Kuwait International Airport, where disruptions to air traffic have impacted both regional connectivity and humanitarian movement. Water reservoirs, energy and power installations, private residences, and seaports have also been targeted - facilities that serve civilian populations and have no connection to military operations. Such actions not only violate international humanitarian norms but also exacerbate instability in an already fragile environment.

The Gulf states remain united in their position: they do not seek to be drawn into broader conflicts and continue to support all efforts aimed at de-escalation and peaceful resolution. They are closely monitoring developments and remain hopeful that ongoing diplomatic initiatives will bring an end to aggression and restore stability. Unity among Gulf nations reflects a shared commitment to peace, security, and collective resilience.

The prolonged continuation of conflict poses grave risks beyond the immediate region. The global economy and international trade are already experiencing strain. Iran's suspension of maritime navigation through the Strait of Hormuz has disrupted critical energy shipments, affecting countries far beyond the Gulf. The resulting volatility in energy markets has translated into tangible hardships, including shortages of essential supplies such as cooking fuel in several regions.

Moreover, rising energy and petrochemical prices threaten to reach unprecedented levels if the conflict persists. Disruptions to fertiliser shipments further compound the problem, placing agricultural cycles at risk in multiple countries. These cascading effects highlight the interconnected nature of today's global economy, where regional instability can quickly evolve into a worldwide crisis.

It is important to recall that GCC nations have, in the past, stood in solidarity with Iran during times of crisis and have condemned external aggression against it. The current escalation against neighbouring states, therefore, represents a troubling departure from principles of mutual respect and regional cooperation. Such actions erode trust and undermine the foundations of peaceful coexistence.

Kuwait emphasises that continued aggression against GCC and Arab states constitutes a serious threat to regional and

international peace and security. The international community must adopt a clear and unified stance in upholding international law and deterring actions that destabilise the region. Silence or inaction in the face of such violations risks normalising behaviour that endangers global stability.

In this regard, the State of Kuwait and its regional partners deeply appreciate the principled position taken by the Republic of India. India's consistent advocacy for peace, dialogue, and respect for international norms reflects its growing role as a responsible global actor. Its voice carries weight not only in the region but also on the international stage.

Kuwait, alongside GCC nations and Jordan, also values India's contribution during the emergency session of the United Nations Human Rights Council held in Geneva on March 25, 2026. India's emphasis on protecting civilians and safeguarding critical infrastructure, particularly in the energy sector, underscores the importance of prioritising humanitarian considerations even amid conflict. Equally significant is the call to ensure the security of global supply chains, which remain vital to economic stability and food security worldwide.

The global community continues to call upon Iran to comply fully with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2817, which condemns aggression and threats

to maritime security, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz. Adherence to international obligations is essential for restoring confidence and preventing further escalation.

Kuwait remains steadfast in its belief that dialogue and diplomacy are indispensable in resolving conflicts. Military escalation only deepens divisions and prolongs suffering, whereas constructive engagement offers a path towards sustainable peace. Kuwait therefore urges Iran to cease its unjustified actions against neighbouring countries and to engage in meaningful dialogue that addresses concerns without resorting to violence.

Despite the challenges posed by ongoing aggression, the Government of Kuwait remains committed to ensuring the wellbeing of all who reside within its borders. Essential services continue to be provided without interruption, and efforts are ongoing to maintain a dignified standard of living for both citizens and residents.

### A final word on friendship

The Indian community in Kuwait is not merely a diaspora statistic. They are doctors, engineers, teachers, technicians, and entrepreneurs who have contributed immeasurably to our nation's growth. Despite the ongoing aggression, the Government of Kuwait remains firmly committed to ensuring the safety, dignity, and welfare of every Indian resident on our soil. They are, and will remain, an honoured part of our society.

But safety cannot be guaranteed in perpetuity by good intentions alone. It requires the aggression to stop.

Kuwait calls on Iran to cease its attacks on the GCC and Arab states — not in the language of ultimatum, but in the language of reason. The path to security in this region does not run through missiles and drones. It runs through dialogue, international law, and the kind of sustained diplomacy that India itself has long championed.

The world is watching. And the world must speak — clearly, collectively, and soon. At this critical juncture, the path forward must be guided by restraint, respect for sovereignty, and a renewed commitment to diplomacy. The stakes are too high — for the region and for the world — to allow escalation to define the future.

Kuwait stands firm in its call for peace, stability, and cooperation, believing that only through collective responsibility can lasting security be achieved.

## From Hormuz to the household: Why India needs a new energy security doctrine

## Living between two democracies, voting in none



**MEGHA JAIN** | **SURABHI SINGH**

A missile strike in the Strait of Hormuz may seem distant until it shows up in the price you pay at the petrol pump. For India, this is not a hypothetical scenario but a recurring economic reality. In an increasingly interconnected world, geopolitical disruptions travel quickly through energy markets, landing squarely in household budgets.

The shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a case in point. As global crude prices surged, India's import bill ballooned, driving inflation across sectors. For a country that imports nearly 85% of its crude oil, exposure to such external shocks is not incidental; it is structural. What appears to be a distant conflict can, within weeks, reshape domestic economic conditions from metropolitan centres to small towns. Energy security is no longer just an economic concern; it is a national strategic imperative. India must move beyond reactive measures to a coherent energy security doctrine that anticipates and absorbs global shocks.

### The anatomy of exposure

India's energy map is, in many ways, a map of geopolitical risk. Nearly a fifth of global oil trade passes through the Strait of Hormuz, and a significant share of India's crude imports traverses this narrow corridor. Any escalation involving regional powers, particularly Iran, has immediate implications not only for physical supply but also for global price benchmarks through heightened risk premiums.

A similar fragility defines the Red Sea corridor. Since late 2023, attacks on commercial shipping have forced vessels to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit times, freight charges, and insurance costs. These ripple through supply chains, functioning as an "invisible tax" on importing economies like India. Disruptions thousands of kilometres away translate into higher landed costs of crude, which then filter through the domestic economy.

Oil shocks are transmitted rapidly and widely. A spike in crude prices raises transportation and logistics costs, pushing up prices across



sectors — from manufacturing inputs to agricultural produce. Fertiliser costs rise, food prices follow, and inflation becomes embedded at the household level. The macroeconomic consequences are equally significant: a higher import bill widens the current account deficit, pressures the rupee, and increases the cost of dollar-denominated imports, compounding the initial shock.

Even modest price changes carry substantial weight. A \$10 per barrel rise can add an estimated \$14-15 billion to India's annual import bill. For policymakers, this means tighter fiscal space and heavier subsidy burdens; for MSMEs, compressed margins and reduced competitiveness. India has managed past disruptions through calibrated taxation and opportunistic sourcing, but in a world of frequent and overlapping geopolitical crises, such measures amount to cushioning, not resilience.

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SINCE 1868

### Strengths Without a System

India has taken meaningful steps to reduce its vulnerability. Following the Ukraine conflict, it increased imports of discounted Russian crude, at one point accounting for over a third of total imports. Supplier diversification has expanded to include the United States, Brazil, Guyana, and parts of West Africa. Domestically, ethanol blending in petrol has crossed 12 per cent, and renewable energy capacity has surpassed 200 GW, with solar playing a leading role.

Yet these gains remain fragmented. India's Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) cover only about 9-10 days of demand — modest compared to the United States' roughly 60 days or China's approximately 70-80 days. In a prolonged disruption, such as a sustained Hormuz blockade, these buffers would offer limited protection. The challenge is not the absence of policy action but the lack of integration. India's energy strategy

must evolve from a set of discrete initiatives into a unified, doctrine-driven framework.

### Towards a doctrine

India's next phase of energy security must rest on four strategic pillars.

First, diversify supply at scale — extending long-term partnerships beyond the Gulf to the Americas, Africa, and Central Asia, while institutionalising energy diplomacy.

Second, expand strategic reserves urgently, targeting at least 15-20 days of cover in the near term, supported by public-private participation and clear drawdown protocols.

Third, secure maritime energy routes — from Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca — through enhanced naval capabilities and closer coordination with strategic partners. Fourth, accelerate the clean energy transition: expanding renewables, scaling green hydrogen, and promoting electric mobility are not merely climate goals but strategic hedges against oil dependency. Together, these measures shift India's posture from managing shocks to pre-empting them.

Every global conflict today carries an economic cost for India — not always visible in headlines but felt acutely in household budgets. Energy costs — from petrol to cooking gas — have become a real-time indicator of geopolitical instability. India has both the capacity and the opportunity to change this equation. By embedding energy security at the core of national strategy, it can transform a structural vulnerability into strategic resilience. The next oil shock is not a question of if, but when. Preparedness must be built accordingly.

Megha Jain - Assistant Professor at Shyam Lal College, University of Delhi and Senior Visiting Fellow, Patle India Foundation and Surabhi Singh - Research Associate, Patle India Foundation

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**RACHITA RAMYA**

Whoever said you couldn't be in two places at the same time was wrong. Immigrants live in exactly that condition, constantly split between two worlds.

There is the host country, where they build their lives and livelihoods, and the home country, where their roots remain. Between the two lies a complicated process of acculturation - part assimilation, part erasure - never entirely complete.

Their identity becomes a shapeshifting, complex mass, shaped by the cultures, regions, and people they encounter. Anything that happens in the home country, from sociopolitical tensions to public health crises, from the governance of a political party to even the threat of war, indirectly affects them. At the same time, developments in the host country, such as immigration laws, economic shifts, job market instability, and rising taxes, shape their everyday realities just as deeply.

Yet, despite being deeply affected by both, immigrants often have no meaningful political voice in either.

India today has one of the largest immigrant diasporas in the world, with over 32 million people of Indian origin living abroad, according to the Ministry of External Affairs. Yet the number of those able to participate in Indian democracy remains strikingly small. In the 2024 general elections, only about 119,000 overseas Indians were registered as voters, and of those, just 2,958 reportedly travelled to India to cast their vote. That is not low participation. It is near exclusion.

The reasons are structural. While overseas Indians can register as voters, the law requires them to be physically present at their designated polling booth. For many, this is not a simple matter of booking a flight. Visa restrictions, work commitments, financial costs, and immigration-related constraints make it extremely difficult to return to India solely to vote. For those on temporary work visas, even short travel can carry professional and legal risks.

At present, there is no provision for online voting and no postal ballot system for most non-resident Indians. Proposals for proxy voting and remote voting mechanisms have been discussed in Parliament and by the Election Commission for several years, but they remain largely unimplemented. In effect, the right to vote exists, but access to it does not.

At the same time, in the countries where they live and pay taxes, millions of immigrants, including H-1B visa holders, international students, and

even long-term green card applicants, have no voting rights at all. In the United States alone, there are over 2 million Indians, many of whom are part of the highly skilled workforce in sectors such as technology, healthcare, and academia. They contribute significantly to economic growth and innovation, yet remain outside the democratic process.

The result is a quiet but profound disenfranchisement. The irony is stark. Immigrants are shaped by the politics of both their host and home countries, yet remain largely excluded from the political processes of either. They contribute economically, intellectually, and culturally, yet have little say in how systems function.

They pay taxes to structures they have no hand in shaping.

They exist in the messy in-between, where "immigrant" is no longer just a status, but a defining identity. They live in a political limbo, neither here nor there. On one side, immigrants in countries like the United States help drive key industries, from Silicon Valley to public health systems, yet remain excluded from voting. On the other, their connection to India often deepens with distance. Many become more attentive to Indian politics, more emotionally invested in national identity, and more engaged in public discourse than when they lived in the country.

Yet they remain largely excluded from shaping its political future in any meaningful way.

They become, in a sense, political orphans. The sharpest minds — engineers, doctors, researchers — find themselves subject to policies they cannot influence, waiting on administrations they cannot elect, and living under decisions they cannot shape. Travel costs, job constraints, and immigration restrictions make participation in home-country elections impractical for most, widening the gap between citizenship and civic agency.

This is not just a drain. This is a vote in vain, a loss not merely of talent, but of democratic voice. The messiness of being in two places, but in reality, the politics of being nowhere.

India received over 125 billion dollars in remittances in 2023, the highest in the world, much of it sent by this very diaspora. Immigrants continue to sustain families, communities, and even national economies from afar. Yet their political voice remains muted. You don't realise the weight your name carries until someone calls you by it. In the same way, you don't realise the power of your vote until it is taken away or rendered impossible to use. This is the problem haunting so many Indians abroad, and it needs real solutions and structural policies, not more waiting.

The writer is an author and public health researcher

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# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



الحوادث المصيبة ممكنة لحظوظ جزيلة  
(ابن المعتز)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB  
*Painful setbacks pave the way to extraordinary gains.*  
Ibn Al-Mu'tazz  
(Abbasid-era poet)

# Opinion

## Israel deploying its 'Gaza playbook' in Lebanon

CHRIS DOYLE



Chris Doyle is director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding in London  
X: @Doylech

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said it "may be unpleasant to scrape away two or three Lebanese villages," but that it is necessary.

Have Israeli actions in Lebanon shown intent? So far, Israel has killed more than 1,000 Lebanese, including 121 children. More than a million people have been displaced. As Israel did in Gaza, it has ordered residents to leave certain areas, focusing on southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut.

The area south of the Litani River — about 10 percent of the country — is being emptied. The Israeli defense minister announced last week that Tel Aviv would be seizing this area. This is more akin to ethnic cleansing.

In addition, Israel stands accused of using airstrike white phosphorus munitions over residential and rural areas of Lebanon. It also did this in 2024. And Oxfam has highlighted how Israeli forces have targeted water and sewage infrastructure in southern Lebanon, a violation of the

Fourth Geneva Convention.

It is probably too early to invoke genocide in terms of Israel's conduct in Lebanon. But war crimes are being committed, as is ethnic cleansing. As Israeli forces wade further into Lebanon and the fighting intensifies, many Lebanese have legitimate fears of what fate awaits them, intensified by what they have seen happen to Palestinians in Gaza. This just adds to the terror.

What is alarming is that, even in the early weeks of Israel's onslaught in Gaza at the back end of 2023, there was more international concern about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's intentions than there is over Lebanon today.

Could Israel do to Lebanon what it has done in Gaza? The answer has to be yes. It is the same government, with the same hateful supremacist ideology and the same brutal contempt for Arab lives. Israeli leaders believe, with good reason, that they can act with complete impunity.

With international attention elsewhere, the Israeli genocide in Gaza continues, albeit at a more sedate pace. Israel has killed more than 700 Palestinians in the Strip since the supposed ceasefire came into effect. Remarkably, given the nature of Israel's bombing campaigns regionally, its military is still finding the time to strike Gaza.

Yet genocide scholars, legal groups and other agencies are alarmed enough to also examine what Israel is doing and planning in Lebanon. Various aid agencies, such as Oxfam and Medical Aid for Palestinians, have warned that Israel is now also deploying its "Gaza playbook" there.

To be clear, these agencies have not yet stated that Israel is committing genocide in Lebanon. What they are doing is sounding an alarm, as they are obligated to do, because of the seriousness of the situation.

For any determination of genocide, the key ingredient is intent. Often, this is tough to prove, as most genocidaires are wise enough not to boast about their "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," as the Genocide Convention defines it.

One remarkable element of Israel's genocide in Gaza is how freely Israeli leaders, politicians and military officials have made genocidal comments. Many of these were read out during South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice in January 2024.

Regarding Lebanon, many Israeli leaders have made similar comments, not least regarding how they intend to do to parts of Lebanon what Israel did in Gaza. For example, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said that "the southern suburbs (of Beirut) will become like Khan Younis," which was destroyed in Israel's war on Gaza. Opposition leader Yair Lapid called for a "sterile zone" along the border. He

Many Israeli leaders have revealed how they intend to do to parts of Lebanon what Israel did in Gaza

COURTESY: AMALIO ROBINASHIROU, AL-JAMBAT



As the number of victims grows, there is a corresponding number of those meant to save them who have also been killed

## Action a must as Gaza doctor faces death in Israeli jail

DR. RAMZY BAROUD



Dr. Ramzy Baroud is a journalist, author and the editor of The Palestine Chronicle. His latest book, "Before the Flood," was published by Seven Stories Press. His website is [www.ramzybaroud.net](http://www.ramzybaroud.net)  
X: @RamzyBaroud

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Israel must immediately release Gaza doctor Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, UN experts stated in unequivocal terms in a statement last week. Abu Safiya had been "subjected to torture and other cruel and degrading treatment," they said, adding that his health condition was "dire."

Many are already familiar with the iconic Palestinian doctor from Gaza. But the deserved and urgent focus on his case should not end with him. Rather, it should illuminate the broader catastrophe afflicting Gaza's health sector, which has been dismantled as part of the ongoing genocide that began on Oct. 7, 2023.

More than 1,700 health workers have been killed in Gaza since the start of the genocide. The majority of Gaza's hospitals have been destroyed or rendered nonfunctional, with only a few partially operating. At least 455 Palestinians died due to hunger, including 151 children, in the first nine months of last year.

For all the grim numbers the Gaza

genocide has produced — and continues to produce — one constant stands out: as the number of victims grows, there is a corresponding number of those meant to save them who have also been killed.

Thousands of doctors, health workers, humanitarian workers, civil defense personnel, emergency responders, volunteers, charity workers and municipal officials have been swept into the same cycle of destruction.

From the earliest days of the genocide, Israel placed Gaza's hospitals at the center of its assault.

The killing of doctors, the bombing of hospitals and the detention of medical personnel are not incidental. They form part of a broader strategy: to render Gaza uninhabitable by dismantling the systems that sustain life.

Deprived of care, stripped of infrastructure and denied the means to survive, Palestinians were left with few options in those early months of genocide.

This is why Abu Safiya has become so

vital to this story. Every Gazan doctor who refused to leave his or her post during the genocide is a hero. Every health worker who risked his or her life to save others represents a model of courage that should be emulated everywhere. And every doctor killed, wounded or detained deserves to be remembered as the highest expression of human commitment to life.

Abu Safiya embodies all of these. He is not unique — and that is precisely the point. He is the face of a collective medical community that refused to abandon its people, even as the system around it collapsed.

At Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza, Abu Safiya remained at his post as Israeli forces advanced on the facility, already overwhelmed by waves of wounded and displaced civilians. Despite shortages of fuel, medicine and staff, he continued to treat patients while helping to protect those sheltering inside the hospital compound.

In the final days before his detention on Dec. 27, 2024, he was among the last senior doctors still operating in the hospital,

overseeing care under conditions that defied any conventional understanding of medical practice.

One image came to define him. Amid the ruins outside Kamal Adwan Hospital, he walked alone in his white coat toward advancing Israeli armored vehicles — a lone doctor facing a war machine. The image circulated widely because it captured, in a single frame, the reality of Gaza: those who heal standing unarmed before those who destroy.

That destruction remains in effect today, even as global attention has shifted elsewhere, compounding the dangers a besieged Gaza faces. "Israel must release Dr. Abu Safiya and all health-care workers," said the UN experts. Israel should also release all other Palestinian prisoners, lift the siege and end the genocide in its entirety.

"States have the power to end his torment," they said. They are not wrong — and there can be no moral or legal justification for their inaction.

## Opinion

## When can American bases be removed?

ABDULRAHMAN AL-RASHED

Iran closing the Strait of Hormuz was a predictable possibility, present in every potential war scenario. There was a precedent for its closure in the 1980s, when Iran planted mines, targeted ships and threatened maritime traffic. Known as the "Tanker War," Iran used missiles and speedboats. This war is historically significant because Iran caused and brought about foreign naval intervention, establishing a permanent

American military presence in the Gulf. Before Iran's attacks on maritime transport, the Americans did not have bases or warships in the Gulf.

The first battle came at the height of the Iran-Iraq war. At the time, Iraq was also attacking Iranian oil tankers. Tehran not only attacked Iraqi naval forces but also the naval vessels of Gulf countries, just as it attacks its Gulf neighbors today.

When the US navy's Fifth Fleet entered the region, an American warship was hit by an Iranian naval mine. That incident changed the rules of engagement, as the US became an active party in the crisis, and naval battles ensued for the first time since the Second World War. Iran targeted Kuwait's oil tankers and struck

Gulf maritime installations, so Kuwait requested support and American flags were raised on the tankers, which were escorted by American naval vessels. With the internationalization of the war, Iran's naval military capabilities and oil platforms were destroyed.

That was an important round of fighting that later concluded the long war with Iran's defeat and acceptance of a ceasefire. Today's war is a continuation of a series of

wars and clashes since the 1980s that express Iran's intentions and policies.

Among the five negotiating conditions that Iran is said to have put forward through Pakistan is a demand for the removal of American military bases from the region. This unrealistic

condition was in response to a list of 15 American conditions, which, although not confirmed by the White House, appear consistent with official statements.

To stop the war, Washington requires Iran to abandon its offensive military capabilities, such as programs, systems and stockpiles, and adopt an implementation mechanism. If Iran were to accept this, talk of removing the US bases would become plausible, as they were primarily

established to counter Iranian threats — despite the lies of conspiracy theory propaganda that claim the bases have hidden motives relating to seizing the Gulf and the region.

Trust in the Iranian regime is lacking and it would be difficult to build the kind of trust that would allow for America to abandon its bases, at least in the foreseeable future. The regime may yet change its policies in a positive way, or it could change altogether, but that is another matter that would then require a review of strategies to confront the Iranian threat.

Talking about the future is left for when circumstances change, but today we are living in ancient history. The war of closing the Strait of Hormuz is a repeat of the Tanker War in the 1980s, which confirms the difficulty of trusting the Iranian regime. The situation is replicating itself despite changes in the players, the oil market and the passage of nearly half a century. That war was between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran; today, it is between Israel and Iran. Oil and gas were and still are strategic commodities for the world's economy.

The Iran of the 1980s is the Iran of today, spreading chaos and terrorism. Its regime is the last rogue state standing, after Saddam, Muammar Qaddafi and Bashar Assad were eliminated.

However, the regime, although it seems cohesive and still on its feet in the current war, is not the same one that fought the eight-year war and the Tanker War; at that time, it was in its prime and at the peak of its popularity. Today, it is old and has lost its popularity, especially among the young generations.

The war has revealed that Iran was planning to use its arsenal in its expansionist project, whose frantic destructive activity we see in the strikes against six Gulf countries, Iraq and Jordan, as well as its popularity, especially among the young generations. The war has revealed that Iran was planning to use its arsenal in its expansionist project, whose frantic destructive activity we see in the strikes against six Gulf countries, Iraq and Jordan, as well as its popularity, especially among the young generations.

If Iran pledges and commits that it will not return to developing its aggressive military capabilities, the American, British and French bases would leave because they are a result of Iranian threats — and Iranian threats are not a response to their presence.



Abdulrahman Al-Rashed is a Saudi journalist and intellectual. He is the former general manager of Al-Arabia news channel and former editor-in-chief of Aharq Al-Awsat, where this article was originally published.  
X: @aarashed

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**Today's war is a continuation of a series of clashes since the 1980s that express Iran's intentions and policies**

**Trust in Iran is lacking and it would be difficult to build the kind of trust that would allow the US to abandon its bases**

## Pakistan should be empowered to mediate end to Iran war

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB

Surprisingly, Israel last week struck close to the Pakistan Embassy in Tehran. This was not by chance. The area near the embassy was hit because Pakistan is trying to play a role in ending the war and, obviously, Israel does not want that to happen. The US last week delivered a 15-point plan to Iran via Islamabad.

After the decapitation of its leadership in the opening days of the war, Iran's position hardened. It did not back down. Of course, backing down in the face of those assassinations would have been an admission of defeat. Both the US and Iran are in a tough position and need an off-ramp — a graceful exit — and this is where effective mediation is needed.

Pakistan is today playing the role of the conveyor. It delivers messages between the two sides. This is not enough to reach a solution and bring an end to the war. Effective mediation is needed. For mediation to work, a mediator needs to be empowered. The mediator needs to have leverage on both sides. Pakistan has good relations with both countries but does not have significant leverage on either.

Pakistan has excellent relations with Saudi Arabia, with the latter being the center of the Muslim world. The foreign ministers of several Arab and Muslim states have already convened in Riyadh to discuss the current crisis and issue a joint statement. However, to solve the ongoing crisis, more than a joint statement is needed. For Pakistan to be able to conduct effective mediation, it needs strong backing. Pakistan has reportedly

announced that it is ready to host talks between the US and Iran in Islamabad.

The war needs to come to an end, as the repercussions are spiraling out of control. As of now, a solution is not within reach as the demands of the two parties are so far apart. Both Iran and the US need to be realistic

in order to bridge the gap and bring the war to a conclusion. Turkey and Egypt have also expressed their readiness to help with the mediation. Prior to the American-Israeli strikes on Iran, Ankara urged the US to solve its problems with Tehran "one by one." Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan urged Washington to focus on the nuclear issue, as Iran was ready to negotiate over its nuclear program.

However, Washington preferred to use

its leverage and take advantage of the dire situation in Iran to negotiate all the dossiers at once via a take-it-or-leave-it deal. It demanded Tehran give up its stockpile of highly enriched uranium to a third party, end its domestic uranium enrichment program, limit its missile program and cease its support for proxy groups.

US envoy Steve Witkoff, in an interview broadcast a week before the start of hostilities, said President Donald Trump was "curious" as to how the Iranians had not "capitulated." Now that it is obvious that Iran will not capitulate easily, the US should welcome mediation and back down from its maximalist demands.

A mediator's role is to bring about a deal that will not make any party look as if they have capitulated. If the US still insists on capitulation, then the mediation of Pakistan or anyone else will not work. However, if the US becomes more realistic and realizes that Iran is not exactly Venezuela and that the war has global repercussions, then mediation could work. However, even with such a change of approach, pressure is needed to secure an arrangement that will end the war and make sure it does not resume.

Mediation is needed now before a major

escalation. The US is contemplating sending 10,000 more troops to the Middle East, in addition to the 5,000 Marines and 2,000 paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division that were sent to the region last week.

The troops are reportedly set to invade Kharg Island, from which Iran exports 90 percent of its oil. Iran has threatened that if the island is attacked, it will attack its Gulf neighbors' energy infrastructure. On the other hand, Trump has said that if Iran does not open the Strait of Hormuz by April 6, the US will hit its power facilities. Of course, Iran would retaliate in such a scenario. This escalation would be very dangerous.

There is a window for negotiation before a major and destructive escalation takes place. This is why Pakistan's role should evolve from a simple messenger to a mediator.

Muslim countries can back Islamabad in order for this to happen. They should throw all their weight behind Pakistan so that it can be a successful mediator. They should be willing to use their leverage with the US and Iran to back Pakistan's effort before it is too late.

**Both the US and Iran need an off-ramp — a graceful exit — and this is where effective mediation is needed**

**Now it is obvious Iran will not capitulate, the US should welcome mediation and back down from its maximalist demands**



Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib is a specialist in US-Arab relations with a focus on lobbying. She is co-founder of the Research Center for Cooperation and Peace Building, a Lebanese nongovernmental organization focused on Track II.

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## COMMENTARY

## UK's biannual report on HK stained by hypocrisy

Grenville Cross says two-faced allegations are not the stuff of better Anglo-Chinese relations

Everybody in public life should know the old adage: "Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones." However, many Western politicians routinely disregard it. An example arose on March 26, when the British foreign secretary, Yvette Cooper, issued the United Kingdom's 55th six-monthly report on the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

In comparison with the six-monthly reports of her predecessors, including David Lammy, David Cameron, and Dominic Raab, Cooper's criticisms were relatively brief (albeit equally mechanical). However, the brazen hypocrisy that stained the earlier reports was evident once more.

For example, Cooper accused Hong Kong of trying "to silence criticism overseas" by using arrest warrants and bounties, which was "wholly unacceptable". By this, she meant it was exercising its extraterritorial jurisdiction to defend itself from foreign-based fanatics trying to wreck the "one country, two systems" policy and undermine China — some of whom, in violation of the comity of nations, have been granted safe haven in the UK, where they operate with impunity.

However, Cooper failed to mention that the national security laws of various other common law jurisdictions, including her own. Australia, Canada and the United States, also have extraterritorial effect (under principles such as the "personal principle" and the "protective principle").

Indeed, the extraterritorial provisions of Hong Kong's Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO) of 2024 owe much to those in the UK's National Security Act of 2023, which its drafters carefully studied. Therefore, instead of criticizing Hong Kong for trying to protect itself from hostile forces, she should have applauded it for following the British model. Unfortunately, her report is all about cheap shots rather than objective commentary.

As usual, Cooper trotted out the discredited myth that the Hong Kong SAR National Security Law (NSL) was being applied willy-nilly. Although the evidence shows the NSL has always been applied



Grenville Cross

The author is a senior counsel and law professor, and was previously the director of public prosecutions of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

with great restraint, she claimed it "continued to expand in scope and practice". She clearly had no interest in the official statistics, unveiled by the Hong Kong Police Force on Feb 11. They demonstrated that since the NSL and the SNSO came into force in, respectively, 2020 and 2024, there were only 385 arrests by the end of 2025, and not all the arrestees were subsequently charged, which is what counts.

As of March 1, only 208 individuals and five companies had been prosecuted for national security offenses since 2020. On any objective analysis, these figures are tiny, particularly given the ongoing efforts to destabilize Hong Kong and wreck the "one country, two systems" framework. Although Hong Kong has a population of approximately 7.5 million, only a handful of fanatics have been prosecuted, with the overwhelming majority of people being law-abiding.

Although reassuring, these statistics do not appear in Cooper's report, which, on its face, is surprising. After all, the UK consul general in Hong Kong, Brian Davidson, presumably provided them, and would not have expected them to be airbrushed out. However, they have no propaganda value, and the view apparently prevailed in London that they are best ignored. Anybody, therefore, who wants to understand the actual state of affairs in Hong Kong will need to look elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the minuscule arrest numbers, Cooper sought to sensationalize what she said were the 69 national security-related arrests made last year, including for "displaying political slogans, peaceful protest and organizing petitions". If this were all there was to the arrests, the cases would not have progressed any further.

In Hong Kong, as in the UK, a suspect

can only be prosecuted if there is solid evidence of a crime. A suspect must have committed a guilty act and also have a guilty mind. Any cases taken to court on the basis posited by Cooper would be dead in the water (as the foreign office's legal department could have explained to her, had she been interested).

Indeed, nobody should be fooled by her attempts to demean a city whose legal system was ranked among the world's best by the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index 2025 (rated 24th out of the 143 jurisdictions surveyed, behind the UK but ahead of the US). Although this was no mean feat, particularly after the turmoil of 2019-20, Cooper gave the city no praise, undoubtedly because it contradicted her critique.

However, this is only half the story, and hypocrisy looms large. Until Sept 5, Cooper was the British home secretary, responsible for policing and law and order. As such, she took the shameful decision (July 5) to proscribe a pressure group called Palestine Action (PA) by listing it under the Terrorism Act 2000. PA enjoys wide support in the UK, and it campaigns for a Palestinian state, an end to the Gaza genocide, and respect for the human rights of the Palestinians. This made it a target of governmental repression.

In consequence of Cooper's ban, the police arrested over 2,700 people in 2025 for peacefully expressing opposition to the banning of PA in the UK. The arrests were on a scale not seen since the poll tax riots in the 1990s, and nobody with a conscience was safe. Those arrested included people of all ages with exemplary pedigrees, united by the belief that it was intolerable to sit on the sidelines as their fellow human beings suffered in Palestine. Their "crime" was to brandish placards displaying slogans like "I oppose genocide, I support Palestine Action".

Rather than telling the Metropolitan Police to concentrate on combating London's notorious crime rates (including street crime, now at record levels), Cooper preferred to unleash them on men and women of conscience peacefully expressing their views.

Among the many voices who denounced her government's repression was Amnesty International, which "condemned the use of counterterrorism laws

to target peaceful protesters". Even Cooper's former Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, described her proscription of PA as "an absurd and authoritarian attack on the right to protest". Unfortunately, it was all water off a duck's back, and she refused to listen to anybody pointing out her clampdown was "un-British".

It came, therefore, as no great surprise when Cooper's ban on PA was declared to be illegal by the High Court in February, primarily because it was not shown to be a terrorist organization. Although there is to be an appeal, the Metropolitan Police initially had the good sense to stop arresting peaceful protesters. However, this changed on March 27 (presumably after governmental pressure), when they announced they would resume their arrests of people for supporting PA (18 were detained in London on Saturday). If this smacked of contempt for the rule of law and a disregard of the legal norms for which Britain was once famed, it was because it was both of those things.

As the minister who engineered a scandal that traumatized thousands of her fellow citizens, divided the country, and threatened the rule of law, Cooper should be hanging her head in shame — not berating the Hong Kong authorities for supposedly arresting a paltry 69 individuals in 2025.

Yet despite her ferocious clampdown on protesters' rights, Cooper accused the Hong Kong authorities of presiding over a continuing "erosion of rights and freedoms". By any yardstick, this was delusional.

Indeed, in its annual human rights report last August, the US Department of State accused the UK of backsliding on human rights, citing "serious restrictions" on free speech. When even Britain's closest ally feels obliged to call out its human rights record, there must be something seriously wrong. It beggars belief, therefore, that Cooper had the gall to point fingers at Hong Kong after her own government's human rights record had been so roundly condemned by Washington.

Although Cooper grandly announced her government would be unwavering in its support of Hong Kong's "rights and freedoms", she would be well advised to focus instead on upholding the rights and freedoms of the British people, which she

has trampled underfoot.

If, moreover, Cooper is really concerned about unjustified arrests, she need look no further than the arrests (and subsequent charging) of two British nationals, Christopher Cash and Christopher Berry, accused of spying for China. After an ordeal that saw their reputations trashed, their employment ended, and their health impaired, the case against them collapsed in September for lack of basic evidence (about China constituting a national security threat). It remains to be seen if the two men will sue Cooper (or the Home Office) for malicious prosecution, but on the face of it, they must have a strong case.

As if all this were not bad enough, Cooper also regurgitated tired old fallacies about the Apple Daily founder, Jimmy Lai Chee-ying, who was recently sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for endangering national security. Using words drafted years ago by her predecessors, she said, "The UK condemns the politically motivated prosecution in the NSL trial of British national Jimmy Lai", which was bizarre.

If there had indeed been any evidence that Lai's prosecution was politically motivated (or otherwise based on improper grounds), his high-powered legal team would have sought a stay of the proceedings as an abuse of the court's process. However, no such application was made, for good reason — Cooper's claim was unsupported by so much as a scintilla of evidence. It is unclear whether Cooper cleared her report with the prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, before publication. If she did, it suggests he may not be as keen as he professes to be about improving relations with Beijing. If she did not, it suggests she may not see eye to eye with Starmer, and is more interested in ingratiating herself with the UK's vocal anti-China lobby than in promoting better ties. Wherever the truth lies, hypocritical allegations are not the stuff of better Anglo-Chinese relations and have no role in constructive diplomacy. The sooner they become a relic of a wasted past, the better it will be for everyone who believes in mature, mutually beneficial exchanges between the two countries.

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## Intrusion into Chinese Embassy in Tokyo was no mere security breach

The recent intrusion into the premises of the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo by a 23-year-old serving officer of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, reportedly carrying a blind weapon and threatening to harm Chinese diplomatic personnel on-site "in the name of God", must be approached as a governance and treaty compliance problem before it is framed as a sensational crime story. Public anger is understandable, yet the more consequential task is to identify what the incident reveals about legal responsibility, institutional discipline, and the ideological climate that can transform diplomatic premises into a stage for extremist performance.

In contemporary diplomacy, the safety of missions is a baseline condition for dialogue itself. When that baseline is shaken, the burden shifts immediately to the receiving state to demonstrate control, credibility, and a capacity for prevention.

International law supplies the correct point of departure. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations does not treat the protection of missions as ordinary policing. Article 22 establishes the inviolability of mission premises. It imposes a special duty on the receiving state to take all appropriate steps to protect against intrusion or damage and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity. The term "special duty" carries operational meaning. It requires a protective posture calibrated to risk, supported by adequate resources, and maintained through routine evaluation. Article 29 extends the protective obligation to diplomatic agents personally, requiring all appropriate steps to prevent any attack on their person, freedom, or dignity. These provisions are not satisfied merely by the fact that an intruder is eventually detained. The harm addressed by the convention includes intimidation, disrupt-



Virginia Lee

The author is a solicitor, a Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area lawyer, and a China-appointed attesting officer.

**A responsible response on the part of Japan is measured by whether the country can demonstrate institutional learning, ideological containment, and operational competence, thereby showing that extremist ideology or currents will not set the tempo of domestic politics.**

tion, and the coercive effects of credible threats. A weapon paired with an explicit death threat can impair freedom and dignity even if no physical injury occurs, because it forces diplomats and staff to work in a state of fear and compels mission procedures to pivot from diplomacy to crisis management.

The identity of the alleged intruder makes the compliance question more acute. An ordinary criminal can be treated as an external risk that policing aims to deter. An active duty officer is different. Armed forces are institutions entrusted with organized coercive power, shaped by discipline, professional ethics, and a chain of command. When a member of that institution allegedly targets a

foreign mission, the incident raises issues of screening, internal supervision, and ideological susceptibility within the security apparatus. The receiving state is then expected to show more than a criminal prosecution. It must show that its civil-military system can prevent personnel from carrying extremist impulses into acts that endanger foreign diplomats, because such acts are inseparable from the state's credibility. This is why China's forceful diplomatic response is not mere rhetoric. It reflects an orthodox expectation that Japan must rectify the conditions that allowed a uniformed actor to become a direct threat to a protected mission.

Understanding the phrase "in the name of God" is essential, not to dignify it, but to interpret its political function. In Japan's nationalist tradition, sacred vocabulary has historically been used to fuse sovereignty, identity, and moral purity, often by referencing myths of divine origin and a sanctified polity. Even after postwar constitutional reforms and official repudiations of prewar state ideology, the symbolic resources of sacred nationalism did not disappear. They can persist in cultural memory and be reactivated in certain situations. In that framework, invoking God can operate as an attempt to place violence beyond ordinary moral scrutiny, presenting it as a duty rather than a crime. The practical danger is that mythic language becomes a tool for insulating an actor from legal and moral restraint, transforming an unlawful attack into a self-styled act of "defense".

In Japan's historical repertoire, the linkage between honor, sacrifice, and death has been repeatedly aestheticized and, at times, politicized as proof of sincerity. In extremist settings, self-destruction is a coercive tactic that forces authorities into a false moral dilemma by implying responsibility for the actor's death. When that tactic is directed at an embassy, it aims to convert a foreign mission into a

hostage of spectacle. For diplomatic protection, this matters because prevention must anticipate performance and symbolism, not only physical perimeter control. An embassy can be targeted for what it represents, and representation is precisely what extremists seek to manipulate.

The security breach, therefore, demands an institutional audit rather than a narrow incident report. Effective mission protection depends on coordinated action across local policing, intelligence assessment, and, where relevant, military liaison. The Vienna Convention's requirement of all appropriate steps implies a continuous cycle of risk identification, preventive patrol patterns, access control, and rapid response protocols. If an intruder can reach mission grounds with a weapon, the question is not only how he entered, but why the risk of such an attempt was not preempted through threat monitoring and layered deterrence. Transparent remedial measures, including upgraded perimeter design, routine joint exercises, and clear accountability for operational lapses, would strengthen Japan's credibility.

Yet security reengineering alone is insufficient if the broader political climate in Japan lays open the way to radicalization. When public discourse increasingly normalizes headline narratives and historical revisionism, and repeatedly frames neighboring states as existential threats, an atmosphere of mobilization can take hold. That atmosphere can breed violence and extremism. It can reduce the social stigma attached to extremist talk and provide a narrative in which aggression is framed as a "patriotic" act. In such conditions, fringe actors portray themselves as the uncompromising executors of a national will that, in their view, elites hesitate to implement. This mechanism is a pathway through which extreme-right forces can gain influence without overtly capturing state institutions, and it is consistent with concerns about resurgent

militarist sentiment in Japan that erodes moral and legal restraints on the radicals.

A constructive way forward requires Japan to immediately address three pressing concerns. First, legal accountability must be prompt and credible, paired with diplomatic assurances that go beyond an apology and demonstrate concrete prevention measures. Second, civil-military governance should be strengthened through stricter internal controls on extremist expression, improved psychological and ideological screening where appropriate, and reinforced professional education that treats attacks on diplomats as fundamentally dishonorable and reckless. Third, political leadership should reduce incentives for extremist entrepreneurship by avoiding inflammatory signaling that turns diplomacy into identity confrontation and by treating historical truth as a foundation for trust rather than as a battlefield for domestic applause.

For China, insisting on these steps is consistent with upholding the integrity of diplomatic relations and safeguarding its personnel. It is also consistent with a broader regional interest: Stable diplomacy requires that missions remain protected spaces where disagreements can be managed without fear. The deeper lesson of this episode is that embassies are on the front line of international order. When the receiving state cannot guarantee their security, every other confidence-building measure becomes harder, because even routine contact is overshadowed by the possibility of politicized violence.

A responsible response on the part of Japan is measured by whether the country can demonstrate institutional learning, ideological containment, and operational competence, thereby showing that extremist ideology or currents will not set the tempo of domestic politics.

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# COMMENT

## Editorials

### KMT leader's visit expected to contribute to peaceful development of cross-Straits ties

Cheng Li-wun, chairwoman of the Chinese Kuomintang party, will lead a delegation to the Chinese mainland, visiting Beijing, Shanghai and Jiangsu province from April 7 to 12. The visit, at the invitation of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Xi Jinping, CPC Central Committee general secretary, marks the first by a KMT leader in over a decade, signifying a restoration of top-level engagement between the CPC and the KMT.

Cheng's pragmatic approach to cross-Straits relations highlights a willingness to stabilize the cross-Straits situation and promote peaceful development. Her emphasis on dialogue and cooperation between the KMT and the CPC could facilitate cross-Straits exchanges, benefiting people on both sides.

Her visit also comes at a critical juncture amid heightened tensions across the Taiwan Strait. These tensions stem from separatist activities on the island challenging the one-China principle, as exemplified by the Democratic Progressive Party authorities' push for a substantial "defense budget" of around \$39 billion for arms purchases from the United States aimed at seeking "Taiwan independence". It is an urgent task for the CPC and the KMT to work together to oppose any attempt to secede Taiwan from the motherland.

Cheng's visit provides an opportunity to reinforce the 1992 Consensus, which asserts that there is only one China in the world and both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China. This consensus lays the political foundation for developing cross-Straits relations and is the anchor for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

Adherence to this consensus is conducive to stabilizing the cross-Straits situation and is crucial for maintaining peace in the region and preventing misunderstandings. The KMT leader's visit can help counteract the DPP's "Taiwan independence" agenda, which is pushing cross-Straits relations to a critical point and increas-

ing the risk of armed conflict.

By reaffirming the 1992 Consensus, the CPC and the KMT can enhance mutual political trust and focus on strengthening the shared cultural identity and well-being of compatriots on both sides of the Strait.

The visit builds on the legacy of the historic 2015 meeting between Xi and Ma Ying-jeou, who was then leader of China's Taiwan region and KMT chairman, underscoring the potential for peaceful engagement between the two sides of the Strait.

Cheng's visit can help foster an environment for mutual understanding and cooperation, emphasizing the shared heritage and cultural ties of people on both sides of the Strait.

There is broad scope for dialogue between the CPC and the KMT, including strengthening economic ties, cultural exchanges and educational partnerships. These efforts can help lay the groundwork for lasting peace and mutual understanding, helping reduce tensions across the Strait.

By facilitating people-to-people exchanges, the CPC and the KMT can enhance mutual understanding and trust between people on the two sides of the Strait, which is crucial for enhancing public recognition of shared cultural identity.

Given the complex and tense situation across the Taiwan Strait, Cheng's visit is expected to send a clear signal of the commitment to the peaceful development of cross-Straits relations and deepened cooperation and exchanges across the Strait. It also highlights the determination to resolve differences through dialogue.

Upholding the 1992 Consensus and opposing "Taiwan independence" are prerequisites for exchanges. By working together on that basis, the CPC and the KMT can jointly contribute to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The potential rewards are significant. The KMT should seize this opportunity to collaborate with the CPC to build a future where peace and prosperity are defining features of the Taiwan Strait.

### AI and data governance not zero-sum game

For years, the prevailing assumption in Washington has been that technology is a zero-sum contest, and that the United States can maintain its technological supremacy by building walls around its own innovation ecosystem.

The logic of "decoupling" — whether in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, or cloud infrastructure — is a bipartisan article of faith. But reality has a way of ignoring political wish fulfillment. The reality of 2026 is that Chinese AI models are quietly becoming part of the foundational architecture of cutting-edge applications being built in Silicon Valley.

From Cursor's adoption of Kimi K2.5 to a growing list of US tech companies switching to Chinese foundational models such as MiniMax, Zhipu AI and Qwen, the trend is unmistakable. Eight of the 10 most downloaded open-source models on platforms such as GitHub and Hugging Face are now of Chinese origin. When a premier AI conference, NeurIPS, rejected a Chinese submission, the China Computer Federation's decision to withhold academic services prompted a swift apology — an incident that reveals not just scientific depth but the extent to which global AI discourse now depends on Chinese participation.

What explains this shift? The answer lies in a convergence of developments. The performance gap between Chinese and US foundational models has narrowed dramatically over the past year. Innovations in residual connections and new architectural pathways have placed Chinese models at the frontier of technical capability. The market for AI agents and open-source ecosystems has matured to the point where cost-efficiency and performance matter more than geographic origin. Chinese models have proved exceptionally competitive on both counts. And the global AI industry is beginning to understand that foundational models are infrastructure, much like electricity or the internet. And infrastructure, by its nature, is global. The world's two largest economies cannot afford to simply wall themselves off from each other in AI.

Yet that is what a new bill introduced by US lawmakers seeks to do — banning government use of Chinese robots and, by extension, deepening a "decoupling" agenda that extends to AI. The economic illogic of this approach is staggering. It assumes that supply chains can be untangled overnight, that innovation can be neatly partitioned by nationality, and that the rest of the world will align itself with US restrictions rather than continue to adopt the best and most

cost-effective technology available. None of these assumptions hold.

Data is foundational to our digital world. But the creation of infrastructure that produces data and the use of data through AI models have been the focus of attention and not enough meaningful consideration has been given to data itself. The need for a world data body and a comprehensive, multilateral approach for governing the use and flow of data, and to address attempts to hijack the open flow of information by criminals and terrorists, has become increasingly evident. As has the question of who benefits from its expanding uses, as there is a huge gap between the data gains of the developed and developing worlds.

The establishment of the World Data Organization aims to address these issues. The organization held its first general meeting in Beijing on Monday, at which its charter was adopted, its first council elected and the groundwork laid for a multilateral framework to govern data and high-tech development.

As foundational models become general-purpose technologies, their diffusion across borders will determine which economies can participate in the intelligent economy of this century. By championing open-source ecosystems and internationalizing its AI services, China is helping nations bridge the digital divide.

None of this is to suggest that geopolitical competition over technology has disappeared. It has not. But the premise that AI "decoupling" is either feasible or desirable is dangerously mistaken. The industry itself is demonstrating that. When Silicon Valley developers choose Chinese foundational models, they are voting with their code.

What is needed instead is multilateral governance. The World Data Organization offers a framework, however nascent, for precisely that. The alternative — a world of competing technological blocs, fragmented standards, and redundant investment — would impose enormous costs on businesses, consumers and innovation itself. These costs would not be borne equally. They would fall most heavily on economies that are least able to afford them.

Washington's lawmakers would do well to respect reality. The attempt to "decouple" the world's two largest economies in AI is not only impossible; it is a form of self-harm. The infrastructure of the intelligent age will be built on global foundations. The only question is whether the US chooses to help shape that architecture or isolates itself from it.

Jin Ding



## Opinion Line

### Ground warfare risks dragging US into Middle East quagmire

To understand how irrational the United States' flirtation with a ground war against Iran is, stop looking at Tehran. Look instead at Tel Aviv — and then at the fault lines cracking open Washington's own political circles. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a leader whose political survival seems to depend on the conflict, has found the perfect tool: a US administration so eager to appear strong that it has forgotten what strength actually looks like.

Plainly speaking, Netanyahu's coalition rests on ultranationalist factions, his corruption trial grinds on, and the world has not forgotten his government's conduct in Gaza. That is where Iran comes in, conveniently positioned to draw out talk of his war crimes as charged by the International Criminal Court, while the US comes in handy as a hired gun.

The Netanyahu government has precisely read the political situation in the US. It sees the protests — such as the "No Kings" rallies — against executive overreach unfolding in Minnesota and elsewhere, and understands that a distracted Washington is a pliable one. It notes the simmering rivalry between different views on the US' Middle East policy even within the core policymaking circle in Washington, and knows the

Epstein files continue to fester awaiting full exposure. Tel Aviv's calculation is simple: Strike Iran while the iron is hot, before the US president can no longer divert public anger with rallying calls to the flag.

The incoherent signals emerging from the White House — one moment hinting at renewed diplomatic engagement, the next moment discussing ground operations — tell you everything. Different factions, different foreign patrons, and different domestic constituencies are all vying to shape a decision that could plunge the Middle East into open war. The result is a foreign policy of spectacle.

What would a ground war mean? Oil prices are already soaring, hurting every driver in the US and every European business. The global economy would be hit with a shock that benefits only vested interests — defense contractors, certain energy players, and the political donors who move between them. The burden, as ever, would be shouldered by ordinary people.

The US administration would do well to listen to the mediators — Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and others — which have been trying to de-escalate the situation. China, too, has been engaged in sustained diplo-

matic efforts. Foreign Minister Wang Yi has held telephone talks not only with Tehran and Tel Aviv and other capitals in the Middle East, but also with Paris, London and Ottawa. Beijing's proactive actions are aimed at an outcome even the peace-lovers in the US want: an early ceasefire. When the US "strategic rivals", as some in Washington call them, work harder for restraint than its allies, it means something has gone badly wrong with Washington's strategic judgment.

Frankly, no ground invasion of Iran can end well, not for US soldiers, not for regional stability, not for the US administration's own political standing, and certainly not for a country suffering from endless conflict and war. Iran is not Iraq. Its terrain, its population, its capacity to retaliate through proxies from Lebanon to the Gulf — these are realities no amount of military briefings can wish away.

The US administration can still step back, value mediating efforts that are already underway, and pursue talks with a sincerity the moment demands. Doing otherwise would amount to "surrender" — to an ally's domestic agenda, to the whims of competing advisers, and to the oldest trap in Middle Eastern politics: fighting someone else's war as if it were your own.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

## What They Say

### Support needed for Chinese companies going global

**Editor's note:** The Chinese government has emphasized that it attaches importance to both the country's gross domestic product and gross national income. The 21st Century Business Herald spoke to Zheng Yongnian, the dean of the School of Public Policy at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, about China's path toward globalization. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

The GDP of the Chinese economy primarily refers to economic activities within the country, GNI, or gross national income, measures the earnings of a country's people and companies, both domestically and abroad, and is referred to as the "Chinese people's economy". In other words, the "Chinese economy" is domestic, while the "Chinese people's economy" is global.

This distinction reflects the significance of China's opening-up policy and has practical implications for how Chinese enterprises plan their business strategies. It is about Chinese companies expanding overseas and becoming truly international. Such expansion not only opens larger markets for their technologies and products, but also supports their long-term growth.

When economies grow to a certain level, their domestic markets inevitably reach saturation point, prompting companies to explore other markets. Chinese companies have been going global for years, but the pace has accelerated in recent years. This trend reflects the Chinese economy's deeper integration with the world and its increasingly prominent voice in global markets. Companies with the right conditions should be encouraged to build global operations rooted in China, thereby contributing to the development of a mutually beneficial "Chinese people's economy".

China's path to globalization is different from that of Western countries. China does not rely on force. Its going global is driven by its industrial and production capabilities.

These capabilities should be seen as a source of strength. When Chinese enterprises go abroad, their capabilities should create value for host countries by supporting local industry, jobs and growth. The goal is to expand the overall economy, not compete for a fixed share. Building infrastructure is critical, as it lays the foundation for development. This way the overseas expansion of Chinese companies can become sustainable.

However, there are still challenges to be overcome. For one, the support systems for companies operating abroad need improvement. Some firms expand without clear strategies and suffer losses. There are also risks to overseas assets in regions with political instability. Stronger mechanisms are needed to protect these interests.

China should promote what can be called "open-source modernization". This means sharing development experience, technology and capacity with other countries so they can adapt them to their own needs. Development should be inclusive, not exclusive.

Globalization is a complex and long-term process. China is still in an early stage, with room to improve in

knowledge, institutions, government services and risk protection. It is important to face challenges directly. Both domestic and overseas issues need to be identified and addressed with practical solutions. This is key to sustainable growth.

China already has a number of successful global companies, but their experiences have not been properly summarized. Meanwhile, mixed and sometimes misleading information in the market can influence corporate decision-making. Companies that are already doing well overseas could play a larger role by sharing their experience, technology and resources with others.

Chinese enterprises also need to pay attention to how they present themselves overseas. Alongside products and markets, they should build clear and credible narratives. Strong corporations often have compelling narratives backing them.

Today, Chinese companies going abroad need to articulate a confident and positive narrative. Many have done remarkable work but struggle to communicate it effectively. Business leaders should go beyond describing products and operations. They should explain the thinking and values behind their global strategies, and clearly tell the story of the "Chinese people's economy".

## CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

**China Daily**  
15 Huaxi Dongjie, Chaoyang District,  
Beijing 100029  
News: +86 (0)10 6491-8366  
editor@chinadaily.com.cn  
Advertisement: +86 (0)10 6491-8631  
ads@chinadaily.com.cn  
Subscription: +86-400-699-0203  
subscription.chinadaily.com.cn  
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

**China Daily UK**  
90 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK  
+44 (0) 207 398 8270  
editor@chinadailyuk.com

**China Daily Asia Pacific**  
**China Daily Hong Kong**  
Unit B18, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan  
Praya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong  
+852 2518 5111  
editor@chinadailyhk.com  
editor@chinadailyasia.com

**China Daily USA**  
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,  
New York, NY 10036  
+1 212 537 8888  
editor@chinadailyusa.com

**China Daily Africa**  
P.O. Box 27281, 00100, Nairobi, Kenya  
+254 (0) 20 692 0900 (Nairobi)  
editor@chinadailyafrica.com  
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com  
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

# VIEWS

Lourdes Casanova and Anne Miroux

## Development where growth meets green

As the global sustainability debate gathers momentum, much of the discussion centers on the priorities of advanced economies: net-zero targets, environmental, social and governance (ESG) disclosure standards, and carbon pricing mechanisms. Yet for emerging markets, including many in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the challenge is more complex.

Climate change is no longer an abstract phenomenon. Heatwaves across South Asia, flooding in Southeast Asia, and water stress in major cities highlight the urgency of environmental action. At the same time, developing economies must continue expanding infrastructure, creating jobs, strengthening industrial capacity and raising living standards. For these countries, sustainability cannot come at the expense of development.

The key question is not whether to prioritize growth or the environment — but how to integrate the two. This perspective lies at the heart of the D-ESG Framework developed at Cornell University's Emerging Markets Institute. By adding a "D" for development to the traditional ESG model, the framework reflects a reality that policymakers across the Global South understand well: economic capacity is the foundation for sustainable transformation.

In high-income countries, environmental policies often compete with marginal GDP gains. But in developing and emerging economies, the "E" in ESG frequently competes with basic needs: reliable electricity, transport infrastructure, affordable housing and industrial upgrading.

China's development trajectory offers a compelling example. Over four decades, rapid economic growth lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty and built world-class infrastructure — from the world's largest high-speed rail network to advanced manufacturing ecosystems. This economic transformation created the fiscal resources, technological base, and institutional capacity necessary for today's large-scale green transition.

China now accounts for more than 50 percent of global installed solar capacity and roughly 40 percent of global wind power capacity, making it the world's largest renewable energy market. In 2023 alone, China added more solar capacity than the rest of the world combined. These achievements reflect sustained industrial policy, innovation investment, and large-scale

deployment capability.

Similarly, China has become the global leader in electric vehicles. In 2023, Chinese manufacturers accounted for over 60 percent of global EV production, supported by integrated supply chains, battery technology leadership, and expanding domestic demand. The EV sector illustrates how environmental goals and industrial competitiveness can reinforce each other.

Green finance has also scaled rapidly. China is home to one of the world's largest green bond markets, with cumulative issuance exceeding \$300 billion. Financial innovation has played an essential role in channeling capital toward renewable energy, energy efficiency and low-carbon infrastructure.

These advances were not possible before a strong economic and industrial base had been established. Development made sustainability scalable.

Many global ESG standards were developed using advanced economies as benchmarks. When applied to emerging markets, this approach can generate misleading conclusions. First, the starting conditions are different. Countries undergoing

industrialization naturally have rising energy demand during certain phases of development. Evaluating them solely on absolute emission levels without considering structural transformation risks oversimplification.

Second, static rankings fail to capture progress. China's carbon intensity — carbon emissions per unit of GDP — has declined by more than 50 percent compared with 2005 levels, reflecting improvements in energy efficiency and industrial upgrading. Measuring sustainability only in current absolute terms overlooks such structural shifts.

If sustainability frameworks do not recognize trajectory, they may discourage the long-term investments required for transition. The D-ESG framework proposes three adjustments particularly relevant for emerging economies.

First, the benchmarking should be among comparable economies. Instead of comparing emerging markets directly to advanced economies, countries should be evaluated within a peer group of major emerging economies, creating context-sensitive assessments.

Second, development indicators should be

integrated into the evaluation. The model assigns 30 percent weight to development — including GDP performance, trade dynamism, innovation, and fiscal balance — and 70 percent to ESG factors combined. This recognizes that economic vitality influences a country's ability to finance green technology, strengthen social inclusion, and improve institutional governance.

Third, there should be recognition of progress over time. The framework incorporates a 10-year improvement measure alongside current performance, thus rewarding reform momentum and structural upgrading.

This approach aligns closely with China's emphasis on high-quality development — integrating innovation, green growth, and shared prosperity. As emerging markets account for an increasing share of global growth, emissions and innovation, their development strategies will shape the future of the global climate agenda.

For many developing economies, the green transition must be framed as an opportunity for industrial upgrading, technological leadership and energy security — not merely compliance with external standards. China's experience suggests that economic modernization and environmental ambition can advance together. Renewable energy leadership, EV expansion, digital infrastructure, and green finance demonstrate how growth and sustainability can become mutually reinforcing drivers.

The global sustainability conversation therefore requires a more balanced narrative. Rather than presenting growth and environment as opposing forces, policymakers should focus on development pathways that reduce emissions while expanding opportunity. Embedding development into sustainability metrics does not weaken climate ambition. Rather, it strengthens it by making it realistic, inclusive and more aligned with structural transformation.

For emerging markets — including China — the future lies not in choosing between growth and green, but in advancing both together. A sustainability framework that reflects development realities is essential to ensuring that the global transition is not only environmentally sound, but also economically just and globally shared.

Lourdes Casanova is a senior lecturer and director of the Emerging Markets Institute at Cornell SC Johnson College of Business, Cornell University; and Anne Miroux is a faculty fellow at the same institute. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

Liu Dongmei and Xu Zhuqing

## Transforming from a single city to a regional engine

For much of the past five decades, global innovation has revolved around star cities. Silicon Valley, Tokyo, London and Seoul thrived by concentrating talent, capital and ideas within tight geographic boundaries. Yet as technologies grow more complex and development costs soar, that model is showing its limits. Innovation today is driven less by isolated breakthroughs than by systems that connect basic research, industrial application, data infrastructure and governance. No single city, however powerful and vibrant, can shoulder that burden alone.

China's latest move reflects this reality. Instead of simply elevating Shanghai as another standalone global innovation hub, it is building the Shanghai International Science and Technology Innovation Center as a regional engine that integrates Shanghai with the wider Yangtze River Delta (YRD).

This is not an expansion of Shanghai's dominance, but a strategic reorganization of how innovation leadership is structured.

What is unfolding in the YRD is a transition from city-based competition to regionalized innovation. The logic is clear. In sectors such as integrated circuits, artificial intelligence and biomedicine, progress depends on long value chains and dense networks of complementary capabilities.

No single city can simultaneously host world-class basic research, large-scale manufacturing, clinical testing, data platforms and governance experimentation. The solution is coordination, not concentration.

Global experience points in the same direction. The competitiveness of the San Francisco Bay Area rests not solely

on San Francisco or Silicon Valley, but on a web of specialized cities linked by shared labor markets, capital flows and research ecosystems.

Tokyo's innovation strength similarly extends far beyond the city itself into the broader bay area. China's approach in the YRD follows the same logic — but with a higher degree of institutional design and policy coordination.

The YRD is uniquely positioned for such a model. The region accounts for roughly a quarter of China's total economic output and hosts some of the country's densest concentrations of innovation resources, including national laboratories, major science infrastructure and top-tier universities.

It has also emerged as China's most competitive regional innovation community, playing a leading role in national research and development and serving as a major source of international technology revenue.

This is not scale for its own sake, but a concentration of innovation capacity that is significant even by global standards.

Yet numbers alone do not explain the strategic significance of the YRD innovation center. What matters is how these resources are being reorganized. At the core is a clear division of roles: Shanghai acts as the coordinating nucleus, while surrounding cities specialize in complementary functions according to their respective strengths in STI — whether in manufacturing, applied research, data processing or original innovation. The aim is to convert fragmented strengths into a system-wide advantage.

This is especially evident in basic research. Shanghai has pioneered new institutional approaches, including long-term funding mechanisms, topic-based research selection and incen-

tives for corporate participation at early research stages.

It could be valuable to extend these practices across the YRD to allow basic research to serve not just individual institutions, but a region-wide innovation pipeline. The emphasis is less on producing immediate results and more on sustaining a continuous source of scientific discovery.

Industrial innovation follows the same systemic logic. Rather than assigning entire sectors to individual provinces, the YRD is experimenting with cross-regional value chains.

In artificial intelligence, for example, Shanghai's strengths in algorithms and platforms are being linked with Hangzhou's data ecosystems and Suzhou's hardware manufacturing.

In biomedicine, Shanghai's research and clinical capabilities are paired with Jiangsu's manufacturing base and Anhui's emerging innovation platforms, creating a full-chain ecosystem from discovery to production. The objective is not duplication, but functional complementarity.

This approach reflects a broader shift in China's development strategy: the cultivation of new quality productive forces — growth driven by innovation efficiency rather than expansion alone. World-class industrial clusters, in this context, are defined not by size, but by their ability to continuously upgrade and generate indigenous innovation.

Equally important is the outward-facing dimension of the YRD experiment. Contrary to common assumptions, the ambition is not technological decoupling, but deeper rule-based engagement with global innovation networks.

The region has expanded international research cooperation, established

overseas innovation platforms and encouraged foreign-funded R&D centers to embed locally. More recently, it has begun exploring governance frontiers — particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence — where technological development and regulatory coordination must move forward together.

Initiatives to pilot cross-border AI governance and compliance standards within free trade zones, and to host regular global dialogues on AI governance, signal an intent to participate in shaping international norms rather than merely adapting to them. For foreign observers, this dimension matters as much as technological capability itself.

Ultimately, the Shanghai International Science and Technology Innovation Center is not just another entry in the global competition for innovation hubs.

It represents a structural experiment: whether regional science and technology innovation ability can be improved through deliberate coordination instead of relying on market-driven agglomeration alone.

If the model succeeds, its significance will matter far beyond China. As innovation becomes increasingly systemic, the future may depend less on where breakthroughs happen, and more on how societies organize the ecosystems that produce them.

Liu Dongmei is the secretary of the Party Committee and a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Science and Technology for Development; and Xu Zhuqing is a researcher of the Institute of Science and Technology Statistics and Regional Innovation under Chinese Academy of Science and Technology for Development. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



Kang Bing

The author is former deputy editor-in-chief of China Daily. kangbing@chinadaily.com.cn

## Taking giant strides in building a child-friendly society

I am sometimes envious of Chinese children today because of the care that society provides them. Since birth, they can get a national subsidy of 300 yuan (\$43.44) every month until they are three years old. Subsidies from local governments can double that amount. It is not a large sum, but enough to ensure that no child goes hungry — a basic guarantee that was far from assured in the old days.

Healthcare support is equally notable. Children have access to a range of free vaccinations, and for a few hundred yuan every year, they get covered under medical insurance. Everyday life also carries small but meaningful privileges: free bus rides before they reach a certain age or height, discounts on air and train tickets, free or discounted entries into parks and tourist places, and even complimentary meals in some restaurants when accompanied by adults.

In my childhood 50 years ago, the only privilege children enjoyed was a one-day free bus ride on International Children's Day celebrated on June 1 in China. Unfortunately, the buses were so overcrowded that only a few could manage to board one. It was an era when almost all daily supplies were rationed. Teenagers, despite their ravenous appetite, often got less food compared to working adults. As a result, hunger was a constant companion during our childhood.

My envy is not only because of the benefits that children enjoy today but also because of what they will receive in the future. A document issued by the central authorities earlier this year pledged to turn China into a child-friendly society. The vision is to provide better living and recreational conditions and improved services to ensure that the country's children grow up in a healthy environment and their rights are fully protected.

## For many young working couples, the financial burden and logistical difficulties of raising pre-school children are a major deterrent to having more children.

This is not an entirely new effort. Even before the document was issued, pilot programs had already been conducted in 116 cities. The document marks a decisive policy shift from experimentation to nationwide implementation so that our children grow up in a friendly environment.

Under the central authorities' guidance, local governments are being encouraged to enact laws and regulations that prioritize children's needs in the design of public facilities. This is important to fill the noticeable gap in such services. Across the country, there is fitness equipment installed in almost all residential compounds and villages, thanks to government investment and charity donations. But these facilities are mostly for adults. There are very few facilities for children who often have to pay for playing in entertainment centers.

This imbalance needs to be corrected. While more child-oriented free recreational facilities should be built, public primary schools and kindergartens should be required to open their facilities to children during weekends, holidays and vacations. Governments can consider subsidizing the operational costs of the facility providers.

Education for pre-school age children should also be included in the country's compulsory education system. This will not only help children grow up in a healthy environment but also ease the burden on young parents. For many young working couples, the financial burden and logistical difficulties of raising pre-school children are a major deterrent to having more children. Addressing these concerns could contribute meaningfully to reversing the country's declining birth rate.

Tourist attractions and public transport systems also need to readjust their regulations for children. Right now, children under the age of 10 or 12 and less than 1.2 meters in height are allowed free entry. But that height threshold was set decades ago when children used to be much shorter due to malnutrition. Now, the average height of children aged 10 years old is well over 1.3 meters. The result is frequent disputes between parents and administrators at entrances, ticket counters and boarding points.

It is high time the old regulations were readjusted to make them more lenient and friendly toward children. In fact, many tourist venues have raised the bar on age and height, knowing that free entrance for children quite often brings their parents and grandparents along.

A lot remains to be done to make our society truly friendly to children. I have no doubt that local governments are busy working on such policies. As China moves toward that vision, it is worth remembering the millions of children in rural areas. Many of them are left behind with grandparents when their parents move to work in cities. Only when these vulnerable children also get the benefits enjoyed by their urban counterparts can we call ourselves a child-friendly society.

## OPINION

## Why Not Declare War?



**GLOBAL VIEW**  
By Walter Russell Mead

"Never, never, never," Winston Churchill wrote in "My Early Life," "believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The Statesman who yields to war fever . . . is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events." One month into his war with Iran, Donald Trump is learning how right Churchill was.

As the economic and political consequences of the widening war ripple across the world, President Trump confronts a complex set of difficult choices. How does he respond to growing Russian targeting assistance to Iran? What should he do if Houthi missiles and drones close the Red Sea again, exacerbating the global energy shock? Should he commit U.S. ground forces to the war, for what missions and at what level of risk? Above all, how does Mr. Trump overthrow the authorities in Tehran, induce them to accept his conditions for ending the war, or spin compromise as success?

Mr. Trump is as unpredictable as war itself, but he has no desire to see his statue enshrined in the History's Greatest Losers wing of the

Temple of Fame. He knows what the Vietnam War did to Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency and he will do anything and everything to avoid a similar fate. This doesn't necessarily mean that Tehran will soon be savoring a tasty TACO-fest. If the conflict continues to escalate, with growing economic costs and American casualties, Mr. Trump might respond with unconventional escalations of his own. He might, for example, press Republican legislative leaders to pass a formal declaration of war for the first time since Congress declared war on Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania in 1942.

Declarations of war unlock vast presidential powers. Woodrow Wilson jailed war critics, put enemy aliens under tight constraints, and prohibited the dissemination of antiwar materials through the mail. Franklin D. Roosevelt interned Japanese-Americans, censored the press and essentially took over the American economy.

The powers of American presidents in wartime aren't unlimited, but they are very broad. According to a 2014 Congressional Research Service report, declarations of war allow presidents to order domestic manufacturers to make munitions and to seize factories if they refuse. Powers of surveillance are greatly expanded, as is the ability to monitor and in some cases control the actions and speech of enemy aliens and

those seen as aiding enemy nations. Of special interest to Mr. Trump, a formal declaration of war would activate the Trading with the Enemy Act, providing the kind of broad authority over international trade that the Supreme Court recently denied him under an-

**Congress hasn't done it since 1942. But a case may emerge for doing it in Iran.**

other statute. Declarations of war empower direct presidential authority over communications and transportation systems.

It has been almost 84 years since Congress made an official declaration of war. President Truman did not seek a declaration of war to respond to North Korea's invasion of the South. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized LBJ's Vietnam escalation, fell well short of a declaration of war. Similarly, President George W. Bush fought terror under an Authorization for Use of Military Force.

In hindsight, one can wonder if these choices were wise. Formal declarations of war send clear signals to adversaries and strengthen the hand of a war president—especially when opponents see the manipulation of American public opinion as their

key route to success.

The Constitution vests war powers in Congress, and while no Congress has ever rejected a presidential request for a declaration of war, we have never had a president quite like Mr. Trump. An overwhelming majority of Democrats would likely oppose granting him this kind of power under almost any circumstances. Enough Republicans worried about possible abuses and the politics of an unpopular conflict might join them to deny a request for a formal war declaration.

But the politics could change. If the economic pain of war grows, if antiwar protesters become the object of a backlash, or if Iranian attacks on American targets raise public ire against Tehran, very small shifts in public opinion could provide the administration with the backing to get a declaration of war through Congress. In any case, Mr. Trump might enjoy forcing his opponents to vote against granting him war powers while American forces are taking casualties overseas.

Wars can be transformational, especially in volatile eras like the present. As the Iran war intensifies, Americans cannot assume that its transformational consequences will be confined to foreign lands. It is not only statesmen who lose control of events when the dogs of war run free.

**BOOKSHELF** | By Andrew R. Graybill

## Lonesome At Heart

**Western Star**

By David Streitfeld  
Mariner, 464 pages, \$35

Larry McMurtry once said of "Lonesome Dove," his 1985 epic about an 1870s cattle drive from Texas to Montana, that "it is the 'Gone With the Wind' of the West"—by which he meant that it was neither terrific nor terrible. Readers have returned a different verdict: last year alone, "Lonesome Dove" sold more than 50,000 copies. McMurtry's stark assessment grew in part from a vocation that, despite his lifelong project to demythologize the cowboy, the ultimate American icon, his most celebrated book had the inverse effect.

This complex relationship to the West in general and Texas—McMurtry's home state—in particular courses through the McMurtry oeuvre of novels, screenplays, non-fiction and criticism. And it animates David Streitfeld's "Western Star," a highly entertaining and informative study of the man who, as the author claims, "created modern Texas literature"—out of necessity, perhaps, given the low esteem in which McMurtry held most of the state's other writers.

Mr. Streitfeld, a journalist, first met McMurtry in the late 1990s. Thereafter, he became a self-described "crony and confidant," despite McMurtry's guardedness. With the writer's blessing he jotted down their conversations and interviewed his friends and associates; McMurtry tolerated these intrusions "as long as he could pretend I wasn't writing a book," Mr. Streitfeld tells us. "Western Star" is thus the rare authorized biography that keeps its subject at arm's length.

McMurtry was born in 1936 in Archer City, a town of a few thousand on the sunbaked and featureless plains of north-central Texas. His father and uncles were in the cattle business, but it was soon apparent that young Larry, who was slight and frail, had no future in ranching. His childhood home lacked plumbing and electricity as well as reading material; that changed when, one day in 1942, an older cousin delivered a box of books—"the seminal event of my whole life," McMurtry later recalled. He became a reader, then a writer, and above all a collector and seller of books. (At his height, his bookstore—Booked Up—boasted some 500,000 volumes spread across several buildings in his hometown.) McMurtry's first novel, "Horseman, Pass By," appeared in 1961 and laid down many of the ideas that he would revisit, especially the sprawling gap between the fantasy of the West and its bleak reality.

"If I have a genius for anything," McMurtry told a friend on one occasion, "it's for being found." And so it was with Hollywood, which over the course of four decades translated some of McMurtry's best work for film, episodes narrated with élan by Mr. Streitfeld. Take, for instance, his chapters on "The Last Picture Show," released in 1971 and based on McMurtry's 1966 novel of the same name. Set in a fictional version of Archer City, where the film was shot on location, production was riddled by the affair between director Peter Bogdanovich and one of the movie's young stars, Cybill Shepherd. Its release, meanwhile, scandalized McMurtry's neighbors with frank depictions of teenage lust and small-town claustrophobia. At the opposite end of McMurtry's career was "Brokeback Mountain" (2005), which he and his writing partner, Diana Ossana, adapted from a 1997 Annie Proulx short story about the forbidden romance between a pair of gay cowboys; their screenplay won an Oscar in 2006.

Larry McMurtry was born into a Texas ranching family. Much of his writing is a lament for the passing of old-time ways.

And yet for all this success, a persistent melancholy stalks the writer. Some of this unhappiness may have been environmental, the result of growing up in a place as discouraging and desolate as Archer City, to which McMurtry was drawn back—improbably—throughout his life, in between long stints in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Tucson, Ariz. Despite many close friendships, especially with women, he was at heart a loner, conditioned, possibly, by clinical depression, for which he sought electroshock therapy even though it addled his brain. "Whole areas aren't there," he told Mr. Streitfeld about his memory in 2012. "Tomorrow I won't remember this conversation." An unmistakable sadness clings to "Western Star," a fitting given that much of its subject's writing was a lament for the passing of the old-timers and their ways, and the subsequent dislocations of future generations left to grapple with a new and homogenized West.

It is perhaps inevitable that "Western Star" will be compared to Tracy Daugherty's acclaimed biography, which appeared in 2023. In fact, the books are better viewed as complementary rather than competitive. Mr. Daugherty's study hews closely to the details of his subject's life, while Mr. Streitfeld's is organized more around McMurtry's formidable body of work. Both authors serve their readers well by resisting any inclination to hagiography, all the more impressive in Mr. Streitfeld's case given his closeness to his subject. Mr. Streitfeld appears occasionally in the book, often to charming effect, as when he mentions attending McMurtry's 2011 wedding to his second wife, Faye (the widow of McMurtry's close friend, Ken Kesey), and being whisked away by the groom to ponder recent arrivals at the bookstore.

Early in McMurtry's career, a paramour gave him a sweatshirt that read "Minor Regional Novelist." Although it mortified his editor, the author himself wore it with a mixture of pride and amusement, conceding many years later to Mr. Streitfeld that "most writers are minor" and that he was content to be counted among them. Maybe so. But by the time McMurtry died in March 2021, few would have considered his output to be inconsequential. His canvas was vast and so were his themes, chief among them a clear-eyed assessment of that part of the nation so essential to the formation of America's national identity.

Mr. Graybill is a professor of history at Southern Methodist University.

## The Poles Who Failed Sheridan Gorman



**MAIN STREET**  
By William McGurn

Sheridan Gorman should be alive. The 18-year-old freshman should be with her family and catching them up on what's new at Chicago's Loyola University. Instead she's gone, and this weekend her family came with moist eyes and broken hearts to her funeral at the First Presbyterian Church in her hometown of Yorktown, N.Y.

This family has been through the unspeakable: The light of their lives snuffed out before her time, cut down as Ms. Gorman gathered by the Chicago lakefront with friends to catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights. The politicians who failed to protect her from a criminal have since compounded the pain with ill-conceived statements about who's to blame. These statements—by the governor, the mayor, a Chicago alderwoman—weren't intended to wound, but they did.

Our political class, apparently, has lost all sense of what's important in moments like these. It's become all about scoring political points against your enemies. Confronting the afflicted, supporting communities and individ-

uals, all that comes later—or not at all. This is not normal.

Begin with Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker. A week ago he admitted there were "real failures" in the immigration and criminal-justice systems that led to this murder. The accused murderer is 25-year-old Jose Medina, a Venezuelan who crossed into the U.S. illegally amid the border chaos of the Biden years. He has been arrested and charged with Ms. Gorman's murder.

Mr. Pritzker's real message wasn't the "real failures." It was: This is Donald Trump's fault, notwithstanding that there's hardly a Republican to be found in Illinois. "I know that the Gorman family has suffered mightily," the governor said. "I agree. There have been real failures. Those failures, of course, extend beyond the borders of Illinois. There [are] national failures, a failure to have comprehensive immigration reform, a failure of the president to follow his own edict to go after the worst of the worst."

Alderwoman Maria Hadden told Fox32's Chicago Live last week that Gorman "might have been a wrong-place-wrong-time, running into a person who had a gun. They might have startled this person at the end of the pier unintentionally," Ms. Hadden has since apologized for sug-

gesting the victim caused her own death while blaming media for "intentionally creating sound bites to misconstrue my words during this tragedy."

Not to be outdone, Mayor Brandon Johnson gave a master class in deflection when asked if he would apologize to Gorman's parents for her death. He then char-

**A young woman's murder has Chicago officials rushing to evade responsibility.**

acterized it as "senseless violence." This was followed by a filibuster, in which he said the city's sanctuary status was established 40 years ago and was somehow shaped by a 2021 criminal justice reform, which he incorrectly said was passed under Gov. Bruce Rauner who was—wait for it—a Republican. (The law was signed by Gov. Pritzker.)

Finally he, too, went to the old reliable: Mr. Trump. "He points the finger at everything and everyone else versus doing some real self-reflection on what his responsibility is."

Politicians have lost sight of the public language needed to deal with tragedy

and grief. Not every man has the rhetorical gifts of Abraham Lincoln, but every one of us can avoid going straight to the cliché sound bites and thereby diminishing the human tragedy before us.

In a statement, the Gorman family put it simply but well: "Sheridan was our daughter. She was 18 years old. She was doing something entirely normal—walking near her campus with friends. She should be here."

The official response to such a tragedy will always seem to fall short, but it doesn't need to make things worse. Especially for the loving family of this young woman, for whom, even many years from now, a touch of heartache will hang over their holidays and family get-togethers.

"Sheridan Gorman was suddenly taken from her family by an act of cruel violence," says the Rev. Gerald Murray, a Catholic priest and commentator for EWTN. "She was the innocent victim of an evil act by a stranger. We are called upon to pray for her family in their unimaginable grief. Life is a gift from God that is precious. She is now in God's hands."

It wasn't only the Gormans who lost something when politics forgot how to say such things.

Write to mcgurn@wsj.com.

## The World Needs a Stronger U.N.

By Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

Every violation of international law invites another violation. From Afghanistan to Iran and across Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Gaza and Venezuela, the line between what is permitted and what is prohibited has been steadily blurred by the complicit inaction of the United Nations Security Council. Wielding the veto as both a shield and a weapon, its permanent members act without grounding in the U.N. Charter. They play with the fate of millions, leaving a trail of death and destruction.

Until recently, there was at least an attempt to give interventions a veneer of legitimacy through U.N. endorsement. Today, the open exercise of power no longer even tries to keep up appearances. The guardrails of multilateral institutions are becoming too limited to contain hegemonic rivalries. Without a more robust multilateralism, we risk replacing an imperfect system of collective security with the brutal reality of widespread insecurity. When all constraints on

the use of force are removed, chaos prevails.

The world is witnessing the highest number of armed conflicts since World War II. It's no coincidence that right now democracy stands at a crossroads. Extremism is both the starting point and the end point of a vicious circle. When governments allow themselves

**Powerful nations are flouting international law, and somebody ought to stop them.**

to be drawn into war by intolerance or the arrogance of power, they plant the seeds of resentment that yield more hatred and violence.

Dual-use technological advances confront us with ethical questions. The selection of military targets is already being carried out by artificial intelligence, without specific legal or moral parameters in place. The principles of international humanitarian law—in particular the distinction between civilians and combat-

ants—are under serious threat. Women and children are the primary victims of this collective tragedy.

We are living through an arms race that is pushing countries to devote ever larger shares of their budgets to armaments. Military spending—now around \$2.7 trillion, according to a recent U.N. report—absorbs valuable resources that could be used to fight hunger and poverty, confront climate change, ensure universal access to education and promote digital inclusion. Even more egregious is the recurring use of hunger as a weapon of war and the impunity with which forced displacement is carried out.

No bombs, drones or missiles can shield economies from the impact of armed conflict. Fluctuations in oil prices mean more expensive—or even inaccessible—energy and transport for businesses and consumers. Blockades constrain trade. Fertilizer shortages push up food prices and fuel inflation. Central banks raise interest rates, increasing public and private debt. Investment opportunities and jobs are lost.

Unilateral actions, arbitrary measures, violations of sovereignty and the erosion of norms are becoming the rule. Research published in the Lancet shows that sanctions imposed without U.N. backing—particularly economic ones—affect mortality rates in targeted countries, and have been responsible for around half a million deaths a year on average since the 1970s.

Excessive power and instability go hand in hand. A world without rules is an insecure world where anyone can be the next victim. Violence can't replace dialogue, nor can force prevail over diplomacy. The prerogatives of the permanent members of the Security Council are already unjustifiable in an international order grounded in the sovereign equality of nations. When exercised irresponsibly, they become intolerable. It's time to respond with resolve by restoring the capacity of a reformed United Nations to act, so that it no longer remains a mere spectator to events that affect us all.

Mr. da Silva is president of Brazil.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Charlie Ergen, SpaceX and Trump

Seven years after launching its first Starlink internet satellite, SpaceX is preparing to go public and could command a sky-high valuation. One ironic beneficiary of Starlink's success is telecom mogul Charlie Ergen, who has used regulatory arbitrage to save his failed broadband bet. This is a tale of dumb industrial policy that might end well despite government planners.

The story starts in 2019 when the Trump Justice Department required T-Mobile and Sprint to sell spectrum and their prepaid phone business to Mr. Ergen's Dish network as a condition for green-lighting their merger. The government's policy goal was to stand up a fourth competitor in the wireless market to Verizon, AT&T and the new T-Mobile-Sprint.

Mr. Ergen had earlier spent billions of dollars acquiring spectrum, much of which he hadn't deployed. The Trump Federal Communications Commission set strict deadlines for him to build out a 5G network to prevent him from warehousing spectrum and later flipping it for a profit, as his critics warned at the time he might try to do.

Mr. Ergen's fledgling network failed to get off the ground. The Biden FCC extended the build-out deadlines so he wouldn't be penalized for noncompliance. Did a \$100,000 donation by Mr. Ergen and his wife to Joe Biden's Super Pac buy him regulatory forbearance?

Regardless, it didn't solve Mr. Ergen's financial problems, including a heavy debt load and declining number of Dish satellite TV subscribers. EchoStar, which merged with Dish in 2023, warned in August of "substantial doubt about our ability to continue as a going concern."

Enter Trump FCC Chair Brendan Carr, who last spring launched a review of Mr. Ergen's compliance with the agency's build-out requirements. Mr. Ergen met with President Trump in June in an effort to stop the FCC from reclaiming EchoStar's licenses. Mr. Trump prodded Mr. Carr to let Mr. Ergen sell

his licenses. Mr. Carr obliged. A private sale bails out Mr. Ergen but is still preferable to letting Mr. Ergen sit on unused spectrum. It also enables the spectrum to be deployed faster than if the FCC were to reclaim the spectrum. The original sin was the first Trump DOJ's attempt to jury-rig a fourth competitor. One political intervention invariably begets more.

Mr. Ergen last fall struck deals to sell spectrum for more than \$40 billion, which allowed him to turn a nice profit on the licenses. His creditors and vendors—such as cell-tower builders—are hounding him for repayment, and he should have to honor his debts. But the overriding public interest here is getting scarce spectrum into the hands of companies that can put it to good use. EchoStar agreed to sell spectrum to SpaceX for \$20 billion including cash and stock. SpaceX aims to use the spectrum to develop a next-generation Starlink cell service, which could compete with the three large wireless providers.

So the market may get a fourth competitor—though not the one regulators had devised. By the way, wireless prices have fallen since 2019, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Give credit to market competition and government spectrum auctions.

Meantime, SpaceX's mooted public offering—which reportedly may fetch a \$1.75 trillion valuation—could let Mr. Ergen cash in big on his shares. EchoStar has effectively become a "space-themed" hedge fund whose "valuation now depends on the market's assessment of Space X," telecom analyst MoffettNathanson wrote this month.

Populist outcry that business titans are profiting off Washington is overwrought, but it's on point in Mr. Ergen's case. That's what happens when politicians and regulators try to manage markets. But the good news is that the private market for spectrum and the second-term Trump FCC may save the day.

The private market for spectrum may rescue dumb industrial policy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Cost of a Constantly Online Childhood

Your editorial "The Social-Media Shakedown Begins" (Review & Outlook, March 26) dismisses the social-media verdict as a victory for the plaintiff's bar. It argues that "most children who use social media don't experience severe problems." Is this true? A Pew Research Center survey found that nearly half of teens (46%) are online almost constantly—nearly double the rate from a decade ago (24%)—and they're spending that time mainly on social media. Teens who use social media for three or more hours a day are at increased risk of depression, anxiety and other mental-health problems. This is alarming, considering that a 2023 survey from Gallup found teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 spend an average of 4.8 hours on social media daily.

While it's difficult to prove social media caused any given individual's troubles, we must remember the

same was once true for tobacco lawsuits. Lawyers for Big Tobacco argued that it couldn't be proven that a specific plaintiff's cancer was caused by smoking. However, once epidemiological research on a population level developed and showed dramatically elevated rates of lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema among smokers, the weight of evidence shifted. Moreover, the tobacco industry's own research revealed that industry leaders knew nicotine was addictive and smoking caused cancer and yet made a deliberate decision to deny this publicly. Sound familiar? With social media, it may be difficult to prove causation for an individual, but once we consider population-level research, the link is undeniable, as it was with tobacco.

CLARE MORELL  
Fellow  
The Ethics and Public Policy Center  
Washington

Florida Empowers Public-Sector Employees

Thank you for pointing out in your editorial what should be obvious in union elections ("Florida Leads Again on Public Unions," Review & Outlook, March 23). Individual workers should be able to decide if they want to join a union or not. It's a simple choice that all public-sector employees should be afforded. Public-sector unions don't agree with this and probably never will.

As your editorial states, the "new requirements are hardly onerous." The Florida legislation simply states that, to recertify a union, a minimum percentage of voting members must show up to vote and then can win with a majority of votes cast. If a union is truly delivering value, it shouldn't be hard to get members to show up to vote.

The fact is that many public em-

ployees have decided that the value they're receiving isn't worth the dues dollars—so it's no wonder that so many are opting out of union membership.

Public-sector unions are inherently political, as stated by the Supreme Court in *Janus v. Afsame*, a decision handed down in June 2018. Despite this ruling, public-sector unions continue to have significant power and remain largely unaccountable to their members. Many employees are finding that they're not getting what they're paying for, and legislation like Florida's empowers them to do something about it.

MARK JANUS  
Punta Gorda, Fla.  
Mr. Janus, the lead plaintiff in *Janus v. Afsame*, is a senior fellow at Liberty Justice Center.

Trump's Iran Target List, Good and Bad

President Trump is whipsawing, in his familiar fashion, between hailing diplomacy with Iran and issuing new threats if peace talks fail. He's also issued a new and broader target list, but some of the possible sites he mentions would do more harm to the Iranian people than to the regime.

"Great progress has been made [in negotiations] but, if for any reason a deal is not shortly reached," Mr. Trump posted on Truth Social Monday morning, "we will conclude our lovely 'stay' in Iran by blowing up and completely obliterating all of their Electric Generating Plants, Oil Wells and Kharg Island (and possibly all desalination plants)."

It's hard to know when Mr. Trump is serious, but this target list is far too indiscriminate. Oil production and the Kharg island oil export terminal are fair military game, as they are the main sources of financing for the regime. The decision to bomb or occupy them with U.S. troops is a matter of military calculation and judgment about the risks.

Oddly, though, Mr. Trump has so far let Iran's tankers full of oil pass through the Gulf and to China or other buyers without interference. He even hailed one group of tankers as a "gift" to the U.S., presumably to keep global oil prices from spiking too high. But if he really wants to squeeze the regime, cutting off its oil exports may be necessary.

The same isn't true of bombing Iran's electric power or desalination plants, which serve civilian more than military needs. These would

punish the Iranian people the U.S. needs on its side against the regime once the bombing stops. Tehran already had a water shortage before the war owing to the regime's mismanagement. Bombing desalination plants would let the regime blame the U.S. for the shortages, in addition to causing far more humanitarian hardship.

The same goes for bombing Iran's electricity production. Iranians without electricity or water would soon need external supplies or become refugees to neighboring countries and beyond. This would win no friends in the region when the U.S. is trying to get them to support the war. Stories of civilian deprivation could also turn public opinion in the U.S. even further against the war.

Mr. Trump's indiscriminate target list echoes World War II's civilian bombing against German and Japanese cities. But this isn't the 1940s when the war's traumas could be somewhat sequestered. One of the great benefits of precision-bombing technology is that it lets the U.S. military target the enemy with limited civilian damage. This is a moral advance in warfare and distinguishes the American way of war from, say, Vladimir Putin's.

Sometimes mistakes still kill civilians, as may have happened when a school was inadvertently hit during the first days of the war. But that's a far cry from the deliberate destruction of civilian targets. Let's hope someone in Mr. Trump's war council will explain the difference and have him stick to regime targets.

Hitting desalination and power plants would hurt the Iranian people.

The Abraham Accords Passed the Stress Test

Regarding Yousef Al Otaiba's op-ed "The U.A.E. Stands Up to Iran" (March 26): Much of the commentary on the United Arab Emirates' response to Iranian strikes has focused on immediate military and financial measures. But the deeper story is what this moment reveals about the Abraham Accords.

Critics argue that the Accords are transactional and shallow: photo-ops dressed up as diplomacy. The war has revealed something different: Israel and the U.A.E. have been sharing early-warning data, coordinating air-defense protocols and building defense-industrial ties. The U.A.E.'s integration with Israeli systems under the United States Central Command isn't the product of crisis improvisation; it's the fruit of years of patient institutional work.

What this means for the day after is significant. If and when the fighting stops, the U.A.E. won't return to a posture of studied ambiguity toward Israel. It will be a country that absorbed a barrage of Iranian strikes, stood firm and deepened its alignment with Jerusalem in the process. That's a different relationship than when the

Accords were signed in 2020. What comes next could be extraordinary. Defense cooperation is already under way. A post-war environment with Iran degraded creates the conditions to go further, with joint infrastructure, integrated financial markets and a technology corridor. The Abraham Accords were always a bet on the future. The U.A.E. is demonstrating the commitment that will be needed to get us there.

JUDAH TAUB  
Jerusalem  
Mr. Taub is founder and managing director of Hetz Ventures, former Israeli intelligence officer, and adviser to governments on AI, cybersecurity and defense strategy.

Iran's Regime Says: Lebanon Is Ours

The deadline for the Iranian ambassador to leave Lebanon was Sunday. Beirut declared Mohammad Reza Shibanj persona non grata, but he's still there, at his embassy. On Monday Iran's Foreign Ministry said he won't be leaving Lebanon, and the message is clear: Neither will Iran.

Talk about a house guest from hell. The Iranian regime is so used to ordering around the Lebanese in their own country, why should it begin respecting Lebanese sovereignty now? Theirs is but to do and die, at Iran's call.

Iran's regime came to Beirut in the 1980s to kill hundreds of Americans. Later it took over Lebanon and used it to drag the whole country into a needless, long-running conflict with Israel punctuated by two devastating wars, and now a third. Tehran accomplished these feats via Hezbollah, a Shiite militia devoted to Iran's Supreme Leader.

This war, which Hezbollah began by firing at Israel on March 2, is waged for Iran's regime. Lebanon has no interest in it. Even Hezbollah clearly wanted quiet as it rebuilds from the previous war it started with Israel on Oct. 8, 2023, the day after Hamas's massacre. But the shots are called in Tehran, which needs Israel preoccupied with a second war front.

Not for nothing did U.S. envoy Tom Barrack say in November 2025 that "Lebanon is a failed state." As he explained, Hezbollah ate away at the state, replaced it in the country's south, and corrupted or otherwise entangled it everywhere else,

from the Beirut port and airport to the armed forces. Hezbollah uses the specter of another civil war to deter any real action against it by Lebanon's government.

Beirut drove Mr. Barrack to distraction by refusing to meaningfully disarm Hezbollah for all of 2025, as it had promised in a U.S.-brokered cease-fire with Israel. This was with the terrorists at their weakest, after Israel's demolition of Hezbollah's leadership in late 2024.

In the current war, when Lebanon finally banned Hezbollah's military activities, the Lebanese army sidestepped the directive. Better to leave the dirty work to Israel, whose troops now expand a security buffer in southern Lebanon. Civilians have been evacuated, and Hezbollah-run villages that were used repeatedly to spark wars may be leveled.

Expelling the Iranian ambassador could have been a protest at Iran's practice of claiming diplomatic status for its Revolutionary Guard commanders, who now conduct a war from Lebanese territory. One man wouldn't have made much of a difference when Lebanon still won't disarm Hezbollah, but Tehran won't even give Beirut cover for inaction. Iran's regime wants Lebanon as a satrapy and nothing more.

Lebanon's future depends on the expulsion of Iran's regime, not merely its ambassador. This war provides the best opportunity in years to do so, and the U.S. and Israel can help. But if Lebanon wants independence, the country will have to seize it.

Tehran's ambassador refuses to leave Beirut, as if he owns the place.

We're Cramped but Content

Jack Butler's op-ed ("The Crowded House I Call Home," March 27) uncannily describes the place our family calls home. Five kids, never enough bathrooms, basement TV and family who travel miles from all over to be here. It was and still is the best.

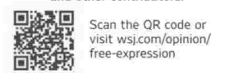
JUDE DEVANE  
Wheaton, Ill.

CORRECTION

A photograph accompanying the March 7 book review "Drawn Into His Father's Orbit" showed Tom Junod walking with his sister. Based on information provided by the publisher, the caption misidentified Mr. Junod's walking partner.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"This is why you're here and not in the NBA."

OPINION

# How Democrats Can Use Their Coming Majority

By **Rahm Emanuel**

Nearly every data point suggests that Democrats will ride to victory this November, making it very likely that we'll take control of the House and possibly the Senate. While we shouldn't take anything for granted, we need to think through how to maximize our opportunity, both politically and in enacting a substantive agenda.

The reality is that what happens in 2027 will have a direct bearing on the 2028 presidential contest. Democrats in Congress helped secure Bill Clinton's and Barack Obama's victories by laying the groundwork in the two years before they won. That lesson should be front and center for congressional leaders today.

## Investigations of Trump won't satisfy the voters. To win in 2028, the party needs a positive agenda.

When the Democrats who controlled Congress in 1990 sent President George H.W. Bush a bill written explicitly to put the nation's finances on firmer footing, they hit a master stroke for both the Clinton campaign and the Clinton administration. In addition to spending cuts, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell insisted that the bill include a modest tax hike, directly in contravention of Bush's pledge at the 1988 Republican National Convention: "Read my lips: No new taxes." The impact reverberated in ways few fully appreciate.

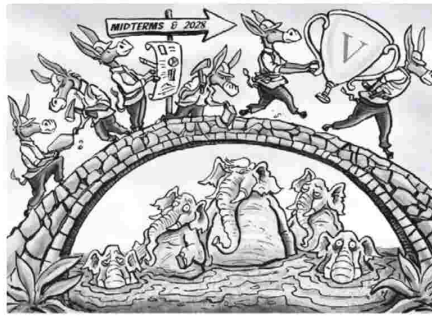
Mr. Mitchell's bill united Democrats behind a common cause, demonstrating that our party was committed to protecting ordinary people in a fiscally responsible way.

It divided the GOP—only 19 of the Senate's 45 Republicans voted for the bill Bush signed, suggesting that the president's party was in disarray and demoralizing the base. It was in the wake of the conservative base's anger that Pat Buchanan decided to mount a primary challenge from the right against the sitting president.

The substance of the bill enabled an economic renaissance that defined Mr. Clinton's eight years. The deficit-reduction package he signed during his first term and the balanced-budget plan he shaped in the second created 22 million new jobs and delivered the first surpluses since the 1960s, and the bottom fifth of earners saw income gains nearly as much as the top fifth for the first time in decades.

Democrats managed a similar maneuver in 2008. Having won control of Congress in 2006, my colleagues and I had to decide whether to send President George W. Bush an omnibus budget bill or to be more surgical, forcing him to veto a bill and highlight the GOP's wayward priorities. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and I prevailed in getting the House and Senate to send him two bills funding an expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, providing healthcare coverage to 10 million additional children. The president vetoed the bills. Both the substantive and political effects would play out over the course of years.

Ahead of Mr. Obama's run for the White House, we united Democrats in favor of something the public overwhelmingly supported: health coverage for the children of parents who worked full-time but couldn't afford insurance. We simultaneously managed to divide the GOP, with more than 60 House and Senate Republicans voting with Democrats to expand CHIP, diminishing enthusiasm for what would become John



McCain's campaign for the White House. After Mr. Obama's inauguration, Democrats passed the bill a third time, and the CHIP expansion became the foundation and inspiration for what would eventually become the Affordable Care Act.

The question now is whether Democrats will heed the strategic wisdom from these two lessons. Many presume we will use the power from winning the House and possibly the Senate primarily for retribution and vindictiveness. The implication is that we will tie up the White House, and the Trump administration more generally, in an endless series of investigations. Democrats should play against type, defying the expectation that we'll embrace gotcha politics. No doubt it's a target-rich environment. But an excessive focus on Trumpian slime will undermine efforts to promote our positive agenda. And it's what we accomplish that will earn us the sweet taste of victory in November 2028.

My reputation as a street brawler might lead many to presume that I'd lean heavily toward extracting our

pound of flesh. When I chaired the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee during the 2006 cycle, we worked hard to focus the public's attention on the corruption surrounding House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. But the situations are different in at least one key respect: Voters today already presume that Mr. Trump is dishonest. They've supported him in two presidential elections nevertheless. So, while it's certainly worthwhile for congressional Democrats to go after waste, fraud and abuse—to take down the crony capitalism that is the hallmark of the current administration—we can't let ourselves become agents of vengeance.

On this front, the press won't be our friends. Mr. Trump's misdeeds elicit more clicks and eyeballs than substantive stories about our plans to drive prosperity for the working and middle classes. To that end, we need to be disciplined, focusing on the ways taxpayer dollars have been misspent and enriched and rewarded Mr. Trump's family and friends. We should avoid issues, like property tax evaluations, where the

public justifiably believes that we're pursuing Mr. Trump for something all well-heeled and well-connected people do, if only because the ensuing debate will distract the electorate from our affirmative agenda.

What is that agenda? It should begin with raising the minimum wage, which hasn't been changed since 2009. We should pass a rate-payers' bill of rights. We should fight to lower healthcare costs. We should end the scourge of social media on children. And we should pass an ethics-reform package that cleans up Washington and bans insiders from betting on prediction markets. That should be our focus in 2027, forcing Mr. Trump and his allies in Congress to veto and vote against bills that unite us, divide them and lay the foundation for our electoral and substantive victories in 2028 and beyond. As with the tax hike in 1990 and work on children's healthcare in 2007, we need to highlight issues that exploit the GOP's fissures to our strategic advantage.

If proof of dishonesty were enough to beat Mr. Trump, he would never have been elected president twice. We've tried that approach again and again, and it too often doesn't pay off. If we don't take to heart that there's a meaningful distinction between dishonesty and corruption, we'll squander a golden opportunity. Beginning next year, we'll have the power in Congress to illustrate to the American people that the most important distinction in Washington is between our positive agenda and their crony capitalism. How we handle 2027 and what we choose to highlight will be as important as who we nominate for president in 2028.

*Mr. Emanuel, a Democrat, served as a U.S. representative from Illinois (2003-09), White House chief of staff (2009-10), mayor of Chicago (2011-19) and ambassador to Japan (2022-25).*



EDITOR AT LARGE  
By Gerard Baker

"I wish I was as cocksure of anything as Tom Macaulay is of everything."

The plaintive observation, attributed to the early Victorian British Prime Minister Viscount Melbourne about the acerbically self-confident historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, remains the motto of the thoughtfully skeptical man through the ages. Some of us still harbor doubt about the consequences of actions in a complex world. But we live in an era when instantaneous certitude about everything, an iron conviction in subjective judgment in the face of objective uncertainty, is the only guarantee of a hearing.

This is in part a corollary of the hyperpartisanship that characterizes our modern political conversation. If you believe that your side represents the only route to virtue and the other side the sure path to perdition, you've already taken a position of metaphysical certainty.

Such assuredness is acceptable from politicians. No one wants to hear a leader publicly fret over the range of possible outcomes of a course he's chosen. But since the line between partisan engagement and independent observation has been blurred, similar devotion to the veracity of one's own judgment is obligatory in the commentator class too.

So it comes as no surprise that less than a month into the latest war, almost everyone seems certain not only about the outcome of the war, but about what it means for decades to come.

Last week the Economist, a publication with a long and spotty track record of declarative certitude in the face of unpredictability, announced that the war was an American failure. "A month of bombing has achieved nothing," its cover thundered.

The academy is on the same page. Robert Pape, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, insists the war is a "longtime disaster" and the "most catastrophic failure of air power we have ever seen."

No fog of war for these seers. They have scrutinized the battlefield from the vantage points of St James's, SW1, and Hyde Park, 60637, and, like ancient augurs, have divined the outcome: It's over for the U.S. and Israel, with devastation rippling for years.

## Or you may already have lost. Commentators on both sides refuse to admit how little they know.

There is no less confidence on the other side. Torsten Slok, chief economist at the private-equity firm Apollo, dismissed the war's alarming fallout in commodity, equity and bond markets, and said it would "ultimately result in 50 years of stability in oil markets, supply chains and geopolitics."

Marc Thiessen, a speechwriter for President George W. Bush (whose administration isn't especially noted for the accuracy of its observations) and now a columnist

for the Washington Post, said on Fox News that President Trump's war would go down as "possibly the greatest military campaign... since the American Revolution." Move over, Dwight D. Eisenhower; step aside, Ulysses S. Grant.

Since rhetorical extremism in the pursuit of persuasion is all the rage, why stop there? Surely someone will soon make the case that Operation Epic Fury is the greatest triumph of arms since Henry V's longbowmen routed the superior French numbers at Agincourt. Or, according to your taste, it already represents the most disastrous defeat for a major power since the Romans were out-generaled at Cannae by Hannibal.

I am not against bold opinion commentary, as you might have noticed, but this level of certainty about a war that is four weeks old and with plainly many more phases to come, is simply unsupported. As we stand, the outcome isn't knowable with any level of confidence; it surely rests on events at a tactical and strategic level in coming weeks and months that we can't know.

It is evident that the U.S. and Israel have enjoyed extraordinary military success in eliminating much of Iran's leadership and military capabilities. But Iran's regime has succeeded at a political and economic level—first by simply surviving the onslaught to date and second by exercising its stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz.

These are all limited and contingent successes. Again, their ultimate outcome is conditional on the extent to which the U.S. is able to break that stranglehold and either force out the regime or at least cut it into submission. And that in turn is conditional on a host of at this stage unknowable developments: the deployment of ground forces, the contribution of neighbors and others to the shipping challenge.

Some of us who acknowledge our uncertainty may be simply reflecting a larger uncertainty about the wisdom of this war in the first place.

In the same way, to declare now that it is already won or lost is merely to affirm one's prior and continuing political and ideological prejudices, delivered to an audience that wants to hear nothing else.

# Operation Epic Fury Should Make China Very Afraid

By **William J. Luti**

Poets may not strike our Operation Epic Fury Navy pilots as aviation visionaries. But in the 1830s, Alfred Tennyson penned an astonishingly accurate portent of events: "For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see / Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be. . . / Heard the heavy-ens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew / From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue."

As I wrote in the U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings 34 years ago, "the English poet laureate could not, of course, have predicted the extent to which the nation's airy navies would dominate the nature of war in the 20th century. Nor could he have appreciated the paralytic effect the

modern extension of his 'ghastly dew' would have on a Middle East nation and its million-man military machine." That was the Desert Storm air campaign.

Epic Fury is the technological and tactical offspring of Desert Storm, whose air campaign was history's first attempt to achieve the political and military aims of war from the air. Until now, Desert Storm was the closest the U.S. had come to achieving the visions of the early air-power prophets. These men—Gens. Giulio Douhet, Billy Mitchell, Hugh Trenchard and Alexander de Seversky—theorized, if a bit prematurely, that seizing command of the air was essential and even sufficient for victory.

And as air-power legend and retired U.S. Air Force Col. John A. Warden III aptly described in his 1991 es-

say "Applying Air Power in the 21st Century," Desert Storm was history's first example of what he called hyperwar—a war that capitalized on high technology, unprecedented precision, strategic surprise through stealth, tactical surprise through defense suppression, and the "ability to bring all of an enemy's key operational and strategic nodes under near-simultaneous attack."

It was also, as Mr. Warden theorized, history's first "inside to outside" war. Past conflicts—due largely to a considerable lag between U.S. doctrine and technology—began with the outermost defensive ring and painfully worked toward the innermost ring of the capital, he wrote. Even World War II's famed U.S. Navy Mark XV bombing wasn't accurate enough to target precisely an enemy's industrial capacity to wage war. Hence the mass fire-bombing raids over Japan and Germany, which killed hundreds of thousands.

Epic Fury is Desert Storm on steroids. Today we're flying fewer sorties than Desert Storm but attacking more aim points with each sortie. Only about 10% of Desert Storm munitions were precision-guided. Today some 90% are. The tactical skill with which our aviators and missile defenders are using advanced U.S. tech is astounding. Particularly impressive is our dismantling of Russian and Chinese-supplied advanced air-defense systems. The implications for deterrence are immense.

The revolution in American technology introduced in the Desert Storm air campaign partially solved this challenge. Due largely to the 1970s' development of the "offset

strategy"—using American technological superiority to offset the Soviet Union's numerical advantage—we were able to penetrate Iraqi defenses with stealth and defense suppression to put short-range precision-guided weapons on targets that mattered.

Desert Storm shocked the Chinese communists. No longer could the Politburo rely on centuries-old doctrine of strategic withdrawal from the periphery to the interior, seeking better ground from which to repel an invader. It also complicated their plans for Taiwan and the South

## Like Desert Storm in 1991, a stunning air campaign is demonstrating America's power of deterrence.

China Sea. By demonstrating our ability to break through air defenses and "go downtown" on day one, we forced the Chinese to adapt their strategy.

What we lacked in Desert Storm was standoff capability, meaning weapons that allowed America to attack targets from a safe distance. The Chinese knew it. Recognizing that geography still matters, they extended their defensive periphery seaward, initially to the first island chain, from Japan to the South China Sea, and then to the second chain and beyond. They began a decades-long pursuit of a new doctrine supported by new weapons to prevent the U.S. Navy and Air Force from operating within

their extended periphery.

This created near-panic in the U.S. defense establishment. Visions of Chinese forces sinking American carriers as we approached China's extended periphery filled U.S. analytical salons. But American military and tactical ingenuity was already on the case. By 2000 we had fielded the first generation of precision standoff weapons and further honed our missile defenses, electronic attack, and penetrating stealth capability. Our next generation of ground- and air-launched extended-range standoff weapons will help cement our competitive advantage inside China's—or any adversary's—defensive periphery.

Like geography, numbers still matter. China's unprecedented military buildup demonstrates the military maxim that quantity has a quality all its own. President Trump's proposed \$1.5 trillion defense budget begins the urgent task of building more ships, aircraft, weapons and unmanned systems to deter this threat.

Operation Epic Fury will show if we are edging closer to the early air-power prophets' vision or if air power in support of maneuvering ground forces remains the key to victory. We don't yet know the answer. What isn't in question is that Epic Fury has restored American deterrence. Should deterrence fail, the Chinese communists should be afraid, very afraid.

*Mr. Luti is an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute, a retired Navy captain and combat veteran of the Desert Storm air campaign.*

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## Opinion

The New York Times

## The Illiteracy of the Iran War

Yonatan Touval  
A foreign-policy analyst and writer.

TEL AVIV  
FOUR weeks into the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, one conclusion is already difficult to avoid. Our leaders preside over an extraordinary machinery of destruction, but they remain strikingly obtuse about human beings — about their pride, shame, convictions and historical memory. The war's architects appear to have assumed that killing a nation's leaders, dominating airspace and destroying infrastructure would produce regime collapse in Tehran and strategic clarity in Washington and Jerusalem. Instead, Iran, though badly weakened, has managed to disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, drastically widen the war's economic radius and force Washington into the old, unglamorous business of soliciting allied help after entering a war confident that it would be swift and decisive.

It is tempting to describe this as a failure of intelligence. Technically, it is not. The spy-craft kind of intelligence behind the war planning and execution is extensive. Recent reporting suggests that Israeli intelligence spent years penetrating Tehran's traffic cameras and communications networks and built what one unnamed Israeli source described to CNN as an A.I.-powered "target-production machine" capable of turning enormous volumes of visual, human and signals intelligence into precise strike coordinates. That is an extraordinary achievement of surveillance and targeting.

Yet never has so much been seen, so precisely, by so many people who understand so little of what they are seeing. A system can tell you where a man is. It cannot tell you what his death will mean for a nation. Such systems are trained on behavior, not on meaning — they can track what an adversary does but not what he fears, honors, remembers or would die for.

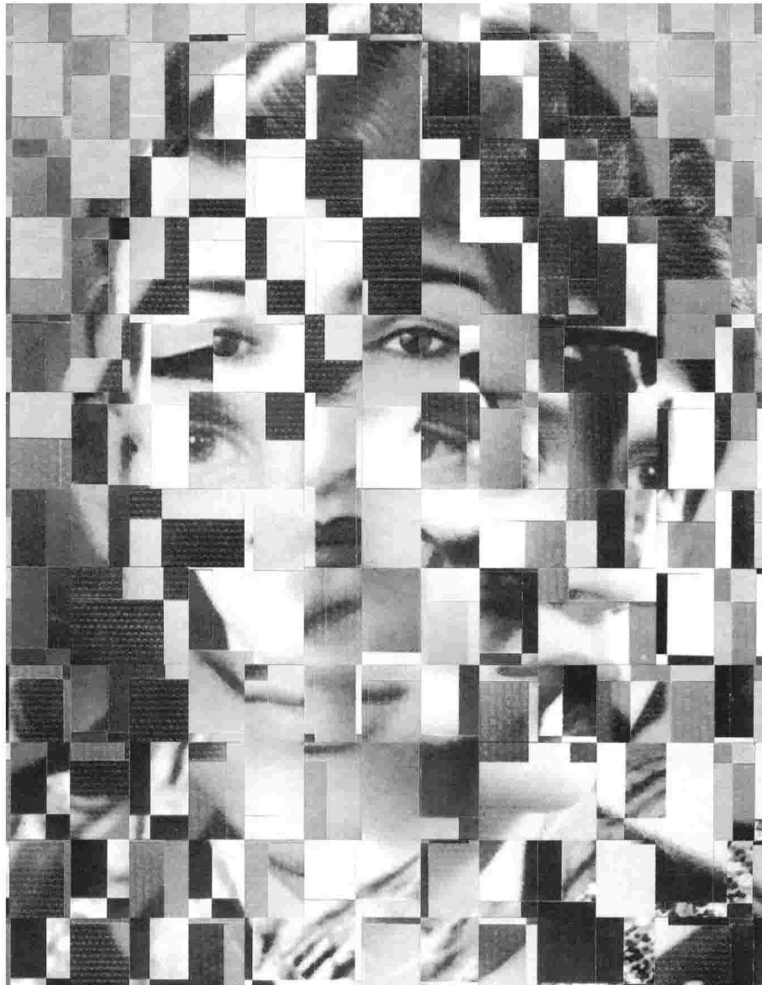
This is the recurring illusion of overequipped leaders: Because they can map the battle space, they think they understand the war. But war is never merely a technical contest. It is shaped by grievance, sacred narrative, the memory of past humiliations and the desire for revenge. Those are not atmospheric complications added to an otherwise technical enterprise. They are what the war is about.

So the familiar errors appear. The war planners imagine that a regime can be decapitated into collapse, whereas external attack often does the opposite — binding a battered state more tightly to a society newly united by injury, humiliation and rage. They imagine that destroying conventional assets would settle the matter, as if legitimacy, wounded sovereignty and collective anger were secondary rather than the war's actual terrain. Planners who took their adversary's self-understanding seriously — rather than discounting it as propaganda — might have anticipated that an attack would not weaken the regime's narrative but instead fulfill it. They might also have foreseen the paradox that systematic decapitation does not produce negotiators. It removes them.

The military theorist Carl von Clausewitz long ago recognized the delusion of reducing war to a kind of algebra. War, as he understood it, is never merely calculation. It is saturated with passion, uncertainty and political purpose. The algebra has grown more sophisticated. But the delusion is just as dangerous today as it was in the 19th century.

What this war exposes, then, is a failure not only of strategy but of literacy. Literature and history, at their most serious, train precisely the faculties these leaders lack: the capacity to grant that other minds are not transparent to us, and are governed by purposes not our own. A mind tutored by history and literature knows that actors in the grip of a sacred cause tend to mean what

It's risky to place an army in the hands of people untrained in history and irony.



SAMON AHMADZADEH

they say — and that bombing a founding myth is more likely to consecrate it than to dissolve it.

Cultural knowledge, of course, rarely prevents the catastrophes of war.

Athens at the height of its golden age sailed for Syracuse and lost an empire. Thucydides spent the rest of his life explaining why. The generals of 1914 were cultivated, well-read men, but those qualities did not save Europe. What has changed is not that culture once prevented blindness and no longer does. It is that culture has increasingly ceded authority to systems that mistake information for understanding and speed for judgment.

Shakespeare understood this blindness better than our strategists. "Macbeth" is not merely a play about ambition. It is about a man who catches sight of a possible future and mistakes that glimpse for a license to force events to conform to his interpretation

— and then watches that interpretation devour him. Soon he ceases even to pretend that action should wait on understanding. There are things in his head, he tells his wife, that "must be acted ere they may be scanned" — done before they can be thought through.

Modern targeting systems promise the same fantasy in technological form: to collapse the interval between seeing and striking, to eliminate the pause in which judgment might still enter. Macbeth acts not after deliberation but instead of it. That is the pattern one can glimpse in this new war, and it is precisely the pattern that literary and historical imagination exists to counter.

Tolstoy traced the same pattern from the other side. In "War and Peace," he depicted Napoleon — nourished on Plutarch's "Lives" and its portraits of greatness — who marched through Borodino to Moscow and still could not fathom a people who would let their city burn rather than submit. His error was not

tactical. It was imaginative: He could not credit the Russians with a logic that was not his own. That is the mistake the architects of this campaign are repeating. A leadership that has spent decades framing resistance to American and Israeli power as a religious obligation will experience military pressure not as a reason to capitulate but more probably as a reason to endure.

The more technologically sophisticated war becomes, the more dangerous it is to place it in the hands of people untrained in irony, contingency and the darker constants of human nature. Such leaders will speak fluently of capabilities, timelines and kill chains. They will have no language for resentment, dishonor, loyalty or grief — and they will discover, too late, that wars are made of these as much as of steel and fire. That is the illiteracy of this war. The algebra of the war makers will have been flawless. But what they cannot read, they will not have reckoned with.

## Trump Will Do the Jitterbug on Your Grave

Frank Bruni

A contributing Opinion writer who was on the staff of The Times for more than 25 years.

THESE are many signs of President Trump's deterioration, but on one front he has indisputably grown sharper and faster.

He's at his peak when maligning the dead. He used to be more shambolic about it. After John McCain's death in August 2018, the aspersions that Trump cast on the Arizona senator were feeble and fitful, with Trump's summary judgment — "I never was a fan" — coming more than six months later. That statement was as needless as it was tactless. Trump had made his disdain for McCain clear all the way back in 2015, when he mocked McCain's five and a half years as a prisoner of war, suggesting that winners don't get captured and tortured.

Trump was quicker to kick Colin Powell's corpse. The highly decorated general and former secretary of state died in October 2021; Trump's public condemnation of him came within about 24 hours. He memorialized Powell's "big mistakes on Iraq," and he accused Powell of disloyalty to fellow Republicans, which really meant a refusal to genuflect before Trump. Trump measures people not by what they've done for others but by what they've denied him. He uses the narcissist's yardstick.

And he whacked Robert Mueller with it,

rejoicing over the former F.B.I. director's death almost simultaneously with the news of it a week ago Saturday. "Good," Trump exulted in a social media post. "I'm glad he's dead. He can no longer hurt innocent people!"

On McCain's and Powell's graves, Trump did a lazy waltz. On Mueller's, a jitterbug. And we've already moved on. We always do. That's the thing about Trump's moral grotesqueness — there's so much of it that no one instance, no single episode, can hold our attention for long. He maxes out our memories, the new depravity quickly overwriting the old depravity on our hard drives.

But let's not purge his denigration of Mueller just yet. For several reasons, it warrants more than a fleeting wince. A common thread runs through the lives of McCain, Powell and Mueller. All three were military veterans. All three saw combat. And all three received Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts for their service and injuries in Vietnam — the place that Trump avoided with a physician's note attesting to his ostensibly debilitating bone spurs.

Is Trump shamed by their examples? He's surely baffled by their choices. Trump wouldn't risk a paper cut unless there were an multimillion-dollar payoff on the far side of the nick. And he has privately referred to Americans killed in wars as "suckers" for having put their lives on the line, according to reports — which he has called "fake news" — by several news organizations.

It's as if he needs desperately to feel superior to those soldiers, to cast their strength as weakness, their courage as folly, lest his own cowardice be exposed. And so he disparaged McCain, Powell and Mueller, talking smack about them even (especially?) when they could no longer talk back.

His pronounced venom for Mueller no doubt reflects his particular interest in discrediting his work as a special counsel investigating Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Mueller's inquiry bedeviled Trump for much of his first term in the White House, and when, in 2019, Mueller released a report saying that he could not determine definitively that the Trump campaign had — or had not — conspired with Russia, Trump falsely claimed complete exonerated, putting the phrases "witch hunt" and "Russia hoax" in heavy rotation.

Trump's spinning of Mueller's report was his dress rehearsal for his rewriting of what happened on Jan. 6, 2021. It required the transformation of Mueller from earnest public servant to vengeful monster, and Trump was hardly going to abandon or halt that project upon Mueller's death.

It's always about Trump, it's all about Trump, and his rants about the recently departed are hardly confined to those in government. In December, after the beloved movie director Rob Reiner and his wife were fatally stabbed in their Los Angeles home, Trump attributed their deaths to their political opposition to him. He wrote in a social

A tyrant has freer rein if his kingdom has been leached of all decency.

media post that Reiner perished "due to the anger he caused others through his massive, unyielding, and incurable affliction with a mind crippling disease known as TRUMP DERANGEMENT SYNDROME." It was appalling. And it was quickly forgotten.

That's why I'm revisiting it. That's why I'm mentioning Mueller. Trump wants to be inoculated from any offenses because that inoculates him from any consequences. He wants to degrade us — he wants to degrade everything — because he's a more fitting ruler with freer rein if his kingdom has been leached of all decency.

He's a hypocrite, of course, as are the lickspittles around him. After Charlie Kirk's death, they freaked out about any stray whisper of the uglier parts of Kirk's legacy — it was untimely, unseemly, cruel — but they shrug at Trump's sadism. They ignore his souring of Kirk's memorial itself, where Trump said flippantly that he hates his enemies. All of that they recast as boldness. Or they claim that it's harmless: It's just Trump being Trump. It's a presidential perk, like winged swag from Qatar, a tacky ballroom and incompetent underlings.

No. It's more than that, and it's worse than that. It's a retreat from empathy, generosity, kindness. And it's telling. The way we respond to death says everything about who we are. If we can't extend the dead a bit of grace, it's because we're graceless.





## OPINION

## Why Not Declare War?



**GLOBAL VIEW**  
By Walter Russell Mead

"Never, never, never," Winston Churchill wrote in "My Early Life," "believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The Statesman who yields to war fever . . . is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events." One month into his war with Iran, Donald Trump is learning how right Churchill was.

As the economic and political consequences of the widening war ripple across the world, President Trump confronts a complex set of difficult choices. How does he respond to growing Russian targeting assistance to Iran? What should he do if Houthi missiles and drones close the Red Sea again, exacerbating the global energy shock? Should he commit U.S. ground forces to the war, for what missions and at what level of risk? Above all, how does Mr. Trump overthrow the authorities in Tehran, induce them to accept his conditions for ending the war, or spin compromise as success?

Mr. Trump is as unpredictable as war itself, but he has no desire to see his statue enshrined in the History's Greatest Losers wing of the

Temple of Fame. He knows what the Vietnam War did to Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency and he will do anything and everything to avoid a similar fate. This doesn't necessarily mean that Tehran will soon be savoring a tasty TACO-fest. If the conflict continues to escalate, with growing economic costs and American casualties, Mr. Trump might respond with unconventional escalations of his own. He might, for example, press Republican legislative leaders to pass a formal declaration of war for the first time since Congress declared war on Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania in 1942.

Declarations of war unlock vast presidential powers. Woodrow Wilson jailed war critics, put enemy aliens under tight constraints, and prohibited the dissemination of antiwar materials through the mail. Franklin D. Roosevelt interned Japanese-Americans, censored the press and essentially took over the American economy.

The powers of American presidents in wartime aren't unlimited, but they are very broad. According to a 2014 Congressional Research Service report, declarations of war allow presidents to order domestic manufacturers to make munitions and to seize factories if they refuse. Powers of surveillance are greatly expanded, as is the ability to monitor and in some cases control the actions and speech of enemy aliens and

those seen as aiding enemy nations. Of special interest to Mr. Trump, a formal declaration of war would activate the Trading with the Enemy Act, providing the kind of broad authority over international trade that the Supreme Court recently denied him under an-

**Congress hasn't done it since 1942. But a case may emerge for doing it in Iran.**

other statute. Declarations of war empower direct presidential authority over communications and transportation systems.

It has been almost 84 years since Congress made an official declaration of war. President Truman did not seek a declaration of war to respond to North Korea's invasion of the South. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized LBJ's Vietnam escalation, fell well short of a declaration of war. Similarly, President George W. Bush fought terror under an Authorization for Use of Military Force.

In hindsight, one can wonder if these choices were wise. Formal declarations of war send clear signals to adversaries and strengthen the hand of a war president—especially when opponents see the manipulation of American public opinion as their

key route to success.

The Constitution vests war powers in Congress, and while no Congress has ever rejected a presidential request for a declaration of war, we have never had a president quite like Mr. Trump. An overwhelming majority of Democrats would likely oppose granting him this kind of power under almost any circumstances. Enough Republicans worried about possible abuses and the politics of an unpopular conflict might join them to deny a request for a formal war declaration.

But the politics could change. If the economic pain of war grows, if antiwar protesters become the object of a backlash, or if Iranian attacks on American targets raise public ire against Tehran, very small shifts in public opinion could provide the administration with the backing to get a declaration of war through Congress. In any case, Mr. Trump might enjoy forcing his opponents to vote against granting him war powers while American forces are taking casualties overseas.

Wars can be transformational, especially in volatile eras like the present. As the Iran war intensifies, Americans cannot assume that its transformational consequences will be confined to foreign lands. It is not only statesmen who lose control of events when the dogs of war run free.

**BOOKSHELF** | By Andrew R. Graybill

## Lonesome At Heart

**Western Star**

By David Streitfeld  
Mariner, 464 pages, \$35

Larry McMurtry once said of "Lonesome Dove," his 1985 epic about an 1870s cattle drive from Texas to Montana, that "it is the 'Gone With the Wind' of the West"—by which he meant that it was neither terrific nor terrible. Readers have returned a different verdict: last year alone, "Lonesome Dove" sold more than 50,000 copies. McMurtry's stark assessment grew in part from a vocation that, despite his lifelong project to demythologize the cowboy, the ultimate American icon, his most celebrated book had the inverse effect.

This complex relationship to the West in general and Texas—McMurtry's home state—in particular courses through the McMurtry oeuvre of novels, screenplays, non-fiction and criticism. And it animates David Streitfeld's "Western Star," a highly entertaining and informative study of the man who, as the author claims, "created modern Texas literature"—out of necessity, perhaps, given the low esteem in which McMurtry held most of the state's other writers.

Mr. Streitfeld, a journalist, first met McMurtry in the late 1990s. Thereafter, he became a self-described "crony and confidant," despite McMurtry's guardedness. With the writer's blessing he jotted down their conversations and interviewed his friends and associates; McMurtry tolerated these intrusions "as long as he could pretend I wasn't writing a book," Mr. Streitfeld tells us. "Western Star" is thus the rare authorized biography that keeps its subject at arm's length.

McMurtry was born in 1936 in Archer City, a town of a few thousand on the sunbaked and featureless plains of north-central Texas. His father and uncles were in the cattle business, but it was soon apparent that young Larry, who was slight and frail, had no future in ranching. His childhood home lacked plumbing and electricity as well as reading material; that changed when, one day in 1942, an older cousin delivered a box of books—"the seminal event of my whole life," McMurtry later recalled. He became a reader, then a writer, and above all a collector and seller of books. (At his height, his bookstore—Booked Up—boasted some 500,000 volumes spread across several buildings in his hometown.) McMurtry's first novel, "Horseman, Pass By," appeared in 1961 and laid down many of the ideas that he would revisit, especially the sprawling gap between the fantasy of the West and its bleak reality.

"If I have a genius for anything," McMurtry told a friend on one occasion, "it's for being found." And so it was with Hollywood, which over the course of four decades translated some of McMurtry's best work for film, episodes narrated with élan by Mr. Streitfeld. Take, for instance, his chapters on "The Last Picture Show," released in 1971 and based on McMurtry's 1966 novel of the same name. Set in a fictional version of Archer City, where the film was shot on location, production was riddled by the affair between director Peter Bogdanovich and one of the movie's young stars, Cybill Shepherd. Its release, meanwhile, scandalized McMurtry's neighbors with frank depictions of teenage lust and small-town claustrophobia. At the opposite end of McMurtry's career was "Brokeback Mountain" (2005), which he and his writing partner, Diana Ossana, adapted from a 1997 Annie Proulx short story about the forbidden romance between a pair of gay cowboys; their screenplay won an Oscar in 2006.

Larry McMurtry was born into a Texas ranching family. Much of his writing is a lament for the passing of old-time ways.

And yet for all this success, a persistent melancholy stalks the writer. Some of this unhappiness may have been environmental, the result of growing up in a place as discouraging and desolate as Archer City, to which McMurtry was drawn back—improbably—throughout his life, in between long stints in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Tucson, Ariz. Despite many close friendships, especially with women, he was at heart a loner, conditioned, possibly, by clinical depression, for which he sought electroshock therapy even though it addled his brain. "Whole areas aren't there," he told Mr. Streitfeld about his memory in 2012. "Tomorrow I won't remember this conversation." An unmistakable sadness clings to "Western Star," a fitting given that much of its subject's writing was a lament for the passing of the old-timers and their ways, and the subsequent dislocations of future generations left to grapple with a new and homogenized West.

It is perhaps inevitable that "Western Star" will be compared to Tracy Daugherty's acclaimed biography, which appeared in 2023. In fact, the books are better viewed as complementary rather than competitive. Mr. Daugherty's study hews closely to the details of his subject's life, while Mr. Streitfeld's is organized more around McMurtry's formidable body of work. Both authors serve their readers well by resisting any inclination to hagiography, all the more impressive in Mr. Streitfeld's case given his closeness to his subject. Mr. Streitfeld appears occasionally in the book, often to charming effect, as when he mentions attending McMurtry's 2011 wedding to his second wife, Faye (the widow of McMurtry's close friend, Ken Kesey), and being whisked away by the groom to ponder recent arrivals at the bookstore.

Early in McMurtry's career, a paramour gave him a sweatshirt that read "Minor Regional Novelist." Although it mortified his editor, the author himself wore it with a mixture of pride and amusement, conceding many years later to Mr. Streitfeld that "most writers are minor" and that he was content to be counted among them. Maybe so. But by the time McMurtry died in March 2021, few would have considered his output to be inconsequential. His canvas was vast and so were his themes, chief among them a clear-eyed assessment of that part of the nation so essential to the formation of America's national identity.

Mr. Graybill is a professor of history at Southern Methodist University.

## The Poles Who Failed Sheridan Gorman



**MAIN STREET**  
By William McGurn

Sheridan Gorman should be alive. The 18-year-old freshman should be with her family and catching them up on what's new at Chicago's Loyola University. Instead she's gone, and this weekend her family came with moist eyes and broken hearts to her funeral at the First Presbyterian Church in her hometown of Yorktown, N.Y.

This family has been through the unspeakable: The light of their lives snuffed out before her time, cut down as Ms. Gorman gathered by the Chicago lakefront with friends to catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights. The politicians who failed to protect her from a criminal have since compounded the pain with ill-conceived statements about who's to blame. These statements—by the governor, the mayor, a Chicago alderwoman—weren't intended to wound, but they did.

Our political class, apparently, has lost all sense of what's important in moments like these. It's become all about scoring political points against your enemies. Confronting the afflicted, supporting communities and individ-

uals, all that comes later—or not at all. This is not normal.

Begin with Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker. A week ago he admitted there were "real failures" in the immigration and criminal-justice systems that led to this murder. The accused murderer is 25-year-old Jose Medina, a Venezuelan who crossed into the U.S. illegally amid the border chaos of the Biden years. He has been arrested and charged with Ms. Gorman's murder.

Mr. Pritzker's real message wasn't the "real failures." It was: This is Donald Trump's fault, notwithstanding that there's hardly a Republican to be found in Illinois. "I know that the Gorman family has suffered mightily," the governor said. "I agree. There have been real failures. Those failures, of course, extend beyond the borders of Illinois. There [are] national failures, a failure to have comprehensive immigration reform, a failure of the president to follow his own edict to go after the worst of the worst."

Alderwoman Maria Hadden told Fox32's Chicago Live last week that Gorman "might have been a wrong-place-wrong-time, running into a person who had a gun. They might have startled this person at the end of the pier unintentionally," Ms. Hadden has since apologized for sug-

gesting the victim caused her own death while blaming media for "intentionally creating sound bites to misconstrue my words during this tragedy."

Not to be outdone, Mayor Brandon Johnson gave a master class in deflection when asked if he would apologize to Gorman's parents for her death. He then char-

**A young woman's murder has Chicago officials rushing to evade responsibility.**

acterized it as "senseless violence." This was followed by a filibuster, in which he said the city's sanctuary status was established 40 years ago and was somehow shaped by a 2021 criminal justice reform, which he incorrectly said was passed under Gov. Bruce Rauner who was—wait for it—a Republican. (The law was signed by Gov. Pritzker.)

Finally he, too, went to the old reliable: Mr. Trump. "He points the finger at everything and everyone else versus doing some real self-reflection on what his responsibility is."

Politicians have lost sight of the public language needed to deal with tragedy

## The World Needs a Stronger U.N.

By Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

Every violation of international law invites another violation. From Afghanistan to Iran and across Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Gaza and Venezuela, the line between what is permitted and what is prohibited has been steadily blurred by the complicit inaction of the United Nations Security Council. Wielding the veto as both a shield and a weapon, its permanent members act without grounding in the U.N. Charter. They play with the fate of millions, leaving a trail of death and destruction.

Until recently, there was at least an attempt to give interventions a veneer of legitimacy through U.N. endorsement. Today, the open exercise of power no longer even tries to keep up appearances. The guardrails of multilateral institutions are becoming too limited to contain hegemonic rivalries. Without a more robust multilateralism, we risk replacing an imperfect system of collective security with the brutal reality of widespread insecurity. When all constraints on

the use of force are removed, chaos prevails.

The world is witnessing the highest number of armed conflicts since World War II. It's no coincidence that right now democracy stands at a crossroads. Extremism is both the starting point and the end point of a vicious circle. When governments allow themselves

**Powerful nations are flouting international law, and somebody ought to stop them.**

to be drawn into war by intolerance or the arrogance of power, they plant the seeds of resentment that yield more hatred and violence.

Dual-use technological advances confront us with ethical questions. The selection of military targets is already being carried out by artificial intelligence, without specific legal or moral parameters in place. The principles of international humanitarian law—in particular the distinction between civilians and combat-

ants—are under serious threat. Women and children are the primary victims of this collective tragedy.

We are living through an arms race that is pushing countries to devote ever larger shares of their budgets to armaments. Military spending—now around \$2.7 trillion, according to a recent U.N. report—absorbs valuable resources that could be used to fight hunger and poverty, confront climate change, ensure universal access to education and promote digital inclusion. Even more egregious is the recurring use of hunger as a weapon of war and the impunity with which forced displacement is carried out.

No bombs, drones or missiles can shield economies from the impact of armed conflict. Fluctuations in oil prices mean more expensive—or even inaccessible—energy and transport for businesses and consumers. Blockades constrain trade. Fertilizer shortages push up food prices and fuel inflation. Central banks raise interest rates, increasing public and private debt. Investment opportunities and jobs are lost.

Unilateral actions, arbitrary measures, violations of sovereignty and breaches of international law are becoming the rule. Research published in the Lancet shows that sanctions imposed without U.N. backing—particularly economic ones—affect mortality rates in targeted countries, and have been responsible for around half a million deaths a year on average since the 1970s.

Excessive power and instability go hand in hand. A world without rules is an insecure world where anyone can be the next victim. Violence can't replace dialogue, nor can force prevail over diplomacy. The prerogatives of the permanent members of the Security Council are already unjustifiable in an international order grounded in the sovereign equality of nations. When exercised irresponsibly, they become intolerable. It's time to respond with resolve by restoring the capacity of a reformed United Nations to act, so that it no longer remains a mere spectator to events that affect us all.

Mr. da Silva is president of Brazil.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Charlie Ergen, SpaceX and Trump

Seven years after launching its first Starlink internet satellite, SpaceX is preparing to go public and could command a sky-high valuation. One ironic beneficiary of Starlink's success is telecom mogul Charlie Ergen, who has used regulatory arbitrage to save his failed broadband bet. This is a tale of dumb industrial policy that might end well despite government planners.

The story starts in 2019 when the Trump Justice Department required T-Mobile and Sprint to sell spectrum and their prepaid phone business to Mr. Ergen's Dish network as a condition for green-lighting their merger. The government's policy goal was to stand up a fourth competitor in the wireless market to Verizon, AT&T and the new T-Mobile-Sprint.

Mr. Ergen had earlier spent billions of dollars acquiring spectrum, much of which he hadn't deployed. The Trump Federal Communications Commission set strict deadlines for him to build out a 5G network to prevent him from warehousing spectrum and later flipping it for a profit, as his critics warned at the time he might try to do.

Mr. Ergen's fledgling network failed to get off the ground. The Biden FCC extended the build-out deadlines so he wouldn't be penalized for noncompliance. Did a \$100,000 donation by Mr. Ergen and his wife to Joe Biden's Super Pac buy him regulatory forbearance?

Regardless, it didn't solve Mr. Ergen's financial problems, including a heavy debt load and declining number of Dish satellite TV subscribers. EchoStar, which merged with Dish in 2023, warned in August of "substantial doubt about our ability to continue as a going concern."

Enter Trump FCC Chair Brendan Carr, who last spring launched a review of Mr. Ergen's compliance with the agency's build-out requirements. Mr. Ergen met with President Trump in June in an effort to stop the FCC from reclaiming EchoStar's licenses. Mr. Trump prodded Mr. Carr to let Mr. Ergen sell

his licenses. Mr. Carr obliged. A private sale bails out Mr. Ergen but is still preferable to letting Mr. Ergen sit on unused spectrum. It also enables the spectrum to be deployed faster than if the FCC were to reclaim the spectrum. The original sin was the first Trump DOJ's attempt to jury-rig a fourth competitor. One political intervention invariably begets more.

Mr. Ergen last fall struck deals to sell spectrum for more than \$40 billion, which allowed him to turn a nice profit on the licenses. His creditors and vendors—such as cell-tower builders—are hounding him for repayment, and he should have to honor his debts. But the overriding public interest here is getting scarce spectrum into the hands of companies that can put it to good use. EchoStar agreed to sell spectrum to SpaceX for \$20 billion including cash and stock. SpaceX aims to use the spectrum to develop a next-generation Starlink cell service, which could compete with the three large wireless providers.

So the market may get a fourth competitor—though not the one regulators had devised. By the way, wireless prices have fallen since 2019, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Give credit to market competition and government spectrum auctions.

Meantime, SpaceX's mooted public offering—which reportedly may fetch a \$1.75 trillion valuation—could let Mr. Ergen cash in big on his shares. EchoStar has effectively become a "space-themed" hedge fund whose "valuation now depends on the market's assessment of Space X," telecom analyst MoffettNathanson wrote this month.

Populist outcry that business titans are profiting off Washington is overwrought, but it's on point in Mr. Ergen's case. That's what happens when politicians and regulators try to manage markets. But the good news is that the private market for spectrum and the second-term Trump FCC may save the day.

The private market for spectrum may rescue dumb industrial policy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Cost of a Constantly Online Childhood

Your editorial "The Social-Media Shakedown Begins" (Review & Outlook, March 26) dismisses the social-media verdict as a victory for the plaintiff's bar. It argues that "most children who use social media don't experience severe problems." Is this true? A Pew Research Center survey found that nearly half of teens (46%) are online almost constantly—nearly double the rate from a decade ago (24%)—and they're spending that time mainly on social media. Teens who use social media for three or more hours a day are at increased risk of depression, anxiety and other mental-health problems. This is alarming, considering that a 2023 survey from Gallup found teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 spend an average of 4.8 hours on social media daily.

While it's difficult to prove social media caused any given individual's troubles, we must remember the

same was once true for tobacco lawsuits. Lawyers for Big Tobacco argued that it couldn't be proven that a specific plaintiff's cancer was caused by smoking. However, once epidemiological research on a population level developed and showed dramatically elevated rates of lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema among smokers, the weight of evidence shifted. Moreover, the tobacco industry's own research revealed that industry leaders knew nicotine was addictive and smoking caused cancer and yet made a deliberate decision to deny this publicly. Sound familiar? With social media, it may be difficult to prove causation for an individual, but once we consider population-level research, the link is undeniable, as it was with tobacco.

CLARE MORELL  
Fellow  
The Ethics and Public Policy Center  
Washington

Florida Empowers Public-Sector Employees

Thank you for pointing out in your editorial what should be obvious in union elections ("Florida Leads Again on Public Unions," Review & Outlook, March 23). Individual workers should be able to decide if they want to join a union or not. It's a simple choice that all public-sector employees should be afforded. Public-sector unions don't agree with this and probably never will.

As your editorial states, the "new requirements are hardly onerous." The Florida legislation simply states that, to recertify a union, a minimum percentage of voting members must show up to vote and then can win with a majority of votes cast. If a union is truly delivering value, it shouldn't be hard to get members to show up to vote.

The fact is that many public em-

ployees have decided that the value they're receiving isn't worth the dues dollars—so it's no wonder that so many are opting out of union membership.

Public-sector unions are inherently political, as stated by the Supreme Court in *Janus v. Afsame*, a decision handed down in June 2018. Despite this ruling, public-sector unions continue to have significant power and remain largely unaccountable to their members. Many employees are finding that they're not getting what they're paying for, and legislation like Florida's empowers them to do something about it.

MARK JANUS  
Punta Gorda, Fla.  
Mr. Janus, the lead plaintiff in *Janus v. Afsame*, is a senior fellow at Liberty Justice Center.

Trump's Iran Target List, Good and Bad

President Trump is whipsawing, in his familiar fashion, between hailing diplomacy with Iran and issuing new threats if peace talks fail. He's also issued a new and broader target list, but some of the possible sites he mentions would do more harm to the Iranian people than to the regime.

"Great progress has been made [in negotiations] but, if for any reason a deal is not shortly reached," Mr. Trump posted on Truth Social Monday morning, "we will conclude our lovely 'stay' in Iran by blowing up and completely obliterating all of their Electric Generating Plants, Oil Wells and Kharg Island (and possibly all desalination plants)."

It's hard to know when Mr. Trump is serious, but this target list is far too indiscriminate. Oil production and the Kharg island oil export terminal are fair military game, as they are the main sources of financing for the regime. The decision to bomb or occupy them with U.S. troops is a matter of military calculation and judgment about the risks.

Oddly, though, Mr. Trump has so far let Iran's tankers full of oil pass through the Gulf and to China or other buyers without interference. He even hailed one group of tankers as a "gift" to the U.S., presumably to keep global oil prices from spiking too high. But if he really wants to squeeze the regime, cutting off its oil exports may be necessary.

The same isn't true of bombing Iran's electric power or desalination plants, which serve civilian more than military needs. These would

punish the Iranian people the U.S. needs on its side against the regime once the bombing stops. Tehran already had a water shortage before the war owing to the regime's mismanagement. Bombing desalination plants would let the regime blame the U.S. for the shortages, in addition to causing far more humanitarian hardship.

The same goes for bombing Iran's electricity production. Iranians without electricity or water would soon need external supplies or become refugees to neighboring countries and beyond. This would win no friends in the region when the U.S. is trying to get them to support the war. Stories of civilian deprivation could also turn public opinion in the U.S. even further against the war.

Mr. Trump's indiscriminate target list echoes World War II's civilian bombing against German and Japanese cities. But this isn't the 1940s when the war's traumas could be somewhat sequestered. One of the great benefits of precision-bombing technology is that it lets the U.S. military target the enemy with limited civilian damage. This is a moral advance in warfare and distinguishes the American way of war from, say, Vladimir Putin's.

Sometimes mistakes still kill civilians, as may have happened when a school was inadvertently hit during the first days of the war. But that's a far cry from the deliberate destruction of civilian targets. Let's hope someone in Mr. Trump's war council will explain the difference and have him stick to regime targets.

Hitting desalination and power plants would hurt the Iranian people.

The Abraham Accords Passed the Stress Test

Regarding Yousef Al Otaiba's op-ed "The U.A.E. Stands Up to Iran" (March 26): Much of the commentary on the United Arab Emirates' response to Iranian strikes has focused on immediate military and financial measures. But the deeper story is what this moment reveals about the Abraham Accords.

Critics argue that the Accords are transactional and shallow: photo-ops dressed up as diplomacy. The war has revealed something different: Israel and the U.A.E. have been sharing early-warning data, coordinating air-defense protocols and building defense-industrial ties. The U.A.E.'s integration with Israeli systems under the United States Central Command isn't the product of crisis improvisation; it's the fruit of years of patient institutional work.

What this means for the day after is significant. If and when the fighting stops, the U.A.E. won't return to a posture of studied ambiguity toward Israel. It will be a country that absorbed a barrage of Iranian strikes, stood firm and deepened its alignment with Jerusalem in the process. That's a different relationship than when the

Accords were signed in 2020. What comes next could be extraordinary. Defense cooperation is already under way. A post-war environment with Iran degraded creates the conditions to go further, with joint infrastructure, integrated financial markets and a technology corridor. The Abraham Accords were always a bet on the future. The U.A.E. is demonstrating the commitment that will be needed to get us there.

JUDAH TAUB  
Jerusalem  
Mr. Taub is founder and managing partner of Hetz Ventures, former Israeli intelligence officer, and adviser to governments on AI, cybersecurity and defense strategy.

Protesters Throughout U.S. History Play the Long Game

In "Politics as Bad Group Therapy" (op-ed, March 27), Jonathan Alpert writes that No Kings rallies "risk turning politics into something that feels good in the moment—and accomplishes almost nothing." This take ignores the history of protests.

Women started seriously lobbying for the right to vote at Seneca Falls in 1848, but the 19th Amendment wasn't ratified until 1920.

The NAACP sponsored a silent march protesting lynching and other violence against black Americans in 1917—and of course many other marches and rallies against segregation and racial injustice followed—but it wasn't until 1964 that a Civil Rights Act with teeth was passed and not until 1965 that the Voting Rights Act was passed. In each case, it took decades of protesting simply "feel good" but "accomplish nothing?"

Protesters serve several purposes. One is to make people uncomfortable and disrupt the status quo. In that regard, the No Kings protests clearly have succeeded.

MICHAEL T. TUSA JR.  
Abita Springs, La.

We're Cramped but Content

Jack Butler's op-ed ("The Crowded House I Call Home," March 27) uncannily describes the place our family calls home. Five kids, never enough bathrooms, basement TV and family who travel miles from all over to be here. It was and still is the best.

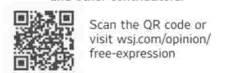
JUDE DEVANE  
Wheaton, Ill.

CORRECTION

A photograph accompanying the March 7 book review "Drawn Into His Father's Orbit" showed Tom Junod walking with his sister. Based on information provided by the publisher, the caption misidentified Mr. Junod's walking partner.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"This is why you're here and not in the NBA."

OPINION

# How Democrats Can Use Their Coming Majority

By **Rahm Emanuel**

Nearly every data point suggests that Democrats will ride to victory this November, making it very likely that we'll take control of the House and possibly the Senate. While we shouldn't take anything for granted, we need to think through how to maximize our opportunity, both politically and in enacting a substantive agenda.

The reality is that what happens in 2027 will have a direct bearing on the 2028 presidential contest. Democrats in Congress helped secure Bill Clinton's and Barack Obama's victories by laying the groundwork in the two years before they won. That lesson should be front and center for congressional leaders today.

## Investigations of Trump won't satisfy the voters. To win in 2028, the party needs a positive agenda.

When the Democrats who controlled Congress in 1990 sent President George H.W. Bush a bill written explicitly to put the nation's finances on firmer footing, they hit a master stroke for both the Clinton campaign and the Clinton administration. In addition to spending cuts, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell insisted that the bill include a modest tax hike, directly in contravention of Bush's pledge at the 1988 Republican National Convention: "Read my lips: No new taxes." The impact reverberated in ways few fully appreciate.

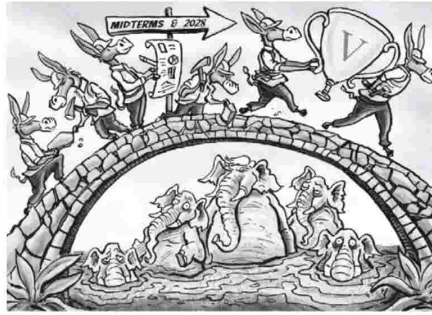
Mr. Mitchell's bill united Democrats behind a common cause, demonstrating that our party was committed to protecting ordinary people in a fiscally responsible way.

It divided the GOP—only 19 of the Senate's 45 Republicans voted for the bill Bush signed, suggesting that the president's party was in disarray and demoralizing the base. It was in the wake of the conservative base's anger that Pat Buchanan decided to mount a primary challenge from the right against the sitting president.

The substance of the bill enabled an economic renaissance that defined Mr. Clinton's eight years. The deficit-reduction package he signed during his first term and the balanced-budget plan he shaped in the second created 22 million new jobs and delivered the first surpluses since the 1960s, and the bottom fifth of earners saw income gains nearly as much as the top fifth for the first time in decades.

Democrats managed a similar maneuver in 2008. Having won control of Congress in 2006, my colleagues and I had to decide whether to send President George W. Bush an omnibus budget bill or to be more surgical, forcing him to veto a bill and highlight the GOP's wayward priorities. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and I prevailed in getting the House and Senate to send him two bills funding an expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, providing healthcare coverage to 10 million additional children. The president vetoed the bills. Both the substantive and political effects would play out over the course of years.

Ahead of Mr. Obama's run for the White House, we united Democrats in favor of something the public overwhelmingly supported: health coverage for the children of parents who worked full-time but couldn't afford insurance. We simultaneously managed to divide the GOP, with more than 60 House and Senate Republicans voting with Democrats to expand CHIP, diminishing enthusiasm for what would become John



McCain's campaign for the White House. After Mr. Obama's inauguration, Democrats passed the bill a third time, and the CHIP expansion became the foundation and inspiration for what would eventually become the Affordable Care Act.

The question now is whether Democrats will heed the strategic wisdom from these two lessons. Many presume we will use the power from winning the House and possibly the Senate primarily for retribution and vindictiveness. The implication is that we will tie up the White House, and the Trump administration more generally, in an endless series of investigations. Democrats should play against type, defying the expectation that we'll embrace gotcha politics. No doubt it's a target-rich environment. But an excessive focus on Trumpian slime will undermine efforts to promote our positive agenda. And it's what we accomplish that will earn us the sweet taste of victory in November 2028.

My reputation as a street brawler might lead many to presume that I'd lean heavily toward extracting our

pound of flesh. When I chaired the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee during the 2006 cycle, we worked hard to focus the public's attention on the corruption surrounding House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. But the situations are different in at least one key respect: Voters today already presume that Mr. Trump is dishonest. They've supported him in two presidential elections nevertheless. So, while it's certainly worthwhile for congressional Democrats to go after waste, fraud and abuse—to take down the crony capitalism that is the hallmark of the current administration—we can't let ourselves become agents of vengeance.

On this front, the press won't be our friends. Mr. Trump's misdeeds elicit more clicks and eyeballs than substantive stories about our plans to drive prosperity for the working and middle classes. To that end, we need to be disciplined, focusing on the ways taxpayer dollars have been misspent and enriched and rewarded Mr. Trump's family and friends. We should avoid issues, like property tax evaluations, where the

public justifiably believes that we're pursuing Mr. Trump for something all well-heeled and well-connected people do, if only because the ensuing debate will distract the electorate from our affirmative agenda.

What is that agenda? It should begin with raising the minimum wage, which hasn't been changed since 2009. We should pass a rate-payers' bill of rights. We should fight to lower healthcare costs. We should end the scourge of social media on children. And we should pass an ethics-reform package that cleans up Washington and bans insiders from betting on prediction markets. That should be our focus in 2027, forcing Mr. Trump and his allies in Congress to veto and vote against bills that unite us, divide them and lay the foundation for our electoral and substantive victories in 2028 and beyond. As with the tax hike in 1990 and work on children's healthcare in 2007, we need to highlight issues that exploit the GOP's fissures to our strategic advantage. If proof of dishonesty were enough to beat Mr. Trump, he would never have been elected president twice. We've tried that approach again and again, and it too often doesn't pay off. If we don't take to heart that there's a meaningful distinction between dishonesty and corruption, we'll squander a golden opportunity. Beginning next year, we'll have the power in Congress to illustrate to the American people that the most important distinction in Washington is between our positive agenda and their crony capitalism. How we handle 2027 and what we choose to highlight will be as important as who we nominate for president in 2028.

*Mr. Emanuel, a Democrat, served as a U.S. representative from Illinois (2003-09), White House chief of staff (2009-10), mayor of Chicago (2011-19) and ambassador to Japan (2022-25).*

## You May Already Have Won the Iran War



EDITOR AT LARGE  
By **Gerard Baker**

"I wish I was as cocksure of anything as Tom Macaulay is of everything."

The plaintive observation, attributed to the early Victorian British Prime Minister Viscount Melbourne about the acerbically self-confident historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, remains the motto of the thoughtfully skeptical man through the ages. Some of us still harbor doubt about the consequences of actions in a complex world. But we live in an era when instantaneous certitude about everything, an iron conviction in subjective judgment in the face of objective uncertainty, is the only guarantee of a hearing.

This is in part a corollary of the hyperpartisanship that characterizes our modern political conversation. If you believe that your side represents the only route to virtue and the other side the sure path to perdition, you've already taken a position of metaphysical certainty.

Such assuredness is acceptable from politicians. No one wants to hear a leader publicly fret over the range of possible outcomes of a course he's chosen. But since the line between partisan engagement and independent observation has been blurred, similar devotion to the veracity of one's own judgment is obligatory in the commentator class too.

So it comes as no surprise that less than a month into the latest war, almost everyone seems certain not only about the outcome of the war, but about what it means for decades to come.

Last week the Economist, a publication with a long and spotty track record of declarative certitude in the face of unpredictability, announced that the war was an American failure. "A month of bombing has achieved nothing," its cover thundered.

The academy is on the same page. Robert Pape, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, insists the war is a "longtime disaster" and the "most catastrophic failure of air power we have ever seen."

No fog of war for these seers. They have scrutinized the battlefield from the vantage points of St James's, SW1, and Hyde Park, 60637, and, like ancient augurs, have divined the outcome: It's over for the U.S. and Israel, with devastation rippling for years.

### Or you may already have lost. Commentators on both sides refuse to admit how little they know.

There is no less confidence on the other side. Torsten Slok, chief economist at the private-equity firm Apollo, dismissed the war's alarming fallout in commodity, equity and bond markets, and said it would "ultimately result in 50 years of stability in oil markets, supply chains and geopolitics."

Marc Thiessen, a speechwriter for President George W. Bush (whose administration isn't especially noted for the accuracy of its observations) and now a columnist

for the Washington Post, said on Fox News that President Trump's war would go down as "possibly the greatest military campaign... since the American Revolution." Move over, Dwight D. Eisenhower; step aside, Ulysses S. Grant.

Since rhetorical extremism in the pursuit of persuasion is all the rage, why stop there? Surely someone will soon make the case that Operation Epic Fury is the greatest triumph of arms since Henry V's longbowmen routed the superior French numbers at Agincourt. Or, according to your taste, it already represents the most disastrous defeat for a major power since the Romans were out-generaled at Cannae by Hannibal.

I am not against bold opinion commentary, as you might have noticed, but this level of certainty about a war that is four weeks old and with plainly many more phases to come, is simply unsupported. As we stand, the outcome isn't knowable with any level of confidence; it surely rests on events at a tactical and strategic level in coming weeks and months that we can't know.

It is evident that the U.S. and Israel have enjoyed extraordinary military success in eliminating much of Iran's leadership and military capabilities. But Iran's regime has succeeded at a political and economic level—first by simply surviving the onslaught to date and second by exercising its stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz.

These are all limited and contingent successes. Again, their ultimate outcome is conditional on the extent to which the U.S. is able to break that stranglehold and either force out the regime or at least cut it into submission. And that in turn is conditional on a host of at this stage unknowable developments: the deployment of ground forces, the contribution of neighbors and others to the shipping challenge.

Some of us who acknowledge our uncertainty may be simply reflecting a larger uncertainty about the wisdom of this war in the first place.

In the same way, to declare now that it is already won or lost is merely to affirm one's prior and continuing political and ideological prejudices, delivered to an audience that wants to hear nothing else.

## Operation Epic Fury Should Make China Very Afraid

By **William J. Luti**

Poets may not strike our Operation Epic Fury Navy pilots as aviation visionaries. But in the 1830s, Alfred Tennyson penned an astonishingly accurate portent of events: "For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see / Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be. . . / Heard the heavy-falls fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew / From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue."

As I wrote in the U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings 34 years ago, "the English poet laureate could not, of course, have predicted the extent to which the nation's airy navies would dominate the nature of war in the 20th century. Nor could he have appreciated the paralytic effect the

modern extension of his 'ghastly dew' would have on a Middle East nation and its million-man military machine." That was the Desert Storm air campaign.

Epic Fury is the technological and tactical offspring of Desert Storm, whose air campaign was history's first attempt to achieve the political and military aims of war from the air. Until now, Desert Storm was the closest the U.S. had come to achieving the visions of the early air-power prophets. These men—Gens. Giulio Douhet, Billy Mitchell, Hugh Trenchard and Alexander de Seversky—theorized, if a bit prematurely, that seizing command of the air was essential and even sufficient for victory.

And as air-power legend and retired U.S. Air Force Col. John A. Warden III aptly described in his 1991 es-

say "Applying Air Power in the 21st Century," Desert Storm was history's first example of what he called hyperwar—war that capitalized on high technology, unprecedented precision, strategic surprise through stealth, tactical surprise through defense suppression, and the "ability to bring all of an enemy's key operational and strategic nodes under near-simultaneous attack."

It was also, as Mr. Warden theorized, history's first "inside to outside" war. Past conflicts—due largely to a considerable lag between U.S. doctrine and technology—began with the outermost defensive ring and painfully worked toward the innermost ring of the capital, he wrote. Even World War II's famed U.S. Navy Mark XV bombing wasn't accurate enough to target precisely an enemy's industrial capacity to wage war. Hence the mass fire-bombing raids over Japan and Germany, which killed hundreds of thousands.

Epic Fury is Desert Storm on steroids. Today we're flying fewer sorties than Desert Storm but attacking more aim points with each sortie. Only about 10% of Desert Storm munitions were precision-guided. Today some 90% are. The tactical skill with which our aviators and missile defenders are using advanced U.S. tech is astounding. Particularly impressive is our dismantling of Russian and Chinese-supplied advanced air-defense systems. The implications for deterrence are immense.

The revolution in American technology introduced in the Desert Storm air campaign partially solved this challenge. Due largely to the 1970s' development of the "offset

strategy"—using American technological superiority to offset the Soviet Union's numerical advantage—we were able to penetrate Iraqi defenses with stealth and defense suppression to put short-range precision-guided weapons on targets that mattered.

Desert Storm shocked the Chinese communists. No longer could the Politburo rely on centuries-old doctrine of strategic withdrawal from the periphery to the interior, seeking better ground from which to repel an invader. It also complicated their plans for Taiwan and the South

### Like Desert Storm in 1991, a stunning air campaign is demonstrating America's power of deterrence.

China Sea. By demonstrating our ability to break through air defenses and "go downtown" on day one, we forced the Chinese to adapt their strategy.

What we lacked in Desert Storm was standoff capability, meaning weapons that allowed America to attack targets from a safe distance. The Chinese knew it. Recognizing that geography still matters, they extended their defensive periphery seaward, initially to the first island chain, from Japan to the South China Sea, and then to the second chain and beyond. They began a decades-long pursuit of a new doctrine supported by new weapons to prevent the U.S. Navy and Air Force from operating within

their extended periphery.

This created near-panic in the U.S. defense establishment. Visions of Chinese forces sinking American carriers as we approached China's extended periphery filled U.S. analytical salons. But American military and tactical ingenuity was already on the case. By 2000 we had fielded the first generation of precision standoff weapons and further honed our missile defenses, electronic attack, and penetrating stealth capability. Our next generation of ground- and air-launched extended-range standoff weapons will help cement our competitive advantage inside China's—or any adversary's—defensive periphery.

Like geography, numbers still matter. China's unprecedented military buildup demonstrates the military maxim that quantity has a quality all its own. President Trump's proposed \$1.5 trillion defense budget begins the urgent task of building more ships, aircraft, weapons and unmanned systems to deter this threat.

Operation Epic Fury will show if we are edging closer to the early air-power prophets' vision or if air power in support of maneuvering ground forces remains the key to victory. We don't yet know the answer. What isn't in question is that Epic Fury has restored American deterrence. Should deterrence fail, the Chinese communists should be afraid, very afraid.

*Mr. Luti is an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute, a retired Navy captain and combat veteran of the Desert Storm air campaign.*

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## The FT View



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## The missing middle in the defence of world trade

*Talk of replacing the US as anchor of the multilateral system has come to little*

A year ago this week, Donald Trump, with an aggressive rhetorical flourish, announced a range of tariffs against trading partners across the world. His "liberation day" levies attracted deserved derision. They were based on an unfounded state-of-emergency legal premise, and a dubious formula that ended up imposing tariffs on, among others, an archipelago of sub-Antarctic islands inhabited only by penguins.

The liberation day tariffs have failed so far on all fronts: practical, economic, political and legal. Trump was forced to reverse them a week later after a toxic reaction in financial markets, returning four months afterwards to impose a less drastic set of duties. They have shown no signs yet of achieving their various contradictory aims, including closing

the overall trade deficit and bringing manufacturing jobs back to the US.

They are also deeply unpopular with the US public and business. To top it all, the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional last month, forcing Trump to rush to replace them with only slightly less arbitrary tariffs based on the balance of payments, unfair trade and national security.

One gratifying development is that, unlike the 1930s, other governments have shown very little sign of wanting to follow America's lead. There has been no escalatory spiral of tariffs.

Yet neither have other governments done much to play the role the US once did of seeking to anchor the world trading system. Mark Carney, Canada's prime minister, gave a high-profile speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January calling for countries to adjust to a world without a US hegemon.

The sentiment was fine, but the practice is missing. Carney and others have been talking about an alliance of middle

powers seeking to save multilateral trade. So far, this has mainly been conspicuous by its absence.

The 12-member Asia-Pacific CPTPP group of countries has been talking for more than a year about working in concert with the EU. But given their different approaches to regulation, plus concerns about needlessly provoking the US, excitable talk about the two trading powers docking with each other and leading a multilateralist charge is a long way from reality. The World Trade Organization meeting of ministers that just ended in Cameroon produced little more than a vague EU-CPTPP statement of co-operation and support for the WTO, and a promise to work towards a digital trade deal.

Regional and bilateral preferential trade agreements continue to proliferate. The CPTPP has several applicant countries in the pipeline (including, intriguingly, both China and Taiwan) and the EU has recently concluded agreements with the South American

Regional and bilateral preferential agreements continue to proliferate but this does not translate into effective global governance

Mercosur bloc. Even India has overcome its traditional reluctance to sign trade deals to reach (somewhat thin) agreements with the EU and the UK.

This does not, though, translate into effective global governance. Even as it is signing those preferential agreements, India is seeking to block WTO negotiations across the board. China portrays itself as a strong supporter of the WTO, and is certainly less destructive of negotiations than India. But its extensive system of trade-distorting state intervention, together with an aggressive export-oriented growth model that is creating huge trade deficits, means it cannot act as an anchor of the system.

Multilateral action has long traded at a hefty discount to multilateralist piety, and the gap has not shrunk since the US decided to absent itself. Governments need to work out, subject by subject, agreement by agreement, where concord can be achieved and then cement it into place with legal certainty. So far, there are few signs they are able to do so.

## Opinion US economy

## Taxing labour and capital in the age of AI

Ewan White



Sheila Bair

How do you explain to young people entering the US workforce that government taxes will take some 20 per cent plus from their paltry pay cheques while some megabillionaires will pay next to nothing? Like most developed countries, the US has long given preferential tax treatment to people who make money from investments over people who earn a living from wages. The unproven rationale for this costly tax break is that it incentivises investment. But as wealth continues to flow disproportionately to investors and away from workers – a trend that AI will probably accelerate – this policy needs a rethink.

There are many ways for the US tax code to favour investment income. Most controversial are the lower rates that apply to capital gains. Wages face

**A teenager entering the workforce will pay a higher rate of federal tax than some billionaires**

a top marginal rate of 40.8 per cent while capital gains (and dividend income) are taxed at a top rate of 23.8 per cent. Importantly, gains are taxed only when investors' assets are sold or "realised". The rate is zero if they hold them until they die. Then, if heirs receive a "step up basis" at the asset's current market value. If a stock originally purchased at \$10 is worth \$100 when the share's owner dies, that \$90 gain will never be taxed.

Tax preferences for investment income have been debated for decades. But the arguments are weak, the breaks are expensive and an estimated 70 per cent of the benefits flow to the top 1 per cent of earners.

Despite what proponents argue on investment incentives, there is little correlation between low capital gains rates and economic growth. As the billionaire Warren Buffett once observed: "People invest to make money, and potential taxes have never scared them off."

Advocates of these breaks argue that they promote efficiency but in fact they distort economic activity, as money is drawn away from its most productive uses to other activities simply to qualify for capital gains treatment. Proponents also argue that shareholder gains are already taxed at the corporate level. But a sizeable per-

centage of capital gains come from assets other than stocks, and corporate tax levels vary widely. Many big US companies pay no taxes.

Finally they argue that raising capital gains tax rates will lower tax revenues because investors will pursue tax shelters and/or hold on to their assets instead of selling them. But even with preferential rates, investors pursue shelters and tax authorities struggle to define the boundaries between earned income and capital gains. Similarly, investors already avoid selling assets, for instance by borrowing against them and living off the untaxed loan proceeds. To tax more investor gains, the most workable solution is to end the "step up" and make them taxable at death.

Rich investors also benefit from the exclusion of investment income from Social Security's flat 12.4 per cent assessment on income up to \$184,500. This is the main reason why a teenager entering the workforce will pay a higher percentage of their income in federal taxes than some billionaires. This spectacularly regressive tax is anachronistic because it is based on the original design of Social Security as a wage-insurance programme. But Social Security has evolved into a social safety programme. With the Congressional Budget Office projecting that the main trust fund of Social Security will approach insolvency in 7 years, wealthy investors must start paying their share.

Populist outrage over increasing wealth inequality has prompted many Democrats to propose surcharges on the super-rich. But the issue is tax fairness between wage earners and investors, and it shouldn't be partisan. Indeed in 1986, Congress eliminated capital gains rate preferences under Republican President Ronald Reagan and my former boss, Senate majority leader Robert Dole.

Revenue raised from eliminating these preferences could be used to reduce budget shortfalls, reduce rates, or some combination. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget estimates that dropping preferential rates for investment income and taxing unrealised gains at death would raise \$1tn over 10 years.

With an ageing population and AI shrinking the base of wage-earners, young workers – if they can find jobs – will carry a disproportionate tax load throughout their lives unless we shift more of the burden to investors. Tech billionaires are fond of saying that government benefits such as universal basic income are the answer to AI-driven job displacement. But are they willing to help pay for it?

The writer is a former chair of the US Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and author of the upcoming book 'How Not to Lose a Million Dollars'

## Letters

## FTSE boss pay packets will have to be justified

It's all very well saying the boards of London-listed companies are feeling more comfortable about handing their chief executives mega pay packets (Report, March 26), but let's not get carried away just yet.

We may well be seeing the start of a more relaxed investor attitude to large pay rises as FTSE executives look to what they could earn across the pond in America.

But acceptance by shareholders, employees and wider society in the UK

is certainly not a given. Just because there's not yet been a "ripple of discontent" does not mean that there is no dissent to come. There is still plenty of time for the popular handwagon opposed to "fat cat" pay to gain renewed momentum as the season of annual general meetings beckons.

Yes, there is greater acceptance that UK companies must remain competitive on pay and able to attract the best talent, including from the US. But London-listed boards will need to

clearly justify any decision to super-size executive pay with a coherent rationale to avoid a repeat of last year when shareholder revolts (votes of 20 per cent or more) against pay deals among FTSE 100 companies doubled.

The army of proxy advisers who hold sway over how a large number of influential institutional investors vote will be watching closely.

**Bernadette Young**  
Director, Indigo Independent Governance,  
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, UK

## German trains ran on time, but that was 40 years ago

What a difference 40 years can make! After reading Olaf Storbeck's well-aimed diatribe regarding Germany's train delays ("Fed up with train delays, Germans are betting on how late they'll be", Outlook, March 26), I was reminded of a polar-opposite experience I had, when planning a train trip to Bayreuth from Italy's Val Pusteria, Alto Adige in August 1986 to attend the Bayreuth Festival.

The journey, transiting three countries, required four trains with three transfers, Fortezza (Franzense), Munich and Nuremberg, Deutsche Bahn's agent, guiding me through the various connections on the telephone, was not terribly concerned with the very tight six-minute transfer time in Munich to locate and board the Nuremberg train. She said she was so sure that the InterCity train would arrive in Munich on schedule that there would be sufficient time for me to have a coffee before boarding the onward train. After begging her, she begrudgingly provided me with the time of the next train to Nuremberg.



That was then, in the "world of yesterday". Today we are using cell phones to place bets on DB's self-inflicted performance failures, so far only for amusement but eventually, to engage with the thriving prediction markets platforms, for profit!

**Ira Sohn**  
New York, NY, US

## What picking on Cuba tells us about America

Whatever the defects of Cuba's government ("The other Trump foreign adventure", FT View, March 24), for 60 years the sufferings of the Cubans have mainly resulted from US blockades of various intensities, culminating in Donald Trump's current oil blockade. What does it tell us about a mighty nation such as the US, and a president such as Trump, that they seek glory by ruling nations they dislike, having not a care about the lives and livelihoods destroyed?

**Peter Cave**  
London W1, UK

## Business jargon's Doppler effect

The statements in the delightful article "No BS: using business jargon is really giving you away" (Opinion, March 28) by Emma Jacobs all exhibit what is known as the Doppler effect, defined as the tendency of stupid ideas to seem smarter when they come at you at high speed.

**Jem Eskenazi**  
London N3, UK

## BBC: reasons to be cheerful

I found your reporting of the challenges facing the new director-general of the BBC strangely eye-oreish (Report, March 25).

The BBC has been "embattled" for a long time but it has a greater opportunity for reinvention and reinvigoration than at any time I can remember – for three reasons. The Starmor government and Lisa Nandy, the culture secretary, seem set on entrenching the BBC's future existence and stability, while also immunising the corporation from the political interference that has dogged it in recent years. That contrasts sharply with years of governments seemingly set on co-opting it, diminishing it if not outright destroying it.

Beyond this, the BBC's core competence rests in arguably the most valuable commodity currently available – the capacity to ensure people trust it. While social media, AI and many other media companies have largely abandoned the field of truthfulness and trustworthiness, the BBC has ever greater opportunity to occupy that space.

And finally, it is one of the most recognised global brands with a still substantial global footprint and audience. Matt Brittin seems a good choice as director-general to chart a new and ambitious course that blends the BBC's traditional broadcast role with an AI and social media presence that places trust at the heart of public conversation here and internationally.

**James Deane**  
London SE12, UK

## Correction

● The Belvedere vodka brand is produced by LVMH, not Pernod Ricard as wrongly stated in an article on March 28.

## OUTLOOK CHICAGO

## A new Obama museum hopes to revitalise the city's South Side



by Patti Waldmeir

Michelle Obama grew up on the South Side of Chicago and Barack Obama cut his political teeth there. Now, the former president and first lady are trying to do their bit for the largely economically depressed and crime-burdened area so close to their hearts by opening the 19.5-acre, \$850mn Obama Presidential Center.

After years of delays, the centre will open on June 1st, the public holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the US. It is part presidential museum, complete with a full-scale Oval office replica; part athletic and community centre with an NBA-sized basketball court; and part incubator for civic activism.

Located in historic Jackson Park, which was designed by renowned 19th-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the Obama campus will be Chicago's newest tourist attraction. The Obama Foundation, which paid for and manages the centre, estimates it will attract 600,000 visitors a year, its spokesperson Emily Bittner tells me.

Many hope this will mark a watershed for the local economy. "A new business changes a neighbourhood's horizon, telling local entrepreneurs and families that this is a place to thrive," says Jared Evans, who manages the Chase community centre nearby. Bittner predicts a 10-year economic impact of \$3.1bn on local Cook County businesses.

For the Obamas, "it was really

important to... put a marker on reversing decades of disinvestment in the community that raised her [Michelle] and helped him [Barack] to discover his purpose", Bittner says. "We are making a major bet on the South Side and [its] people."

But with only weeks to go until opening, the challenge of revitalising the area is plain to see. Some 41.3 per cent of households in Woodlawn, where the centre is located, earn less than \$25,000 a year, per capita income is just over half that of Chicago overall; the unemployment rate of 15.6 per cent is nearly twice that of Chicago overall; and more than a third of households have no vehicle available to them.

Stony Island Avenue, a commercial thoroughfare, boasts only fast food outlets to feed tourists. And when I visited last week, local radio reported two stabbings on the nearest subway. A recent Chicago Tribune investigation found assaults on public transport passengers were up to five times higher in Chicago than in other big US cities. Widespread perceptions of Chicago, and particularly the South Side, as unsafe could hurt tourism, local residents fear. But they note the Obama centre is close to the popular Griffin Museum of Science and Industry and the relatively affluent University of Chicago campus.

While real estate sources say properties are being snapped up for renovation to high-end residences, activists worry that gentrification will push out longtime residents who can

no longer afford to live there. The Chicago city council has recently passed measures aimed at protecting low-income residents.

Bittner admits the Obamas can't solve the area's problems alone: "I don't think any one entity can erase decades of disinvestment." Steven Duriauf, an expert on poverty, inequality and economic growth at the University of Chicago, tells me that "the remedies for breaking the perfect storm of disadvantage [in the area] require something more than 'trickle down' benefits from the Obama centre."

But he concedes that "it will have some marginal effect". Alyssa Sylvester, barista at a nearby high-end coffee shop, thinks "anything that showcases the neighbourhood is good for us". For my money, South Side headlines on Chicago's newest museum are preferable to those obsessing over crime and poverty.

The Obamas' vote of confidence in the South Side is engraved into the granite face of the 225-foot, museum tower. The inscription at the top of the tower is from the former president's speech marking the 50th anniversary of the Selma civil rights marches. "You are America. Unconstrained by habit and convention. Unnumbered by what is, ready to seize what ought to be... The single most powerful word in our democracy is the word 'We'. 'We The People'. 'We Shall Overcome'. 'Yes We Can.'"

The writer is a contributing columnist

# Opinion

## Why do politicians want AI to go faster?



**TECHNOLOGY**  
Sarah O'Connor

Looking at what's possible, it does feel surprisingly slow," Sam Altman said recently on the topic of AI adoption rates. It is no surprise to see technology leaders bemoan the pace of AI diffusion — they have something to sell, after all. But why do so many political leaders echo their impatience for greater speed? I do understand the underlying rationale. If AI can boost productivity growth — and I think it might well do in a number of sectors — then the sooner you can spread it, the sooner you can reap the benefits for growth. For the UK government in particular, which is trying to get into life a moribund economy, the appeal is understandable.

But bullish rhetoric about "unleashing" AI is badly out of touch with the

sensibilities of many voters in the developed world. A poll in the US last month found that just 6 per cent of registered voters thought the use of AI was moving too slowly, while 50 per cent thought it was moving at the right pace, and 60 per cent felt it was moving too quickly.

Leaders like Donald Trump often talk about an AI "race", but I suspect that many people either don't know what the finish line is supposed to be, or have only heard it articulated by technology executives, whose predictions of the future don't exactly sound like a place that most normal people would want to accelerate towards. Anthropic's Dario Amodei foresees "unusually painful" labour market disruption at a pace that is "hard for people to adapt to", while Altman recently said: "We see a future where intelligence is a utility like electricity or water and people buy it from us on a meter."

Of late, politicians have moderated their tone somewhat. Trump has told AI companies they need "PR help" while UK chancellor Rachel Reeves acknowledged people's concerns in a recent speech. "There will be bumps in the

road as we navigate these changes," she admitted, while saying she wanted Britain to "achieve the fastest rate of AI adoption" in the G7. But the attempt to combine both messages doesn't work well. Most people know that bumps in the road ahead aren't usually a cue to press the accelerator.

If the politics are tricky, the economic case for hurrying this transition along

**Bullish rhetoric about 'unleashing' it is badly out of touch with the sensibilities of voters**

isn't completely clear-cut either. We know from history that people and economies are remarkably good at adapting to technological change over the long run. In 1920, more than 14 per cent of people worked in agriculture and mining in the UK, for example. By 2016, that share had fallen to almost 1 per cent. In many professions and sectors that have declined gradually over time,

older people have retired and younger people have not joined.

But economic change can be painful if it outpaces people's ability to adapt. MIT professor David Autor's work on the "China shock" highlighted the impact of Chinese competition on US textile mill workers, many of whom were geographically concentrated and struggled to get out of harm's way fast enough.

A new paper by Argentine economist Eduardo Levy Yeyati argues that two economies can arrive at the same technological frontier, and yet experience different transitions. "In one, firms adopt AI at a pace the labour market can absorb," he writes. "In the other, adoption outruns reallocation capacity. The long-run destination may be identical; the permanent social damage is not."

The public is aware, too, that general purpose technologies always lead to social and cultural as well as economic change. Indeed, when Anthropic recently interviewed 80,000 users of its Claude chatbot across 159 countries, many of the concerns people raised were outside the economic realm: autonomy and agency; cognitive atro-

phy; misinformation; privacy; wellbeing and dependency.

The economic historian Karl Polanyi once argued that "it should need no elaboration that a process of undirected change, the pace of which is deemed too fast, should be slowed down, if possible, so as to safeguard the welfare of the community".

This does not have to be an argument against change — even rapid change. The key phrases, for me, are "undirected" and "deemed too fast". Whether a process feels "too fast" depends on the psychological and practical capacity of society to cope with the pace. As I have argued before, that capacity can be improved via better safety nets and proactive skills policies that enable people to pre-empt and drive change, rather than merely react to it.

But at the moment, I think many people feel they are in a speeding car without either a seatbelt or their hands on the wheel. In those circumstances, nobody should be surprised if they vote to hit the brakes.

sarah.oconnor@ft.com

## Crypto has no place in UK political donations

Oliver Bullough

The UK government's decision last week to block cryptocurrency donations in politics is the right one. The restrictions that defend democracy from foreign interference were built in an analogue age. Regulators cannot currently confirm the origin or ownership of digital assets, making crypto donations an obvious vehicle for corruption.

Political crypto funding may not be widespread in the UK yet, but its threat to democracy is not theoretical. Moldovan officials have detailed a Russian assault on the country's electoral process via crypto, and Romanian intelligence reports claim that the involvement of cryptocurrencies helped to undermine democracy so thoroughly that a whole election had to be cancelled. The UK government is wise to get ahead of this potential problem.

But it could do more. Its intention, in the Representation of the People Bill, is merely to impose a moratorium on cryptocurrency donations "until the Electoral Commission and this Parliament are satisfied that there is sufficient regulation in place".

A more categorical ban would be better, not just because it would be harder to undo but because of the message it would send. The immediate effect would be the same but the boldness of a total ban would be a welcome example of a liberal democracy standing up for its principles.

The image in popular culture of cryptocurrency is still rooted in the early days of bitcoin, which was pro-

**A total ban would be a welcome example of a democracy standing up for its principles**

posed in 2008, when digital assets were anarchic, decentralised and revolutionary. Digital money on the blockchain was a strike back against a financial system that had partitioned hard and then left taxpayers with the bill.

But that was nearly two decades ago. The modern reality of crypto could not be more different. Bitcoin is used for speculation and ownership is dominated by corporations and billionaires, with trading infrastructure every bit as centralised as traditional finance.

The real action, however, lies in stablecoins: cryptocurrencies with value pegged to a real-life asset but traded via the blockchain, and thus outside the anti-money laundering checks of banks.

The largest non-dollar stablecoin — the rouble-denominated ATAS — was launched by a fugitive Moldovan oligarch and a Russian defence sector bank, and is designed to facilitate cross-border payments in spite of western sanctions on Russia. The Centre for Information Resilience claims that it is linked to Moscow's attempts to use cryptocurrencies to fund foreign political influence campaigns.

There is nothing to stop other geopolitical adversaries of the west from doing the same. And there are thousands of exchanges, many of them far outside the reach of western regulators. This means cryptocurrencies can be exchanged for cash, leaving their ownership hidden and their presence unknown.

It is hard to imagine Britain's overstretched law enforcement agencies and regulators ever becoming potent enough to police political donations coming from this diverse, ever-shifting ecosystem.

A sovereign democracy has to be able to set its own rules, and there is nothing more foundational for its health than how it is funded. Except for in the special circumstances of Northern Ireland, non-British companies cannot fund UK politicians because they are not answerable to British laws. The same logic applies to cryptocurrencies. Allowing their use in political funding would not — as Nigel Farage claimed — extend democracy, but reduce it.

Financial innovation can be good. Perhaps cryptocurrencies will find use cases beyond fraud, money laundering and speculation. But privatised money will always be ultimately controlled by its owners. We should never want our political system to be answerable to anyone but us.

The writer is a journalist and author of 'Everybody Loves Our Dollars'

## Iran could emerge more dangerous



**WORLD AFFAIRS**  
Gideon Rachman

Donald Trump has a perverse genius for driving American adversaries to discover new forms of leverage over the US. His trade war with China persuaded Beijing to exploit its domination of rare earths and critical minerals, forcing the US to reduce its tariffs.

In a similar fashion, Iran has now finally carried through on a longstanding threat and in effect closed the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran, like Beijing, will have been delighted to discover how quickly it can inflict economic pain on the west.

Iran's exploitation of its control over the strait means that the Islamic republic can now aspire to do far more than merely survive the US-Israeli assault. It has a real prospect of emerging from the war in a strengthened international position.

There is no doubt that Iran has suffered some savage blows. The country's leader and many of his most senior advisers were killed on the first day of the conflict. Its ships, missile launchers and command centres have been struck repeatedly. The Iranian economy is in deep trouble and inflation is rampant.

But Iran is not merely fighting on. It has demonstrated that it can inflict real damage on its Gulf neighbours, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE — placing big question marks over their long-term futures. Crucially, the Strait of Hormuz also provides the Islamic republic with a significant potential future revenue stream that could prove extremely valuable.

Iran has charged a reported \$2m each to allow ships safe passage through the strait. In normal times, about 140 ships a day make the journey. So a crude calculation suggests that, if Iran succeeds in setting up a toll booth on the strait, it could add billions of dollars a month to the state coffers.

Marc Rubio warned last week of the danger that Iran will seek to charge ships passing through the strait. The US secretary of state said that this would be illegal and unacceptable. He is right on both counts. The question is: what can the US do about it?

The discouraging answer is that there may be no military solution to this problem, short of regime change in Tehran. The US is currently dispatching ground troops to the region. But the seizure of Kharg Island, which Trump has floated in a recent interview with the FT, would not necessarily solve the strait problem.

In fact, western military planners are very pessimistic about the chances of reopening the strait by military means alone. The geography of the area and the technology available to Iran — including drones that can be operated many miles



from the shoreline — mean that even naval escorts cannot guarantee the safety of commercial traffic.

That leaves a negotiated agreement with Iran as the most realistic option. But Iran is likely to demand a very high price. The Iranian regime has its eye on potentially game-changing future revenues — as well as a means of dispensing favours or punishments to countries all over the world.

Trump, the self-styled master negotiator, is floundering. He recently admitted that he finds the Iranian negotiating style very "strange". The previous week the US president had suggested that "me and the ayatollah" might jointly manage the strait — which some have interpreted as a bid to split potential tolls with Tehran.

**The regime has its eye on game-changing revenues — and a means of dispensing favours or punishments**

But the Iranians seem uninterested.

Iran's neighbours are horrified at the idea of Tehran emerging from the war with practical control over Gulf energy exports as well as a new stream of income. There is much speculation that the UAE and Saudi Arabia could join the conflict rather than accept that outcome. But those countries are also well aware that Iranian strikes on their oil installations or desalination plants could wreak long-term havoc on their economies and societies. They may ultimately decide that paying protection money to Iran is a better option than escalation.

Asian nations — which are the main markets for Gulf energy exports and are not in Iran's line of fire — may also consider paying up. US allies, such as Japan and the EU, will know that paying off Iran would provoke American wrath. But European relations with the Trump administration are already so bad — and the president so erratic — that the Europeans might risk it, rather than accepting permanently higher energy prices or going

back to buying Russian oil and gas.

Of course, there are still many "known unknowns", to quote Donald Rumsfeld, an architect of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The intervention of US land forces would be a dramatic escalation. It is possible that the social and economic pressures within Iran will eventually cause the regime to implode. But, so far, it looks remarkably resilient.

Some of those who detest Trump, Israel or Saudi Arabia will enjoy the sight of the Islamic republic turning the tables on its enemies. But that is very short-sighted. The Iranian regime has sponsored violent Islamist groups across the Middle East and massacred its own people in the streets — as well as providing vital support for Russia in its war on Ukraine. If it emerges from this war embittered and emboldened, that will be bad news for global security, with the world economy — and the Iranian people themselves. Unfortunately, that currently looks like a plausible outcome.

gideon.rachman@ft.com

## A blueprint for Chinese global leadership



**GEOPLITICS**  
Adam Tooze

Why did America launch a war against Iran? How should China respond? What is your assessment of the 15th five-year plan?

Anyone who was willing to answer questions for the swarming press pack at the recent China Development Forum in Beijing faced these three questions, again and again. Their juxtaposition, as well as the relative difficulty in answering them, is a marker of the state of the world in the spring of 2026.

The answer to the first question is an embarrassing void. One can make educated guesses, but in the court of the mad king, Donald Trump, there is no real knowing. Trump himself cannot give a cogent explanation. Congress and

the media, who are supposed to hold the executive branch to account, have failed completely. The mechanisms that are supposed to produce a sense of common purpose in democracies are out of action. The very real indignation of a large part of the US public is not channelled into a movement to stop the war.

To the third question, the answer, at least as portrayed at meetings like the forum, is obvious. One need only look to the eager speeches of the American and European corporate leaders there. They took turns reciting the buzzwords of the plan — sci-tech, win-win, sustainability, resilience. As these sorts of documents go, the 15th five-year plan is a sensible continuation of its predecessors. Under Communist party leadership, China is the last true bastion of technocratic "growthmanship" in the world economy. Corporates who are willing to face the heat of Chinese competition love it.

But what about question number two? What should China do? This is the strategic question.

It is a truism of the moment that China is the last adult in the room. If Beijing chose to play the part, global

leadership would be there for the taking. If you were drafting a five-point plan for Chinese hegemony at a think-tank in Beijing, it might look like this.

Start by offering to backstop multilateral efforts to give short-term balance of payments support to countries facing financing issues. With its huge trade surplus, Beijing has dollars aplenty. China could then make a gesture of sharing its privileged status in the Strait

**It is a truism of the moment that Beijing is the last adult in the room**

of Hormuz. It is not by accident that tankers are rumoured to have been rebadging themselves as Chinese.

Beijing could also offer to contribute some fraction of its huge petroleum reserve to a global oil stability pool. It might offer to do this in co-operation with big suppliers like the Saudis, Malaysians and the Brazilians.

At the same time, Beijing should band together with a coalition of the willing to launch a comprehensive global green investment push, boosting demand for its green industries. Europe would find this hard to resist. But everyone, even the Saudis and the Emiratis, are interested in China's clean electrotech. The sharp distinction between petrostates and electrostates exists mainly in the minds of fossil-fuel ideologists, not for those interested in cheap, clean power.

Finally, and most ambitiously, China could declare that in the interests of global stability there must be immediate ceasefire negotiations in both Ukraine and the Gulf. Until those talks begin, it is no longer in China's interest to export critical supplies to combatants in either region. This would exert pressure on Moscow and Washington. Without Chinese rare earths, the US and Israel cannot continue their missile war for long.

Of course, any such proposal will be dismissed as naïve. First and foremost because a move to assert hegemonic leadership will produce a reaction. The Marshall Plan was a key moment in the escalation of the cold war. The

extension of the EU and Nato into eastern Europe triggered resentment on the Russian side. If China were to use the threat of export bans to bring either the US or Russia to the table, it would be a power move that defined a new era of global politics. There are hawks in Washington who would welcome the chance to raise the stakes.

Beijing has adopted a defensive stance, prioritising its own supplies. In a world as messy as ours, playing the role of adult is hard. It is far easier for Beijing to bide its time and to wait out the crisis, allowing the US to destroy its own credibility and Russia to become more and more dependent. Meanwhile, at events like the CDF, the participants, including representatives of the US, pontificate about "global geopolitical risks" as though they were natural disasters rather than the result of decisions made by the US and Israel.

But the choice lies with Beijing. The script for Chinese leadership is more or less writing itself.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and writes the Chartbook newsletter