

The Editorial Page

TUESDAY, MAY 12, 2026

● **WEB EXCLUSIVE**
 'Why the CDS appointment procedure demands scrutiny.'
 — By C Uday Bhaskar
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● **WORDLY WISE**
 Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.
 — T S Eliot

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

PM frames severity of energy challenge

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's appeal to the people, to cut back on the consumption of petroleum products and conserve foreign exchange, underlines the severity of the energy supply shock for the Indian economy. India is now far removed from its recent Goldilocks phase, buffeted by high energy prices and continuing disruptions in supplies, the exit of foreign portfolio investors and a falling currency. PM Modi's plea, asking people to use public transport and electric vehicles, avoid purchasing gold, and postpone travel abroad, is directed towards curbing the demand for energy, gold and forex. To put this in perspective — in 2025-26, India's imports of petroleum, crude and products stood at \$173 billion and gold imports were at \$71.9 billion, while the rupee is now around 95.2 against the dollar. Alongside, the invocation of Covid-era measures such as work from home and virtual meetings — to prevent the spread of the virus then, to reduce fuel consumption now — underscores the gravity of the situation.

The Iran war has disrupted energy supplies the world over. Countries have responded by raising energy prices and a combination of measures designed to limit demand. For instance, Asian economies like South Korea, Indonesia and Bangladesh have imposed fuel restrictions in order to curtail domestic consumption. In the US, gas prices are inching upwards, touching \$4.52 a gallon, up from \$3.135 a year ago. In Europe, the average price (Eurosuper 95) is reported to have increased from €1.64 to €1.83 per litre between February 23 and April 20, with a marked variation across countries. Fuel prices have also been raised in countries like the UAE.

Over the last few months, the Indian government has taken steps to shield consumers. For instance, it prioritised gas supply to domestic consumers, while cutting back supply to commercial and industrial users. It raised export levies on diesel and aviation fuel to ensure supplies in the domestic market. Indian refiners have also raised their LPG production — in March, LPG production was up 30.8 per cent as per S&P Global. However, till now retail prices of petrol and diesel have remained unchanged, with oil companies and the government absorbing the shock. But there are limits to their ability to soak up the losses — the under-recoveries of Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petrol are estimated to be Rs 30,000 crore per month on petrol, diesel and cooking oil. The process of internal price adjustments must begin. Prices at the pump should reflect the global reality.

CM Vijay begins well, hard part comes now

THE VICTORY of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) marks one of the most dramatic electoral breakthroughs in recent history, riding on a powerful anti-incumbency wave and an appeal that cut across sections of the youth and the politically disillusioned. The message from the electorate was unmistakable: Tamil Nadu wants change. Delivering on the promise of a departure from the same-old will also be Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay's biggest challenge. The euphoria that surrounded his swearing-in ceremony — with the crowds and the emotional fervour — has set the stage. By visiting his rivals in victory's aftermath, the new CM has made a heartening beginning.

His second challenge comes from his inexperience, his own, as well as the two-year-old TVK's. Stardom and charisma can carry a leader to office, but running a state will require more. One of CM Vijay's first acts has been to announce a White Paper to show how the DMK government damaged the state economy, leaving it with "a debt of Rs 10 lakh crore". Yet, TN is home to one of India's strongest-performing economies, posting double-digit growth on the back of a conducive business environment for both labour and capital. For the new administration, the task will be to sustain this momentum, even as the state enters the "ageing category", with over 15 per cent of its population over the age of 60.

The new CM's third challenge will be managing the coalition he now heads: Falling 10 seats short of the majority mark, the TVK relies on support from Congress, CPI(M), CPI, VCK and IUML. Vijay's assurance that he will be the sole centre of power in the government will be tested, even as the TVK leadership demonstrates that it possesses both ideological clarity and the ability to carry allies along. The question of ideology is especially important. Vijay has repeatedly attacked the traditional Dravidian parties while invoking Periyar as his guiding light. He has spoken of inaugurating a "new era of real, secular social justice", signalling continuity with the state's long social justice tradition while simultaneously recasting its politics in a more aspirational mould. His ability to strike the right balance will shape the identity of his government. For now, Tamil Nadu has chosen hope and novelty over the familiar. The aspirations that propelled Vijay to power must now be met with governance, delivery and stability.

The selfie is the political message

THE POINT of the social-media age, marketers told the world at its inception two decades ago, was to give voice to the voiceless, a platform to those who couldn't get past the traditional gatekeepers of TV, radio and the humble newspaper. The smartphone, its camera and the internet were going to usher in a new wave of creative endeavours. As it turns out, the smartphone mostly takes selfies. Take the newly minted Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, C. Joseph Vijay. The matinee idol-turned-politician's spectacular victory ensured that every media outlet in the country was broadcasting his oath-taking ceremony. Yet, in the sea of cameras, Vijay brought his own, taking a series of selfies with party leaders, allies like Rahul Gandhi, and the massive crowd.

Long before Marshall McLuhan became the most-quoted by-too-clever-by-half MBAs and PR types in PowerPoint presentations, politicians have been made and unmade by the fact that, all too often, the "medium is the message". In a democracy, a politician must be of the people, as well as rule over them, both everyman and larger-than-life. Hence the curated candid photos of world leaders at official events, the guffaws at each other's jokes for a tweet or a reel. And the public often consumes an image of a politician capturing an image.

The selfie, in this context, becomes not just an image but also a way to control the message. After all, the frame leaves out as much as it admits in. The one who wields the camera determines what the public can see. And then there is the simpler explanation: Perhaps politicians just want a photo where they can tag their friends on an Instagram story.

Government, oil companies can't absorb energy shock indefinitely

FOR DECADES, the global energy economy has functioned on the tacit assumption that the Strait of Hormuz would always remain open. That assumption has been fundamentally shaken this year.

The disruption has been without precedent. The 1973 Arab oil embargo endured for five months but never resulted in the closure of the strait. During the tanker war phase of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq conflict, shipping traffic was constrained, though not completely interrupted. Likewise, the 2019 drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq facility caused only a temporary disruption before supplies stabilised. In all these earlier episodes, the shock to global energy markets lasted only a short time. The present crisis, however, has extended well beyond two months and increasingly appears to be a disruption with no immediate resolution.

For India, the exposure has been severe, with a significant share of crude oil imports and LPG and LNG volumes transiting through the strait. Within eight days of the disruption, the government issued the LPG Control Order. Refineries were directed to maximise LPG yields to meet domestic demand, despite such production being uneconomical under normal circumstances. LPG production was increased from 36,000 MT to 54,000 MT per day. On the demand side, priority was accorded to protecting supplies for domestic consumers. Similarly, in the natural gas sector, domestic PNG and transportation CNG were prioritised. Export duties were imposed to protect supplies to the domestic market.

Over the past two months, global crude

oil prices have risen by 80-100 per cent, topping \$120 at times, with product prices also increasing sharply. Yet on petrol and diesel sold through retail outlets, these increases have not, so far, been passed on to domestic consumers. Instead, the exchequer has absorbed the burden through reductions in duties and through oil marketing companies (OMCs) bearing losses. The depreciation in the rupee-dollar exchange rate has only aggravated the challenge.

The crisis could have been far more crippling had India not significantly expanded its energy infrastructure over the past decade. LPG import terminals have increased from 11 to 22, LPG pipeline infrastructure from 2,311 km to 6,242 km, strategic crude reserves from zero to 5.33 MMT, and refining capacity from 215 MMT to 258 MMT. Ethanol blending, too, has risen from 1.53 per cent to 20 per cent, reportedly saving the exchequer more than Rs 1.5 lakh crore. In addition, the refineries are operating above 100 per cent capacity utilisation to meet the increased demand.

The surge in energy prices has affected consumers worldwide. Most European and East Asian economies have increased retail fuel prices by 25-35 per cent. Several countries in India's neighbourhood have resorted to fuel rationing, reduced work weeks, austerity measures, or have faced severe shortages. In contrast, Indian consumers have, by and large, been shielded from steep price increases, while supplies have been largely uninterrupted and free from major restrictions.



B ASHOK

If the conflict persists, difficult decisions may become unavoidable, with every stakeholder required to bear a part of the burden until the crisis passes: The GoI, state governments, and consumers

This protection for consumers has been real, but it has not come without a cost. The obvious question is whether such a model is sustainable. The answer is clearly no. Neither the government nor the oil companies can indefinitely absorb such financial stress.

Fifteen major oil and gas companies together contribute approximately Rs 7,40,765 crore to the government by way of taxes, duties, and other levies. Of this, Rs 3,25,504 crore accrues to state governments, largely through VAT on petrol, diesel and ATF. Based on excise duty reductions alone, the government is estimated to lose nearly Rs 460 crore per day — translating to almost Rs 1,68,000 crore annually.

There is also a widespread perception that oil companies make windfall profits whenever crude prices decline, while retail fuel prices remain unchanged. However, data published by PPAC shows that the three major OMCs together earned a post-tax profit of Rs 33,602 crore on revenues of Rs 18,20,477 crore in 2024-25 — a return of only 1.85 per cent, when the Indian basket of crude averaged \$78.6 per barrel. By comparison, returns during 2022-23 (average crude price of \$93.2 per barrel) and 2023-24 (\$82.6 per barrel) were 0.06 per cent and 4.4 per cent respectively, the latter being an exceptional year. Even in 2019-20, prior to the pandemic, when crude averaged \$60.5 per barrel, returns stood at just 0.56 per cent.

The capital expenditure of the three OMCs stood at Rs 72,000 crore in 2024-25, compared to Rs 68,350 crore and Rs 63,491 crore in the preceding two years. The indus-

try operates on the principle of creating and enhancing supply infrastructure ahead of demand. This approach has largely ensured the uninterrupted availability of petroleum products even during periods of severe disruption, including times of natural calamities. LPG supplies during Covid are a recent example. The trend has to continue if the energy needs of a growing economy are to be met in the years ahead. These investments also extend to emerging energy options in the ongoing energy transition, besides planned expansion of storage capacities in view of evolving geopolitical realities.

Between March 16 and April 30, the total loss suffered due to prices being maintained is estimated at around Rs 62,000 crore. Of this, the GoI has suffered a loss of around Rs 30,000 crore due to excise duty reduction and the OMCs have borne the rest.

Given the strategic importance of this sector, the companies must continue to function efficiently and generate adequate resources. The sector cannot afford to bleed indefinitely or with companies ending up with weak balance sheets. If the conflict persists, difficult decisions may become unavoidable, with every stakeholder required to bear a part of the burden until the crisis passes: The GoI through duty reductions, state governments through rationalisation of VAT on fuels, and consumers through higher prices at the pump.

It is undoubtedly a difficult proposition, but perhaps the only viable path to endure a prolonged crisis.

The writer is former chairman, Indian Oil Corporation Ltd

When women enter the legislature, the agenda changes



SHWETA BANSAL

THE NARI Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, and the legislative moves now associated with it, ask India: Who gets to sit in the rooms where the country makes its most consequential decisions?

The proposal is simple: Reserve one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women. This is a structural intervention in a political order that has treated male dominance as natural. Women form nearly half the population, yet they have hovered around 14 per cent in the Lok Sabha, with even weaker representation in many states. They largely remain outside the institutions that decide on labour, violence, health, land, welfare, and economic policy.

The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026 has not passed muster in Parliament. But the Prime Minister's renewed push has reopened a central question: Should India continue to wait for perfect conditions before correcting a deep democratic imbalance?

The answer is a firm no. Concerns around delimitation and federal balance deserve attention. Any redrawing of seats can sharpen anxieties between regions. These risks should be managed, not used as excuses for indefinite delay. A country of 1.4 billion people cannot keep treating women's political exclusion as a technical inconvenience. Delimitation may carry costs, but so does postponement. India has already paid the price for generations.

The pandemic exposed how unevenly crisis falls on women. Women lost jobs disproportionately, absorbed more unpaid care work, and faced rising violence behind closed doors. Climate stress, agrarian distress, education gaps, public health, nutrition, migration, and informal labour all demand perspectives that male-dominated legislatures have too often ignored.

India already has experience with women's reservation in panchayats, where one-third, and in many states nearly half, of the seats have been reserved for women since the 1990s. Women sarpanchs have often prioritised water, sanitation, schools, nutrition, roads, and local accountability. Their presence has not solved every problem. Proxy politics, caste hierarchies,

and patriarchal control persist. But it shows that when women enter institutions in meaningful numbers, the agenda changes.

International experiences show both the promise and the limits of quotas. Rwanda, after the 1994 genocide, used constitutional quotas to increase women's representation dramatically. Women legislators helped advance laws on gender-based violence and land rights. Yet questions remained about party control, elite networks, and whether all women, especially the most marginalised, gained meaningful power. Many Nordic countries used voluntary party measures to drive up women's representation. Their parliaments have shaped policies on parental leave, work-life balance, and equity. Still, even these countries have not escaped sexist political cultures, harassment, informal exclusion, etc. New Zealand and Germany tell a similar story. Representation did not dilute merit. It expanded the understanding of merit. But numbers alone did not dissolve imbalances.

India should learn from these. Quotas must come with stronger inner-party democracy, fairer candidate selection, campaign finance reform, and pathways for women from marginalised communities.

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam's 15-year sunset clause also invites review. This is appropriate. Any major democratic reform should be judged by what it achieves, who it includes, and how it changes political practice. A critical mass of women can change the culture of Parliament, the priorities of parties, and the expectations of voters. Their voices may not be heard clearly at first. There may be familial, party, and institutional constraints. But over time, it can shift the boundaries of the possible.

India should debate delimitation, federal balance, sub-quotas, rotation, and implementation. But it should also recognise that women have waited for decades. It's time they entered legislatures as co-authors of the republic. A Parliament that looks more like India will make democracy more honest.

The writer is an IFS officer. Views are personal

Most important AI lesson must be taught at home



SUTIRTH DEY

ON APRIL 1, the Union Education Minister launched the new CBSE curriculum on computational thinking and artificial intelligence for students of Classes III to VIII. The rollout is among the most ambitious school AI programmes anywhere in the world. There is no plan, however, for how those children will use AI. Consider the chatbot on a child's phone at nine in the evening, sitting beside a half-finished assignment. No syllabus reaches that.

A recent study by the Salaam Bombay Foundation and NMIMS surveyed 1,050 Class IX students across 20 Mumbai municipal schools. More than 70 per cent reported using ChatGPT, mostly for maths problems, translations, and homework. The study also found early signs of cognitive offloading: Letting a tool do our mental tasks. We all do this; the worry is when a child does it before learning how to think. In a 2025 study, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School tracked nearly 1,000 Turkish high-school maths students who were given AI tools during practice. They found that those given unrestricted AI access scored 48 per cent better than peers who studied without it. But when AI was withdrawn, those who had used it did 17 per cent worse than peers who had never used it.

The case against AI in education is narrower than these numbers suggest. A college student of mine struggles with English. He uses AI to re-explain the class notes in the language he thinks in. The same tool that hollows out one student's learning can open another's. Which way it goes depends on the student's judgement. No policy can teach that. Whether a child reaches for the chatbot to understand or to outsource depends on what the school demands and what the household rewards. The former is outside a parent's control. The latter is not. If the expectation at home is highest-marks-in-every-subject, an overloaded child will likely search for shortcuts. Schools that reward high marks share the blame. But parents have a larger stake in how their children turn out, and must move first. What does that mean in practice?

Take the child into confidence. The cost of letting the chatbot do their thinking is real, and most children can absorb this if an adult explains it. They would love to think for themselves; they outsource because, in the moment, the alternative is harder. Then recalibrate. When your child reports a mark, ask how they got it. If the work was their own, praise it and let the mark be whatever it is. If the work was the chatbot's, say so, and withhold praise. None of this works without your own AI literacy. The point is not catching the chatbot in your child's homework but knowing these tools well enough to ask sharp questions about their process.

The new curriculum will teach Indian children how AI works. Knowing when to set the chatbot aside is a lesson the school cannot give. That lesson is given at home, in a hundred small conversations about what learning is, and what is beneficial in the long run. The parent who asks the child, after every assignment, to explain the work back, or try it once with the screen closed, is giving them something AI cannot: The slow muscle of working things out, and the joy of arriving there themselves.

The writer is chair, AI committee, and professor of Biology, IISER Pune. Views are personal

40 YEARS AGO

May 12, 1986



Akali groups clash near Temple

THE POLICE fired tear gas shells to disperse supporters of the two Akali Dal factions when they clashed outside the Golden Temple complex. Curfew was imposed around the complex following the incident. In other developments in Punjab, curfew was imposed in Tarn Taran and terrorist violence left three people dead, report agencies.

Repoll for 32 Bangladesh seats

THE PRO-government Jatiya Party of Bangladesh needed 19 of the 36 seats yet to be announced to win an absolute majority in the country's 300-member parliament. The Jatiya Party had won 132 of the 264 results unof-

ficially declared so far, while the Awami League-led opposition alliance was way behind with 90 seats. The League had bagged 70 seats. Meanwhile, opposition parties have demanded re-elections, objecting to the holding of fresh polls in some constituencies.

BJP on national unity

THE THREE-DAY plenary session of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) concluded with the party pledging itself to work for and to protect national integrity under all circumstances. In a detailed resolution on national integration, the BJP gave a call for raising politics to a moral pedestal without caring for petty personal, group or regional gains. The party committed itself to subordinating all

petty loyalties and considerations of caste, creed and region to the overriding ideal of India's unity and the social cohesion of its people.

Sri Lanka seeks arms from West

SRI LANKA will be partitioned unless the Government receives Western aid to fight Tamil guerrillas, President Junius Jayawardene was quoted as telling a London newspaper. "The outside world must help now, because this is now an international problem," he told the Sunday Times. "Ours is a democratic country, and it is being destroyed by these people. Another few years of this and we will have bled to death, or we will be partitioned like Cyprus," the president said.



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• ECONOMICS

Why saving forex could hamper India's growth



UDIT MISRA

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi has urged Indians to save foreign exchange (forex) by any means necessary.

In a recent speech, he called on Indians to stop buying gold for a year. Gold imports are a huge source of forex demand.

He also urged people to work from home to reduce consumption of imported crude oil: another big drain on forex.

Modi asked people to cut down on use of edible oil in their food, saying this will not just reduce imports but also improve health. He appealed to farmers to halve the use of chemical fertilisers, suggesting a shift to natural farming. He also underscored the need for buying "made in India" products instead of imported ones for everyday use. He also called on other organisations — from courts to labour unions to media — to help work towards this goal.

Link between forex and Modi's demand

This call comes in the wake of the war in Iran, and the associated supply and price shocks of goods like fuel and fertiliser.

When Indians buy imported goods — be it gold or a toothbrush or fertiliser or edible oil — India ends up exhausting its pile of forex held with the Reserve Bank of India. That's because imports involve Indians using their rupees to buy dollars and then using those dollars to buy imported goods.

Usually, foreigners worldwide also buy Indian goods: they use dollars to buy rupees, adding to Indian forex reserves.

But the situation can go off-balance if India's imports far outstrip exports: here, India will keep spending dollars without getting as many in return.

If this sustains, it has two effects: one, India runs down its forex pile, and two, the rupee's exchange rate weakens against the dollar (or any other currency India uses to trade).

Another way through which forex comes in and out of India is foreign investments. While foreigners invest in India by either creating new businesses (foreign direct investment) or buying shares in listed Indian companies (foreign portfolio investment), Indians similarly invest abroad.

Since the economic reforms in 1991, Indians generally import more than they export — this is called running a "current account deficit" (CAD). Whereas foreigners invest in India more than Indians invest outside India — called a "capital account surplus" (CAS).

Typically, CAS is bigger than CAD, implying more dollars are coming in than going out and India adds to its forex reserves. This is technically called a "Balance of Payment (BoP) surplus".

BoP and rupee's exchange rate

As long as BoP is in surplus, RBI can either let the rupee's exchange rate strengthen or it can simply accumulate forex reserves. Often, RBI accumulates forex reserves for various reasons, one of them being that letting the rupee strengthen may not help Indian exports. Moreover, healthy reserves help in times of crisis.

When BoP goes into a deficit, either the rupee weakens or forex reserves fall — the latter happens if RBI defends the rupee's exchange rate by selling dollars in the market. Roughly since mid-2024, India's BoP surplus has taken a hit. While CAD hasn't worsened, CAS has shrunk — often, it has become a deficit itself.

Chart 1 shows that India's current BoP situation appears as weak as it was in 2013, when Morgan Stanley designated India as one of the "fragile five" economies.

Thus, both ill-effects of a BoP deficit are happening. One, the rupee is weakening against the dollar (Chart 2) and second, RBI has been drawing down its forex reserves to defend the rupee's exchange rate (Chart 3).

The more the rupee weakens — thanks to India's heavy dependence on crude oil imports — the more the imports become costlier.

Will Modi's mantra help?

India can deal with the forex situation in two ways: one, either reduce demand for dollars by cutting domestic consumption, or two, boosting India's ability to earn more forex by improving domestic production. Modi's suggestions are focused on cutting consumption while none focus on boosting production.

This has several implications. If all Indians were to suddenly stop using gold in all ceremonies and substitute it with fresh flowers plucked from the nearby garden, and if all Indians stopped stepping out from home for any reason (or just cycled),

PM Modi's solutions focus on cutting back consumption, but it will slow down India's growth. What is required is boosting India's production and productivity

the capital account. After all, why would foreign investors return to an economy they are already shunning, if that economy chooses to further roll back consumption?

Arguably, there can be another medium-term scenario: that consumption doesn't get reduced but gets diverted to Indian firms, and Indian businesses invest because Indians only prefer "swadeshi" goods. This would turn around the Indian economy by redirecting all demand towards Indian businesses.

By itself, the idea of becoming self-reliant sounds intuitively appealing. While it is an understandable goal, not every country can become self-reliant in everything.

For instance, while India is now self-reliant in food production, this depends on imported fertilisers. Even if India intends to make all its fertilisers at home, it is still reliant on imported feedstock (fuels such as natural gas or naphtha, etc.) that account for over 80% of the total domestic production cost of fertilisers. So, if India cannot be self-reliant in fertilisers, it can't really consider itself to be self-reliant in food production.

Similarly, India cannot replace imported crude oil with any domestic alternatives in a hurry; moreover, any shift will cause the economy to slow down. So, crashing India's overall imports doesn't necessarily make the economy stronger; if anything, a forced reduction will slow down the economy.

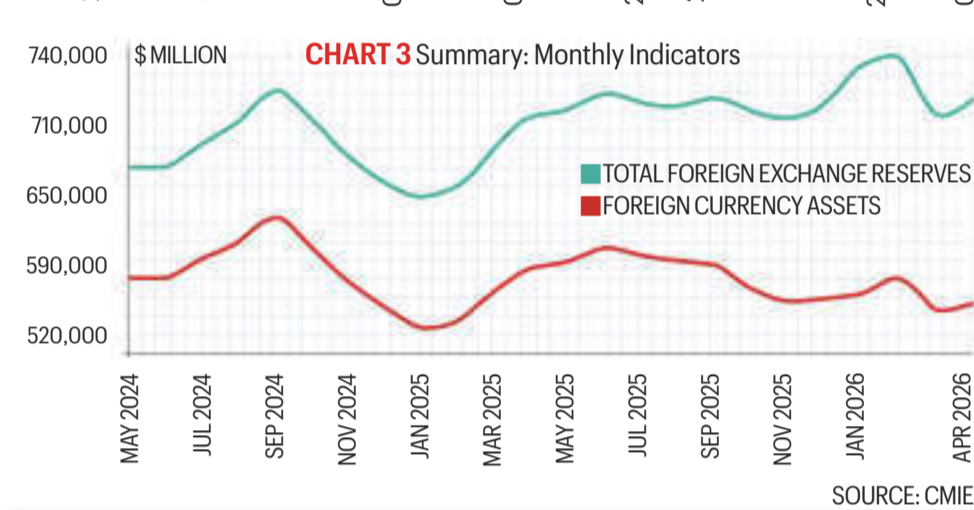
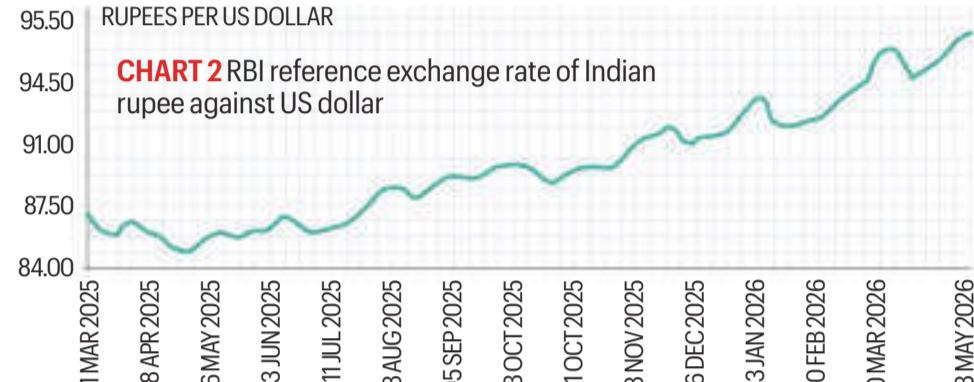
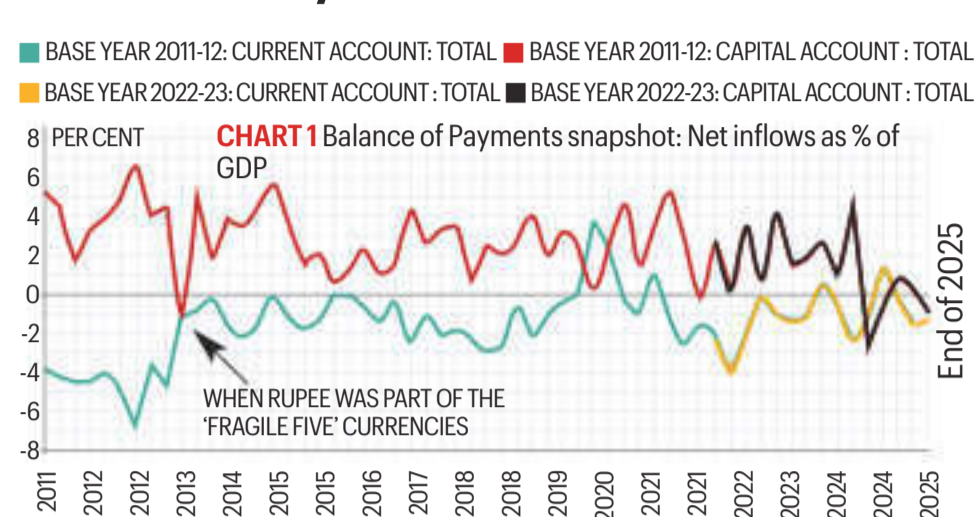
Further, that too much use of chemical fertilisers is hurting India's soil is incorrect: actually, it is an imbalanced use. The sole reason for this is the domestic subsidy regime that over-subsidises urea, nudging farmers to overuse it. Reducing use of chemical fertilisers and shifting to natural farming can only help to some extent.

Dealing with the forex issue

Cutting consumption in such a stark manner cannot be a sustainable solution. India needs to boost both its domestic production and productivity. Only when India becomes more efficient as a producer — regardless of what machines we import — will it be able to grow its share in the global exports market.

Similarly, only when India reforms its ease of doing business will it attract fresh investments either from within the country or from outside. Higher levels of exports and/or improved attractiveness in terms of starting and running a business is the actual recipe for dealing with the forex issue in a sustainable manner.

• Balance of Payment



Boosting forex

RBI accumulates forex reserves for various reasons, one being that letting the rupee strengthen may not help Indian exports.

Healthy reserves help in times of crisis.

then India's imports will fall since imports of gold and crude oil are majorly why imports exceed exports. This will reduce demand for dollars by reducing or even eliminating CAD.

But this will likely come at the cost of overall economic growth because all businesses using these commodities will likely suffer lower sales, not to mention inefficiency due to cutbacks.

Weaker consumption will drag down growth in the immediate time period of the current year. Further, weak consumption levels are why businesses have not increased their investments into the Indian economy despite the government's best efforts. So, a strict adherence of Modi's call could further disincentivise businesses.

Moreover, while consumption cuts help the current account, it may further worsen

• POLITICS

Before Vijay: Recalling India's first hung Assembly, also in Madras

Jatin Anand
New Delhi, May 11

C. JOSEPH Vijay took oath as the Chief Minister on Sunday after high political drama in Tamil Nadu, despite his Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam emerging as the largest party.

A similar crisis played out nearly 75 years ago in the same region. The 1952 Assembly election in the erstwhile Madras state — comprising present-day Tamil Nadu and parts of Kerala, Karnataka, and undivided Andhra Pradesh — threw up India's very first fractured verdict.

Madras's 1951 election

The election to the 375-seat Madras Assembly was held in January, with no party securing an outright majority. The Congress won 152 seats. The Communist Party of India (CPI) came second, followed by the J B Kripalani-founded Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party. There were 63 independent members.

Historian Rajmohan Gandhi, in *Rajaji: A Life*, attributed the Congress's lacklustre performance to many factors — a foodgrain crisis, the appeal of the Communists, and

strong support for a former Congress leader in the Telugu-speaking region.

This leader was T Prakasam, the ex-premier (equivalent to CM) of the Madras presidency. Gandhi wrote: "Though he had lost his own seat, Prakasam claimed the support, not proved, of a front of 166 MLAs..."

This left the Madras Governor, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji of Bhavnagar, in a quandary. On one side was Prakasam's claim. On the other was the Congress, and its leader K Kamaraj's assertion that "only the Congress is going to rule". Krishnakumarsinhji referred the question to the President.

Meanwhile, Jawaharlal Nehru was clear in his preference for an elected government over President's Rule, and was keen that the party "avoid any appearance of hankering after office".

Consensus around Rajaji

Rajaji, or CR, was one of the most important figures of the freedom movement. In 1948, he became Governor-General, and independent India's first Indian head of state.

As the situation continued to fester, the Congress was internally forming a consen-

History repeats

Vijay, taking the support of smaller parties to keep the DMK and the AIADMK out of power, bears striking similarity with the events of 1952.

Rajaji took the support of several independents and other parties to keep the Communist-led opposition from power.

sus on nudging the leader. The thinking was that the prestige he commanded would ensure support for his government.

Rajaji's elevation was also backed by the new Governor of Madras state, Sri Prakasa. According to Rajmohan Gandhi, he wrote to President Rajendra Prasad: "After endless parleys, everybody came to one and only one solution — that the only person who could save the situation was Rajaji."

Later in March, Madras Congress leader Kumaraswami Raja conveyed to him the state legislature party's resolution backing Rajaji. Nehru accepted that decision, but hesitated about effectively parachuting in a non-elected person to the chief minister's post. However, Rajaji was also clear that he would not stand for election.

Following discussions among Governor Sri Prakasa, Kumaraswami Raja and Rajaji, a solution was found — Rajaji would be nominated to the Upper House of the state legislature. President Prasad was informed about this on April 1. Kumaraswami Raja, with the Governor's cooperation, moved swiftly to swear Rajaji in as Chief Minister, "before Nehru could come to know of CR's

inflexible condition."

Nehru was clearly unhappy with being blindsided, and expressed this in a letter to the Governor on April 3. But he also acknowledged: "At the same time, I could suggest no other and better alternative to all this and so I left it to our friends in Madras..."

Vijay, taking the support of smaller parties, bears striking similarity with the events of that time. Rajaji took the support of several independents and parties to keep the Communist-led opposition from power.

Nehru's displeasure

According to Nehru, President Prasad had termed Rajaji's nomination to the Legislative Council as "a wrong step, wrong not only in the spirit of the Constitution but also the letter of it".

Nehru's key concern, as expressed in a letter to Governor Sri Prakasa, was that it could set a bad precedent. Interestingly, other prolific political figures from what is now Tamil Nadu took a similar route to the CM's chair, including CM C N Annadurai and five-time CM and DMK patriarch M Karunanidhi.

• HISTORY

When the British 'brought back Somnath gates' from Afghanistan

Yashee
New Delhi, May 11

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi visited Gujarat on Monday to mark 75 years of the inauguration of the restored Somnath temple. He posted on social media, "...while the attackers have faded into the dust of history, the soul of Bharat endures. Somnath stands tall and eternal."

The Somnath temple

Located in Prabhas Patan, Veraval, Somnath is an important Hindu pilgrimage. According to the temple's website, it is "the holy place of the First Aadi Jyotirling Shree Somnath Mahadev and the sacred soil where Lord Shri Krishna took his last journey..."

By most historical accounts, the temple faced several attacks from raiders, with the most damaging by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1026 CE. This history of Somnath has often been used to divide Hindus and Muslims. The British attempted this as far back as 1842, when an official claimed to have "avenged the insult of Hindus" by bringing back the "sandalwood gates of Somnath" from Afghanistan. The gates later turned out to be neither of Somnath nor of sandalwood.

Lord Ellenborough's proclamation

In 1842, the British Army suffered losses in its Afghanistan expedition. A retaliatory strike was carried out, and it is during this time that the "gates of Somnath" carried away by Mahmud of Ghazni surfaced in a big way. The British brought back a pair of wooden gates from Ghazni, claiming they were the original gates of Somnath taken by the invader.

On November 16, 1842, British Governor General Lord Ellenborough issued a proclamation "to all the Princes and Chiefs, and people of India", which read: "Our victorious army bears the gates of the temple of Somnath in triumph from Afghanistan...That insult of eight hundred years is at last avenged." He added: "I have ever relied with confidence upon your attachment to the British Government. You see how worthy it proves itself of your love, when, regarding your honour as its own, it exerts the power of its arms to restore to you the gates of the temple of Somnath, so long the memorial of your subjection to the Afghans."

Upon examination, the gates were found to be made of deal, an inexpensive pinewood, and not of Indian design. The UK's National Army Museum says the gates "turned out to have been made in Ghazni".

• FACED FLAK
Ellenborough's actions were criticised in England.
In March 1843, a motion was moved in the House of Commons that the letter "to all the chiefs, princes, and people of India, respecting the restoration of the gates of a temple to Somnath, is unwise, indecorous, and reprehensible."

Controversy persisted
The theory of the gates persisted, and resurfaced in 1951 ahead of the restored temple's inauguration. In April 1951, Radio Pakistan (Peshawar), carried a broadcast that gates from Afghanistan were being carried to India for the ceremony.

On April 21, 1951, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to his Pakistani counterpart, Liaquat Ali Khan: "The story of the gates of Somnath temple being brought back to India from Afghanistan is completely false... nothing of the kind is being sent from Afghanistan to India. Nevertheless, the Pakistan Press has been full of this story."

Centre	हिंदी माध्यम	English Medium
Korla Bugh	17 मई शाम 6:00 बजे	13 May 8:00 AM
Noida	19 मई दोपहर 3:00 बजे	22 May 6:00 PM
Indore	20 मई शाम 5:30 बजे	18 May 8:00 AM
Lucknow	29 मई सुबह 8:00 बजे	25 May 8:00 AM
Prayagraj	14 मई सुबह 11:15 बजे	1 June 5:30 PM
Ranchi	एडमिशन आरंभ	Admissions Open
Patna	एडमिशन आरंभ	Admissions Open
Jaipur	26 मई शाम 5:00 बजे	4 June 11:00 AM

• CLIMATE

From Western Disturbances to El Niño: Brief guide to climate terms this summer

Anagha Jayakumar
New Delhi, May 11

INDIA IS headed into a summer of compounding extremes. Western Disturbances brought unseasonal rain to the north, El Niño threatens a weak monsoon and intensified heatwaves, and the humidity is already making temperatures feel worse than the thermometer reads.

Here is a simple guide to the terms dominating the weather conversation.

WESTERN DISTURBANCES: These are east-moving rain-bearing wind systems that originate beyond Afghanistan and Iran, and pick up moisture from bodies like the Mediterranean Sea. These are typically extra-tropical cyclones resulting from low-pressure areas, formed by interactions between polar and tropical winds.

Western Disturbances are embedded within the subtropical westerly jet stream, which is a high-altitude, fast-moving air current that flows from west to east. It is found over the Himalayan and Tibetan

highlands and is most common between December and March, influencing the weather over India as well.

EL NIÑO: The El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is a climate phenomenon marked by changes in sea temperatures along the eastern Pacific Ocean, coupled with fluctuations in the overlying atmosphere. It can interfere with the global atmospheric circulation, influencing the weather.

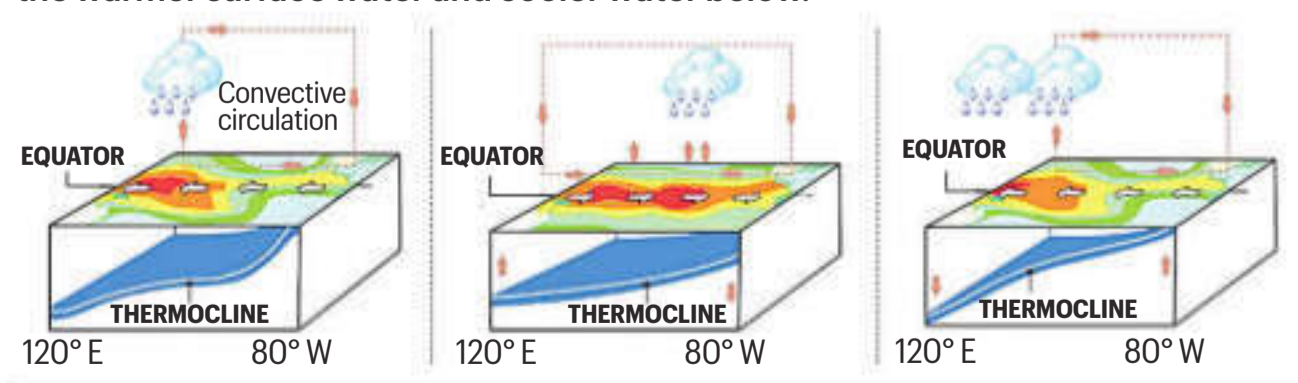
It has three phases: warm (El Niño, Spanish for "little boy"), cool (La Niña, Spanish for "little girl"), and neutral, occurring in irregular cycles of two to seven years (graphic shows neutral, El Niño and La Niña, respectively).

In the neutral phase, the eastern side of the Pacific Ocean (near the northwestern coast of South America) is cooler than the western side (near Indonesia). This is due to the prevailing wind systems that move from east to west, sweeping the warmer surface waters towards the Indonesian coast. The relatively cooler waters from below come up to replace the displaced water.

During El Niño, the surface waters of

• THREE PHASES OF EL NIÑO SOUTHERN OSCILLATION (ENSO)

The illustrations show the Pacific Ocean around the equator and trade winds. The heat map shows water temperature. Thermocline is the layer of water separating the warmer surface water and cooler water below.



this region of the Pacific get unusually warm, disrupting the flow of moist winds in India. The result is a weak or delayed monsoon for India, as well as dry spells in major agricultural states. There is also evidence that the frequency and severity of heat waves India experiences are linked with the phenomenon.

The opposite happens when La Niña is underway: cooling of the surface waters of the eastern Pacific. India thus gets stronger, moisture-bearing winds, and typically experiences a boost in its southwest monsoon, at times causing flooding and crop damage.

HEAT WAVE: A period of unusually high temperatures departing from the normal,

and varies regionally. It may be exacerbated by factors like humidity, wind speed and the duration of a heat wave event.

A heat wave may be considered if the maximum temperature of a station reaches 40°C in plains or 30°C in hilly areas. Once this threshold is reached, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) may declare a heat wave (i) based on departure from the usual temperature, if the temperature ranges 4.5°C to 6.4°C above normal, and (ii) based on the actual maximum temperature (more than 45°C).

IMD uses slightly different criteria for coastal stations to account for humidity. These criteria must be met in at least two stations within a meteorological subdivision and must persist for two consecutive days.

WET BULB TEMPERATURE: The temperature typically measured by a regular thermometer is Dry Bulb Temperature, but this does not account for moisture. Wet Bulb Temperature is the lowest temperature that can be realised by evaporating water into the air to measure how effectively hu-

midity allows for evaporative cooling. Simply, it tells you the maximum temperature your body can cool down to.

Why this distinction? Besides heat, humidity has a major role to play in the physiological stress that the human body experiences during extreme heat. With increasing humidity, the sweat that humans generate to dispel heat from their bodies does not evaporate, making it difficult for a person to regulate their body temperature.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that sustained exposure to wet bulb temperatures exceeding 35°C could prove fatal.

"FEELS LIKE" TEMPERATURE: It refers to apparent temperature, which accounts for wind and humidity conditions to determine what outdoor air temperature will feel like in relation to body temperature.

For instance, a 40°C day in Delhi will not feel like a 40°C day in Palakkad, Kerala. Delhi experiences dry blistering heat, while Palakkad sees sticky, sultry heat with high humidity, making it feel much hotter.



● **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
Trump's war has given China an economic opening.
— *Financial Times*

India has demonstrated strategic autonomy, but its record is not perfect



KANTI BAJPAI

SINCE THE Russian invasion of Ukraine, Indian officials and commentators have increasingly suggested that India is and should be guided by the concept of strategic autonomy. What exactly is strategic autonomy? How would we know it when we see it? And has it been good for India?

Former foreign secretary Shyam Saran, the originator of the term "strategic autonomy" in Indian discourse, defined it as "the capacity of a state to take relatively autonomous decisions on matters of vital interest". The words "vital" and "relatively" are important because "not all interests are of a vital nature, and in a multi-state landscape, one cannot ascribe absolute value to every interest". Put differently, trade-offs and concessions are inevitable in foreign policy, but not on vital interests.

How would we know what strategic autonomy actually means for India? As things stand, official pronouncements on it are largely non-falsifiable — almost any decision can be ascribed to strategic autonomy.

Outside of government, can we assess India's strategic autonomy? Where has India made crucial decisions in external and internal policy that run counter to the demands or expectations of China, the European Union (EU), Russia, and the US?

China has made three key demands on India, historically — abide by the One China policy (stop sheltering the Dalai Lama and Tibetans, no recognition of Taiwan); settle the border by conceding Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh; and reject a US-led containment structure in Asia.

India has largely refused to give in to Chinese demands. It has continued to shelter the Dalai Lama and Tibetans. While it does not recognise Taiwan diplo-

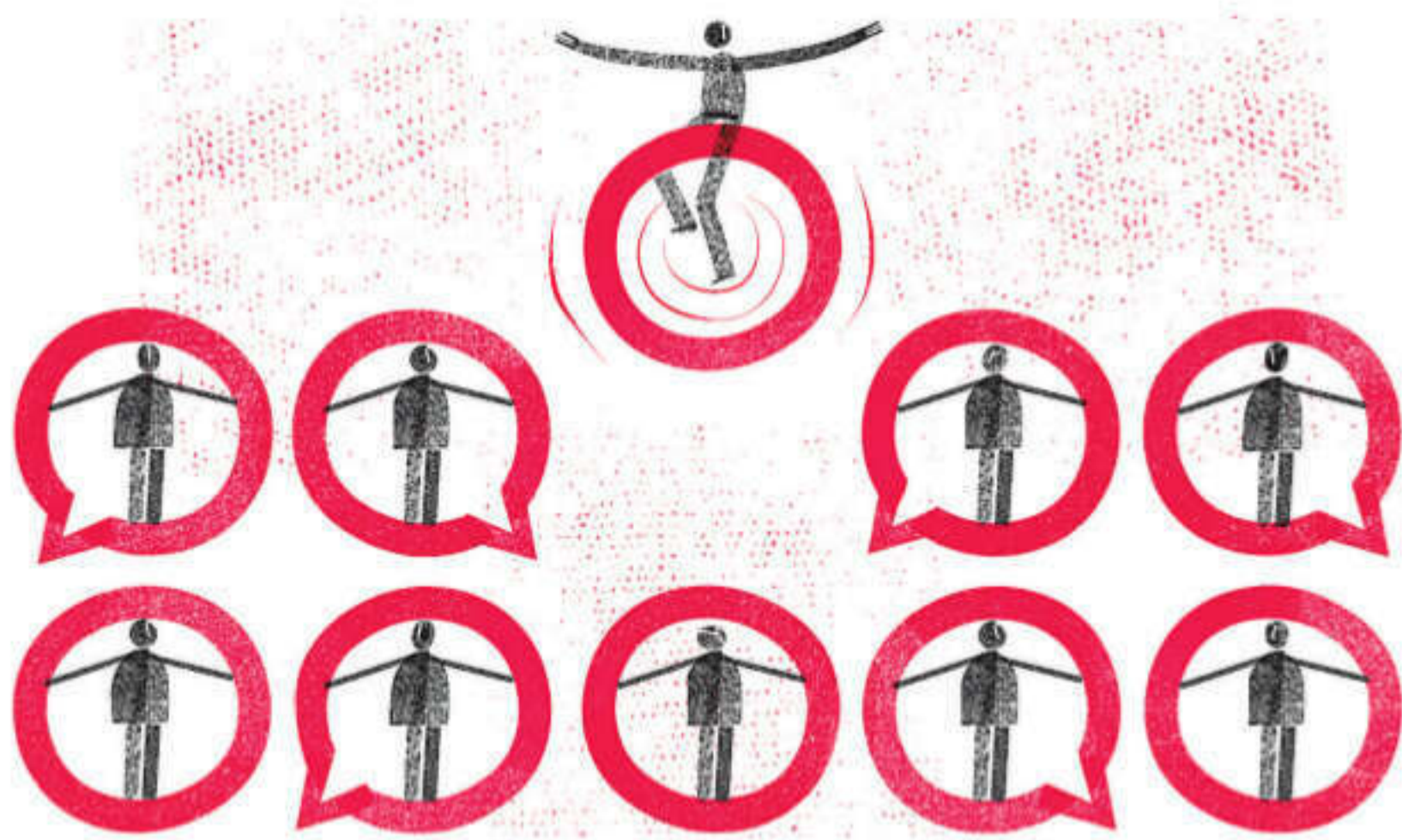


ILLUSTRATION: CR SASIKUMAR

matically, it has trade and other relations with the island. Despite Chinese blandishments and coercion, it has rejected any deal on the border that concedes Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. On containment, India's record is more mixed. While it has rejected any US-led containment of China, it has partnered the US, Japan, and Australia in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the Quad, both of which initiatives are a response to a rising, more assertive China.

The EU seemingly has had no very high-stakes demands on India except perhaps on trade and human rights, which India has resisted. More importantly, since 2022, it has badgered India on the war in Ukraine. It has repeatedly asked India to condemn Russia's invasion, mediate between Ukraine and Russia more actively, reduce its dependence on Russian oil, and honour international sanctions on Russia.

Here again, India has resisted. It has never condemned Russia for the February 2022 invasion. It

For some critics, being stiff-necked has resulted in rigid diplomacy and no big-power friends. Others maintain that while India has resisted the bigger powers, it no longer voices criticisms of them on behalf of others. It has thereby lost influence globally

has modestly mediated between Russia and Ukraine, but not because of EU pressures. It has continued to buy Russian oil, even if its purchases have been reduced in recent months. And some Indian businesses may be evading international sanctions against Russia — with or without the government's knowledge.

Russia's demands on India are not publicly known, but we can assume it has strongly urged India to reject Western demands on the Ukraine war, oil, and sanctions. Has Russia threatened to punish India in this regard, for instance by withholding arms sales? It is hard to say, but Russia probably needs the sales as much as India. Russian leverage is therefore limited. On oil purchases, a desire to diversify supplies and to take advantage of affordable prices over external pressures accounts for India continuing to buy Russian oil.

The US is the most stringent test case for Indian strategic autonomy. Over the past decade, the US has demanded that India

eliminate high tariffs on US goods and strengthen intellectual property rights, stop buying Russian oil and reduce arms purchases from Russia, commit to buying US energy, technology, and agriculture products, and prevent BRICS from anti-American actions such as "de-dollarisation". It has also asked India to curtail relations with Iran (oil purchases and cooperation, trade and investment, the development of Chabahar port and the Chabahar-Zahedan rail link).

Overall, in relation to the US, India has stuck to its guns. The exceptions are BRICS and Iran policy. India has opposed BRICS abandoning the dollar — though it is unclear if its opposition was under US pressure or for its own reasons. And on Iran, it has curtailed relations and, most recently, avoided condemning the US war and Israeli actions in Iran and Lebanon.

In sum, India has shown a willingness to defy bigger powers, though its record is not perfect. For some critics, being stiff-necked has resulted in rigid diplomacy and no big-power friends. Other critics maintain that while India has resisted the bigger powers, it no longer voices criticisms of them on behalf of others (as it used to do in the heyday of its internationalist diplomacy). It has thereby lost influence globally. Supporters of India's diplomacy argue that it wisely practises "multi-alignment", which means balanced relations with bigger powers and not giving offence to them except when its security and welfare are directly threatened. As a result, India is free to focus on its internal economic development.

Who is right? The answer depends on a rigorous assessment of whether India is strategically friendless and whether that matters, whether it has lost global influence and whether that matters, and whether multi-alignment plus stubborn resistance when it counts has indeed left India free to focus on the home front to the benefit of security and welfare.

The writer is visiting professor, International Relations, Ashoka University, and emeritus professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

A question for Israel: How much retribution before you say enough?



NAVDEEP SURI

ISRAEL, OF late, has been occupying a disproportionate amount of my mind space. It isn't just this illegal, pointless aggression on Iran that will be remembered as Benjamin Netanyahu's war and Donald Trump's folly. It is also the barely concealed ambition of a Greater Israel, involving the occupation of the Golan Heights in Syria, a chunk of southern Lebanon, over half of Gaza and the ever-spreading cancer of illegal settlements in the Occupied West Bank. There are days when my disappointment with Israel is deeply personal, tinged almost with a sense of betrayal.

Israel was the country that captured my imagination as a teenager growing up in Amritsar in the mid-1970s. The historical novel *Mila 18* by Leon Uris was probably the first one to leave a profound imprint, followed by *Exodus*. I was enchanted by the tales of heroism, along with the accompanying narrative about the establishment of the State of Israel against all odds in 1948. I was enamoured with the prodigious intellect of a small community that produced Einstein and Marx, Freud and Spinoza, Proust and Bohr, Kafka and Spielberg.

As a 16-year-old, I wrote to the Israeli consulate in Mumbai, and they responded promptly, sending me reams of material — books, pamphlets, slick brochures, elegant maps. About the great victories of 1948, the brilliant pre-emptive strikes in the Six-Day War of 1967, the Yom Kippur attack in 1973, and the case for "secure borders". I admired the idealism of the Zionists building a nation from their kibbutzim, an oasis of liberal democracy.

The infatuation lasted for over a year, but popped up again after seven years when I joined the foreign service in 1983. I chose Arabic over other language options and landed up in Cairo, disappointed that my first diplomatic passport had a stamp proclaiming "Not Valid for Israel and South Africa". I made it a point to visit Rafah and Taba in Sinai, Allenby Bridge in Jordan and Quneitra in Syria's Golan Heights, and saw the Star of David fluttering in the distance. Meanwhile, conversations with Egyptian and Syrian friends and with a range of Palestinians in Cairo and Damascus gave me the other side of the story. Access to Arabic-language media started to change my perspective, as did the still visible evidence of Israel's destructive and eventually disastrous invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Admiration of Israel's many strengths was now tinged with a concern over its growing belligerence.

But nothing prepared me for the revulsion with which I watched the unfolding genocide in Gaza. Of course, Israel had the right to respond to the brutal terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023. But how much retribution is to be extracted before you say enough? 72,000 dead Palestinians, over half of them women and children? How do you see the images from brave films like *Doctors Under Attack* and *The Voice of Hind Rajab*? How do you ignore the ongoing crimes of the IDF in Lebanon? And there is this unanswered question that haunts me. How could a people who have suffered so much pain and persecution over the centuries bring themselves to inflict the same on the hapless Palestinians and the Lebanese?

Others, too, are agonising over this. Omer Bartov, a Holocaust scholar who was raised in a kibbutz and served four years in the Israeli Defence Forces, poses similar questions in his recent book *Israel: What Went Wrong?* He outlines Zionism's shift from a movement for Jewish emancipation to an ideology that is increasingly based around ethno-nationalism, settler colonialism and the exclusion of Palestinians. The signs were always there, he says; we chose not to see them.

The International Court of Justice ruled in July 2024 that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories since 1967 is illegal; the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant for crimes against humanity in Gaza; Jewish historian Avi Shlaim's newest book *Genocide in Gaza* sets out the legal basis for holding Israel to account; Jewish survivors and descendants of survivors of the Holocaust have published an open letter condemning the massacres in Gaza. A reappraisal of Israel is also visible in European nations that have traditionally over-compensated for their guilt over the Holocaust. Starting with Ireland, Norway and Spain, most European states are hardening their stance on Israeli transgressions, and there is a growing chorus to suspend the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

The Europeans, the ICC and ICJ don't really matter. Israel's security, for at least the last five decades, has been underwritten by ironclad, bipartisan and virtually unconditional US support. But a slew of recent polls reveal the speed with which that consensus is unravelling. A Pew survey released in April 2026 showed that 60 per cent of US adults now hold an unfavourable view of Israel, including a staggering 80 per cent of Democrat voters.

Israel has its own moment of reckoning during elections later this year. Will it try to advance lasting security through peace with its neighbours and by addressing legitimate Palestinian aspirations? Is there a Yitzhak Rabin or Shimon Peres waiting to be discovered? I am not holding my breath.

The writer is a retired diplomat

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Adhikari's challenge

THE EDITORIAL rightly urges the new Suvendu Adhikari government to heal divisions, but it misses the deeper malady: For nearly 50 years, West Bengal has confused the party with the state ("Bengal CM's first task: Take everyone along", *IE*, May 11). The Bharatiya Janata Party government now inherits an economy drained of industry and a people who have learned to seek survival through loyalty rather than law. Welfare schemes, however well meant, will simply become new chains of dependency unless the bureaucracy is freed from political captivity.

Babu Crishna, Bengaluru

BENGAL'S CRISIS is no longer merely electoral, but cultural ("Bengal CM's first task: Take everyone along", *IE*, May 11). The editorial itself notes how the boundaries between party and state gradually blurred across governments, normalising intimidation and political violence over decades. The real challenge before the new leadership is whether it can dismantle this inherited political culture.

Havya Garg, Chandigarh

Pendency crisis

THE EDITORIAL rightly argues that increasing the Supreme Court's strength, by itself, cannot resolve the deeper crisis of pendency ("Judicial reform shouldn't stop at SC", *IE*, May 11). An equally important reform lies in reducing the everyday burden that compels citizens to approach courts in the first place. A significant share of litigation arises from routine administrative failures, delayed government decisions, unclear regulations and poor grievance-redress mechanisms. When citizens must move courts for pensions, land records, tax refunds or service matters, the justice system ends up compensating for deficiencies in governance. As the editorial notes, the state remains the country's largest litigant; judicial reform must therefore include administrative reform.

Ritika, Hyderabad



KAMALRAM SAJEEV

HAMLET DID not ask to be remembered. He asked to be understood — and knew, in his final breath, that the two are never the same. There is something of that sorrow in the twilight of Pinarayi Vijayan. A leader who built roads through mountains and broadband amidst poverty. Who governed with the cold precision of someone who had never once confused sentiment with strategy. He is, in the grand Shakespearean tradition, both architect and ruin — the strong hand that steadied the ship, and the fist that, gripped too long, forgot how to open. And like Horatio on that blood-soaked Danish stage, it falls to the rest of us to tell the story.

Vijayan's journey started in 1964, at the bottom of a ladder he would spend the next five decades climbing. By 1998, when the incumbent state secretary died, he was the only man the party could imagine stepping forward. He would hold the secretaryship for 17 years. While communist parties across India were collapsing, Kerala held. Vijayan overhauled the party's culture, purging factional rot, binding together a coalition that, by every political logic, should have long since splintered. His rivalry with VS Achuthanandan was the most visible crack in the edifice — yet the edifice stood. He was the proof, and Kerala was the argument: That the Left could still govern, still win, still matter.

He became chief minister in May 2016, carrying the same

Pinarayi changed Kerala, his virtues became his undoing

faith that had sustained him through five decades — not in promises, but in execution. Through KIIFB, highways merged into hillsides and coastlines. Through Aardram, hospitals stopped being places people went to die. LIFE raised 5 lakh roofs over the roofless. When floods and landslides tore into Kerala, the government did not scramble. Years of quiet institutional investment meant Nipah was strangled at its root, Covid turned Kerala into a global case study in statecraft, and floodwaters receded into the Rebuild Kerala Initiative. His 2021 victory was a verdict that said at the ballot box what he had spent decades arguing in committees: The Left, when it governs seriously, earns the right to govern again.

Power, held long enough, begins to leave its bruises on the hand that holds it. Vijayan's command instinct, so effective in an emergency, hardened into something less flexible and more personal. Voices within the CPI(M) itself noted his distance from the rank and file, his imperviousness to internal criticism, a departure from the party's culture of self-scrutiny. Corruption allegations involving his daughter Veena Vijayan and the Cochin Minerals and Rutile Limited controversy were never judicially proved, but his silence had its own costs. The 2024 controversy in which a fabricated quote hostile to Malappuram, a Muslim-

Vijayan's command instinct, so effective in an emergency, hardened. Voices within the CPI(M) noted his distance from the rank and file

majority district, was planted in a major newspaper through a PR agency with alleged BJP links, raised questions about political judgement.

By 2025, the Opposition's sweep through local body elections confirmed what many had sensed. Then came the assembly verdict — the LDF collapsing to 35 seats in a 140-seat House. Remarkably, the sharpest accusations flew not from the Opposition but from within the Left's own house, pointing toward Vijayan's high-handedness. Anti-incumbency may have set the wind blowing, but it was the force of a single, centralised, unaccountable authority that filled the sails.

Vijayan changed Kerala. He held a party together through national collapse, governed through catastrophe with rare competence, and made Kerala — for a decade — the most serious case the Indian Left had to offer. He is also the man around whom power gathered and hardened, whose late years dimmed what his early years had built, whose greatest virtues — discipline, control, single-mindedness — carried, as all great virtues do, the quiet seed of their own excess.

Pinarayi Vijayan is not asking to be remembered. He asks, through every road built and fibre cable laid, to be understood. Whether the story others now tell will honour that distinction — that, finally, is not his to decide.

The writer is chief editor, truecopythink.media



HIMANSHU JAISWAL AND SHIFALI GOYAL

INDIA'S ACHIEVEMENT of 20 per cent ethanol blending (E20) in petrol ahead of its original 2030 target marks a significant milestone in its energy transition, with E20 fuel being sold across the country from April 1. What began as a modest pilot in 2001, followed by the Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) programme in 2003 and further policy support measures, has evolved into one of the world's most ambitious biofuel initiatives, making India the third-largest ethanol producer after the US and Brazil.

Ethanol blending reduces carbon emissions and creates additional income

India is making ethanol leap, but there are trade-offs

streams for farmers and distillers. EBP was also expected to reduce India's dependence on imported crude oil. However, this has only been partially realised. During 2014-24, EBP resulted in crude oil substitution of about 193 lakh metric tonnes, yet despite achieving the 20 per cent blending rate last year, the crude import bill declined by only 3 per cent due to blending. At the same time, total crude imports continue to rise. Recent calls to push ethanol blending to 30 per cent or higher need a comprehensive evaluation.

A NITI Aayog report estimated the ethanol requirement for E20 at 1,016 crore litres. Achieving E30 by 2030 would require around 1,735 crore litres. A crude estimate for ethanol demand for E30 may range between 1,700 and 1,800 crore litres for petrol blending only. Higher blending through domestic production could provide India with a

stronger strategic lever against global shocks, but with several trade-offs.

The first is environmental. Ethanol production from sugarcane and rice is highly water-intensive. Intensified sugar production and diversion toward fuel have exacerbated groundwater depletion in already water-stressed regions, such as parts of UP, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. While maize offers a relatively less water-intensive alternative, scaling it up carries its own implications for land-use, cropping patterns, and diversion of produce away from existing uses.

The priority must be scaling second-generation (2G) ethanol, and addressing environmental and food concerns

Second is the question of food security. India has increased ethanol production from surplus food grains, including broken rice. A lower output of the same may pose risks of diversion, as occurred in 2023, restricting these feedstocks to distilleries. Uneven monsoon patterns, associated with a high probability of El Niño this year, could adversely affect output and intensify pressure on food availability. Third, moving to higher blends would necessitate not only new distillery investments but also expansion of existing facilities. Storage and transportation infrastructure for ethanol would need to be scaled up significantly. These capital-intensive adjustments require huge investments, careful planning, and policy coordination.

Fourth, the automotive ecosystem may not be fully prepared for higher blending. Since 2023, new vehicles sold in India have

been made E20-compliant. With the majority of vehicles running in India not being E20-compliant, moving to higher blends would require further engine modifications and higher adoption of flex-fuel vehicles.

India's next phase of biofuel expansion needs a more calibrated strategy. Shifting to less water-intensive feedstocks, prioritising plant-specific incentives in ethanol-deficient states, and importing ethanol may offer complementary pathways. The priority must be scaling second-generation (2G) ethanol, produced from agricultural residues and non-food biomass, and addressing environmental and food concerns. Else, higher ethanol blends risk substituting one set of vulnerabilities with another.

Jaiswal is consultant, CSEF, and Goyal is research associate, CSEF. Views are personal



Belated warning

Narendra Modi's suggestions to Indians imply a serious economic impact

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's seven-point call to action for the citizens of India lays bare the severity of the impact of the West Asia crisis. Further, apart from its implications, Mr. Modi's message is problematic for two other key reasons: its timing and content. A key part of his message was to urge people to work from home and reduce their fuel usage. A more effective approach might have been to lead by example. Yet, Mr. Modi's message comes days after he and his Cabinet colleagues flew all over the country and organised roadshows to campaign for the recent elections. Neither did any of his pre-election speeches mention these issues. His message also comes on the back of daily reassurances by his government's officials that there was nothing to worry. Clearly, there is. The Prime Minister's message also follows various Ministers' attempts to heap praise on him for not raising petrol and diesel prices. A decision not to further burden the common man is welcome, but the flip side is that it fails to impress upon them the need to curtail consumption. The government took that strategic call before the elections, and is now trying to dilute it. Perhaps a hike in fuel prices will follow soon. The Prime Minister's speech also coincided with a similar call to action for Indian corporates by the Confederation of Indian Industry. This kind of coordinated messaging points to a dire situation. Several of the Prime Minister's suggestions might also have other negative impacts that could be more serious than the problems they are trying to address. Some others might simply not be as effective as he hopes.

If farmers stop using chemical fertilizers, as he has urged, the immediate impact will be on crop output at a time when El Niño is already set to hurt it. High-frequency indicators are already revealing the economic damage of the West Asia crisis. This will only exacerbate the situation. The suggestion to stop foreign travel will conserve foreign exchange, but Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data up to February 2026 shows that Indians' foreign travel spending in 2025-26 was already down by 3%. March, the first month after the Iran war broke out, is likely to have seen an even sharper decline. The real pressure on the rupee and India's foreign exchange is because foreign institutional investors are pulling out while the RBI is using valuable dollars to shore up the falling currency. Urging Indians to buy local is another way of asking them to consume less, since purely domestic supply is not nearly enough to cater to the demand. Asking them to buy less gold is also likely to be futile. All this means that the economy is in for a hard time over the next few months — a warning the Prime Minister should have delivered much earlier, elections or no elections.

Ugly bout

The timing of the show-cause notice to Vinesh Phogat is suspect

Double World Championships bronze medalist Vinesh Phogat's comeback bid after a sabbatical following the Paris Olympics hit a roadblock when the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) found her ineligible as per a United World Wrestling (UWW) rule, which requires retired athletes to inform the world body six months prior to their intended return to competition. With an eye on the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, Phogat — a prominent face in the 2023 wrestlers' protest and one of the six women who brought allegations of sexual harassment and started a legal battle against former WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh — was aiming for a brave comeback in the Open Ranking tournament at the Nandini Nagar Mahavidyalaya; Brij Bhushan, also a Gonda strongman and former BJP Member of Parliament, owns it. The National Federation, which is headed by Brij Bhushan's close aide Sanjay Singh, also issued a show-cause notice to Phogat on three separate, prominent grounds. Firstly, that she did not adhere to the 50kg weight limit and was disqualified after reaching the final at the Paris Olympics. It resulted in her disqualification, a loss of medal and negative publicity. Second, as an athlete in the registered testing pool, who is required to give a time slot every day and be available for dope tests, she had multiple whereabouts failures, including on December 18, shortly after announcing her comeback. Third, Phogat violated a UWW rule by competing in two weight categories, 50kg and 53kg, at a selection trial in March 2024 for an Olympic qualifying event.

But the timing of the show-cause notice and the charges, which Phogat has rubbished, raises doubts about the intentions behind it. As for the Paris fiasco, it happened two years ago. Under World Anti-Doping Agency rules, three missed tests and/or filing failures within a 12-month period constitute an anti-doping rule violation. It is, however, not applicable in Phogat's case. Moreover, the UWW and National Anti-Doping Agency are the authorities concerned to deal with doping issues. The trials, in which Phogat participated in two weights, were held by an ad hoc body as the WFI was not recognised by the government at the time. As a parent body, the WFI should have shown maturity in handling Phogat's comeback. Instead, it clubbed together different matters spanning two years to thwart the 31-year-old's return. Phogat, who is a Congress legislator from Haryana, has shown her strong temperament and is working with her legal team to respond to the show-cause notice within 14 days. Meanwhile, the UWW should step in to stop the ugly bout between a decorated wrestler and the WFI. India can do without further embarrassment on this score.

Magna...what? Most contemporary readers and viewers of news would, on hearing or reading that phrase, ask. But not those interested in history, the rule of law, the rights of citizens, the supremacy of ethics over politics in the running of governments.

King Charles III of the United Kingdom in his speech on April 28, to the U.S. Congress in Washington DC used the phrase to thunderous applause. He is very much into the history of his country. He has to be, as a successor of King John (c.1167-1216) who unveiled, or was forced to unveil the Magna Carta. 'John who?' could well be the next question. So lacking in luck was King John that no monarch in England has been given that name ever since. There has been no King John II. But he is famous for having decreed and given, or made to decree and give, not just to his country and people, but to the world, the Magna Carta.

The over 800-year-old royal charter of rights sealed by King John at Runnymede, near Windsor, on June 15, 1215, owes its name to Latin, the language of Homer and Cicero, in which the phrase means Great Charter. Magna Carta has come to mean, for those interested in the evolution of the political rights of people, a metaphor for any text that inscribes such rights as inherent in people, rather than being concerted without checks in any individual or organ of state.

Singularly unpopular for his whimsies, King John had to make peace with a group of rebel barons who demanded that the King sign himself out of arbitrary power and, most important of all, proclaim that he was subservient to law or what, in today's legal parlance would be called 'due process'. In referring to the Magna Carta, King Charles III was drawing attention to the limits of his own or any sovereign, including, in today's world, elected 'sovereigns'. Small wonder that legislators in Washington DC greeted the reference with éclat.

Subtle language craftsmanship

Does King Charles write his own speeches? It is more than likely that for a state visit such as this to the U.S., the British monarch had his speeches drafted by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. This, not just because they were to come from Britain's reigning King but because they were to be made in the world's most powerful nation currently at war, a war seen by the world as one that has been started by the personal decision of U.S. President Donald Trump. And that is where Britain's subtle ways with the language of William Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde and George Orwell came in handy. As also its interiorisation of Latinisms and Latin concepts



Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Teacher, former administrator, diplomat and Governor

that have grown into English usage. The term Magna Carta was per se coined, according to Wikipedia, by 'scribes in the English Royal Chancery around 1215-1217'. Three clauses of the Magna Carta remain on Britain's statute, of which the following is most impressive: 'No Freeman shall be taken or imprisoned, or be disseised of his Freehold, or Liberties, or free Customs, or be outlawed, or exiled, or any other wise destroyed; nor will We not pass upon him, nor condemn him, but by lawful judgment of his Peers, or by the Law of the land. We will sell to no man, we will not deny or defer to any man either Justice or Right.'

The phrase has been used down the centuries as a metaphor.

As a barrister working for Indian South Africans' political rights in the late 19th century, Mohandas K. Gandhi cited Queen Victoria's extinguishing the overarching powers of the East India Company over the destiny of India in her Proclamation of 1858, as a Magna Carta. In 1948, Eleanor Roosevelt, while working on the UN Declaration of Human Rights as the committee's Chair, famously called the UN document the "international Magna Carta of all men everywhere". Winston Churchill referred to it as a "law which is above the King", and argued that the reaffirmation of a supreme law justified the respect it has held through time.

Contextual messaging

King Charles was not handing down to the U.S. Congress a tedious lesson in the history of the historical Magna Carta. But he did something that was altogether classy. Knowing full well that he was addressing a House comprising both Republican and Democratic legislators, he knew that when he said to that gathering, that the Magna Carta made the King subservient to the law, his listeners would transpose his remarks right onto what is happening in the U.S., to its state and government.

The King made more than one reference to the Magna Carta, and mentioned the fact that the parchment linked the political history of Great Britain and the U.S. inextricably, that a large number of judgments in the U.S. courts cited Magna Carta, making that tract a U.K.-U.S. bond. But it was when he said very simply and matter-of-factly, that the Magna Carta had made "executive power subject to checks and balances", that the House, after a moment of reflective absorption, rose in a thunderous standing ovation. All present, starting doubtless with Democrats, saw before them a direct successor to King John of Magna Carta fame, speaking of the Magna Carta's limiting arbitrariness in the monarch — a huge, self-limiting, self-denying, self-critical exposition

King Charles III has done well to reiterate that the Magna Carta's 'law above rulers' theme must resonate across the democratic world

A new phase in the India-Vietnam strategic partnership

The state visit of Vietnamese President Tô Lâm to India last week (May 5-7, 2026) marks a consequential moment in the steady deepening of India-Vietnam ties, reflecting both the maturation of a long-standing partnership amid the sharpening strategic imperatives of the Indo-Pacific. The decision to elevate bilateral relations to an Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, along with a wide range of agreements spanning defence, technology, finance, and energy, signals not merely incremental progress but a qualitative shift in the trajectory of the relationship.

The visit comes at a time of heightened geopolitical flux in the Indo-Pacific as Vietnam finds itself navigating an increasingly assertive China in the South China Sea, while India continues to consolidate its Act East policy into a more security-oriented Indo-Pacific strategy. The convergence of threat perceptions, particularly regarding maritime coercion, supply chain vulnerabilities, and strategic autonomy, has provided a durable foundation for bilateral engagement. Indeed, the evolution of India-Vietnam ties has been gradual but structurally consistent, with India's erstwhile Look East (now Act East) policy providing the initial impetus and the elevation to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 enabling institutionalised defence and security cooperation. Since then, regular high-level exchanges, defence dialogues, and capacity-building initiatives have deepened trust.

The pillar of defence cooperation

Defence cooperation, in particular, has emerged as the backbone of the partnership. In addition to symbolic actions such as the transfer of the missile corvette, *INS Kirpan* (in 2023), India has offered Vietnam finance lines, training assistance, and maritime cooperation structures. The



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Indo-Pacific dynamics are reshaping the India-Vietnam bilateral relationship

current debates around the possible shipment of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles demonstrate a change in the deterrence calculation in the South China Sea from capacity-building to capability enhancement.

Similarly, economic ties, while less prominent historically, are now acquiring greater salience. Bilateral trade has crossed \$16 billion, with an ambitious target of \$25 billion by 2030, underscoring the recognition of untapped potential. A move toward next-generation economic participation is shown in the focus on supply chain resilience, rare earth collaboration, and digital payment integration. Moreover, Vietnam's position as an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) manufacturing powerhouse makes it an essential partner for India's diversification plans, especially in terms of scaling back reliance on supply chains that are mostly focused on China.

The regional impact

This deepening partnership has important regional ramifications. First, the relationship between India and Vietnam forms an important component of multilateral balancing in the Indo-Pacific.

Together with Japan, Australia, and the United States, both nations contribute to a wider network of strategic alliances that fight to maintain a rules-based maritime order, even if they are not legally included in U.S.-led alliance structures. A common normative framework intended to combat unilateralism in the South China Sea is shown in the explicit focus of joint statements on the "rule of law, peace, and stability".

Second, the partnership underscores the growing centrality of ASEAN in India's Indo-Pacific vision. Vietnam, as one of ASEAN's more geopolitically assertive and strategically

of 'due process' of the rule of law as being above the person of the ruler, with the Magna Carta being above the King.

The importance of the 'Magna' code

The speech's salience in today's Washington aside, it should be seen as having been made to all Parliaments and legislatures across the world, affirming that all people of the world — whether in the west or east, north or south, geographically or metaphorically — live with the expectation that the laws governing them are made by their representatives, for a humane, just, and moral order. That they are implemented fairly, equitably, transparently. That those in charge of the process are not governed by whimsy, caprice or bias. And that they are subservient to such laws, not the other way around. And that waging wars, waging peace are part of that 'Magna' code.

The speech, having been made in the parliament of what is called, not unambitiously, the world's oldest (continuous constitutional) democracy, was not partisan. It was not taking sides between elected legislators of diverse opinion and the executive. Indeed, it could not have, in good protocol and better prudence. It said, without stating it explicitly, that the spirit of the Magna Carta holds that those seeking and receiving popular mandates to form an executive are also under the scrutiny of parallel and co-extensive checks and balances. What has been called the "brooding spirit of the law" casts an obligation on the legislature and judiciary to ensure that democracy is not trampled, as it was in India during the infamous Emergency of 1975-77, by the robotic power of a "brute parliamentary majority," or by subtler, more devious methods of manipulation and subversion that play on human emotions, sentiments, and suspicions, which can lead to ethnic tensions, presaging civil strife — a form of 'within country' war — such as every continent has known.

History has known heredity to give the world villains as kings, violence as creed. It has also known credulity to give the world duly elected counterparts of such kings, creeds. Today, when massively contested elections in India east and south (in terms of voting percentages) have brought about new governments in three, and reinstalled one, it is important, and indeed critical, for electors and the elected to note that over any formation of government, there exists a monitor of morality which obligates democratically and federally ethical conduct.

It is a curious felicity that a reigning king wearing a heritable crown should have spoken democratic home truths to a great Parliament citing a Latin code and receive a standing ovation.

There is hope for truth. Or, in Latin, *spes veritatis est*.

consequential members, serves as a linchpin for India's deeper engagement with Southeast Asia. At the same time, Hanoi's own foreign policy, characterised by diversification and strategic hedging, finds a natural complement in India's multipronged partnership approach.

Third, the expansion of cooperation into areas such as critical minerals and emerging technologies points to the evolving nature of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. Partnerships such as the India-Vietnam partnership will be crucial in shaping alternative economic architectures as global supply chains become more securitised. The agreements made during the visit point to an effort to move beyond conventional economic ties in favour of a more comprehensive framework for economic security.

Structural issues

Looking ahead, the trajectory of India-Vietnam ties will depend on the ability of both sides to translate strategic intent into operational outcomes. Implementation gaps, particularly in trade, connectivity, and defence industrial cooperation, remain despite the strong political and strategic alignment. For example, navigating scientific, financial, and geopolitical obstacles will be necessary to realise defence exports such as BrahMos. In a similar vein, resolving structural obstacles, including logistics, legal frameworks, and private sector involvement, will be necessary to meet the ambitious trade goals.

India-Vietnam relations are likely to become increasingly embedded within the evolving architecture of the Indo-Pacific. Partnerships that combine functional cooperation with strategic trust will become more important as great power competition heats up. Hence, Mr. Tô Lâm's visit is more about marking the beginning of bilateral ties as a mature, multifaceted partnership than about a single diplomatic milestone.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Austerity from top down

Austerity must begin at the top. With crude above \$105 and the Strait of Hormuz crisis threatening India's foreign exchange reserves, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for citizen restraint on fuel, gold and foreign travel is understandable. But moral authority requires symmetry. Asking ordinary Indians to cut travel and consumption rings hollow when the ruling establishment continues

lavish official travel and high-energy political events — and when the call came only after the Assembly elections concluded, with no mention of the crisis during the campaign itself.

Gopalaswamy J., Chennai

Role of the Governor

The role of the Governor in the Tamil Nadu election result needs a relook. In this instance, the Governor acted appropriately, and any contrary view would

foster unwarranted cynicism about the office. According to the Sarkaria Commission's recommendations, the largest coalition should first be invited to form the government — which was not the case here. Preference should then be given to the single largest party, which, in this case, was the TVK led by C. Joseph Vijay, comfortably ahead of both the DMK and the AIADMK. Therefore, when Mr. Vijay approached

the Governor, there was nothing improper in asking him to furnish proof of the numbers required to form the government, which he admittedly lacked.

In S.R. Bommai, the Supreme Court of India held that the floor of the House is the constitutionally ordained forum for testing a Ministry's majority.

Corrections & Clarifications

Governor Rajendra Arlekar asked the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam to furnish letters from the political parties offering the support of their MLAs-elect and did not "demand signed letters from 118 Members of the Legislative Assembly before he would administer the oath" (Editorial page, "The Governor who forgot his job", May 11).

The strapline of a report, "Manipur Naga bodies urge PM to rein in Kuki groups" (News page, May 11), read: "Civil society groups say recent attacks on Kuki villages... were used". It should have been Naga villages.

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However, this does not preclude the Governor from ascertaining whether the single largest party has the requisite support before inviting it to face the House. In the present case, the Governor strictly adhered to the principle that the single largest party must demonstrate that it commands the numbers.

N.G.R. Prasad, Chennai

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

A new start against noise pollution

For a few weeks now, the most insistent sound in Tamil Nadu has been the pea whistle, and that looks set to continue. Inside the Chepauk stadium, Chennai Super Kings supporters live up to the team's call to action – "whistle podu" (blow the whistle) – through all its Indian Premier League matches.

Outside the stadium, since the Assembly election results on May 4, supporters of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) have flooded the streets across the State to celebrate Joseph Vijay's victory by blowing the party's election symbol, which is also a pea whistle.

Anyone who watched the 2010 football World Cup will understand how irritating this noise can be. The vuvuzelas were so relentless that international viewers complained that the football commentary had become inaudible, prompting several broadcasters to add audio filters. When hundreds or thousands of people blow pea whistles, they render a comparably terrible annoyance. A single whistle blast creates 104-116 decibels of pressure at the source, according to research from Western Michigan University. The threshold beyond which sustained exposure to air pressure can damage hearing is 85 decibels.

Some of the cricket team's matches have been rousing and the TVK's victory is unprecedented. But the fact remains that noise pollution has become the most tolerated form of pollution in India.

While even air pollution has finally forayed into the policy vocabulary as a deleterious problem, data from the National Ambient Noise Monitoring Network (NANMN) show that more than 80% of recording stations breached the prescribed noise limits during both day and night in 2019 itself – while awareness of its ills remains low. In Chennai, all 10 stations exceeded the residential nighttime



Vasudevan Mukunth

The World Health Organization has attributed 16% of disabling hearing loss in adults to occupational noise

threshold of 45 decibels. A 2022 UN Environment Programme report cited a maximum reading from Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh to be the world's second-highest on its list (a ranking contested by government officials).

The actual problem is likely to be much worse as the NANMN has only 70 stations across seven metros, and the network has not been meaningfully expanded in 14 years. District towns in the Hindi belt and the Northeast generate ambient sounds whose profiles no official authority is measuring. Further, in towns with less healthy civic infrastructure and less responsive policing, loudspeaker permissions are unchecked and construction activity often runs through the night. Among the poor, the children often sleep with noise while their parents often spend several hours in conditions that, in any country with a functioning occupational health enforcement, would attract criminal liability.

Effects of excess noise

The World Health Organization has attributed 16% of disabling hearing loss in adults to occupational noise. India is estimated to have 6.3 crore people with some degree of impaired hearing. According to studies of noise-induced hearing loss in occupational settings, the prevalence of impaired hearing ranges from 13% in a Puducherry survey of 500 construction workers to a pooled estimate of 49% in a meta-analysis of industrial cohorts.

The European Environment Agency ranks noise as the second-largest environmental cause of disability-adjusted life years lost in Europe, behind only air pollution.

A WHO synthesis attributed around 16 lakh healthy life years lost annually in Western Europe to traffic noise alone. This is because loud sounds disrupt sleep, elevate cortisol levels in the blood, render endothelial dysfunction, and impair the cognition of children

near airports and arterial roads. India also has more densely packed cities, building acoustics that are less sensitive to the need to mitigate noise, and of course looser enforcement.

Rules against noise

If tolerance is not a feature of India's political discourse, it remains a fixture of how Indians react to pollution.

One reason is the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules 2000, which set zone-wise limits and silence zones but which are rarely enforced. The Central Pollution Control Board only recently proposed financial penalties for violations – that too because much of the worst noise is generated by occasions that politicians would prefer not to police.

The Rules already accommodate religious and cultural observances. State governments can permit nighttime loudspeaker use between 10 pm and midnight on festive occasions for up to 15 days a year. However, public events routinely exceed decibel limits within the permitted hours, with sound systems often plonked in residential lanes and sometimes even outside hospitals.

No major political party has been willing to ask its supporters to organise a festival or procession but observe the limits. Parties fear that any restraint will be read as an attack on the faithful. It need not be and the political imagination should be capable of saying so.

Mr. Vijay has presented TVK as a fresh start for Tamil Nadu, unencumbered by the compromises of the Dravidian parties. At least for now, he possesses the political capital to set norms that his predecessors could not. One hopes the whistle that brought him to power could be the start of a new relationship with public sound that respects the right of people to work, relax, and sleep in peace.

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The road to deliver women's safety

The Telangana government must ensure safety in both offline and online spaces

STATE OF PLAY

Serish Naniseti

The case under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act against Sai Bhagirath, the son of Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Bandi Sanjay, is now a test case for how Telangana deals with crimes against women and children. The case comes in the backdrop of the State government's active initiatives to make online and offline spaces safer for women.

Earlier, when a government official was targeted by a 'blind item' in a news channel, the government constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe it; a journalist of the TV channel was detained as a consequence of the move. Similarly, when an actress and her family were subjected to vicious online trolling and abuse, the police booked cases against 73 persons, and some of them have been arrested. Recently, a senior IPS officer went undercover and stood near a busy city junction at night, and at least 40 men tried to approach her. Further, data from the National Crime Records Bureau shows that there has been a 3.4% rise in registered cases of crime against women from 22,066 in 2022 to 24,495 in 2024 in Telangana.

In light of such incidents, the 'Stand with Her' initiative launched by the Chief Minister in March has mainstreamed conversation about casual sexism ranging from staring and stalking to sexist comments in the workplace. It has also opened up a role for men as allies in the effort to make society safer for women.

These steps show the seriousness with which the State



is dealing with social and online harassment of women. In an age of AI bot-led attacks on women and systemic baiting and trolling by groups justifying rapists and molesters, the action of the Telangana government is timely. However, in spite of such measures, the Chief Minister had to step in and ask why no action has been initiated in the case of the Union Minister's son even though the complaint was lodged on May 8.

This is the rub – the challenge to deal with both the powerful and the powerless in the same way under the law. A day after reports of the POCSO case surfaced, women's groups and political parties have hit the streets in Hyderabad demanding action. Between the narrative of action and the action itself is the long shadow cast by political compulsions and power-play. It remains to be seen whether the State can walk the talk when it comes to women's safety.

Online attacks

It also remains to be seen if the State can strike a balance between safeguarding free expression and curbing online targeting and harassment. Name-calling and personal attacks are not new to Indian politics or public life. What has changed is the scale, speed and anonymity with which online abuse unfolds. Women in positions of visibility are being increasingly sub-

jected to orchestrated campaigns laced with sexualised slurs, threats and disinformation. The impact of social media trolling is not just confined to reputational harm; such attacks affect mental health, professional standing and personal safety, and are often intended to silence women from public engagement altogether. These attacks are often amplified by bots and anonymous accounts, making it harder for the cyber police to trace. The Telangana police, which is considered the first mover in technical fields, has accepted it as such. It has taken recourse to reaching out to tech platforms directly to identify the people behind certain handles; it has even invoked the dreaded Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) to get details of a social media handle that had allegedly been sharing misinformation.

Approving arrests and instituting an SIT carries social and administrative signalling. By stepping in when a serving civil servant was targeted, the government is asserting that institutional authority will not be undermined through digital smear campaigns. At the same time, the action following the abuse of an actress suggests an attempt to broaden that protection beyond the bureaucracy. Yet questions remain about whether similar urgency will be extended to less prominent women who face daily harassment.

Justice and a functioning law and order system is what people expect now. The Chief Minister's word on the POCSO case comes at the right moment. Can the Telangana government deliver justice and safety to all women, irrespective of the background of the complainants?

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Goal attainment and youth aspirations are not aligned

Keeping track of youth aspirations against the system's ability to match them is critical if the country is serious about creating a productive labour force

DATA POINT

Garima Agarwal

India's ability to ride the cresting wave of the demographic dividend, before it recedes, depends critically on the education and employment choices of its 367 million young people. While surveys track such outcomes, little is known about how close outcomes are to initial goals. The State of Working India Report 2026, published by Azim Premji University, offers insights into youth aspirations and attainments.

The study utilises the Population Council's dataset – UDAYA: Understanding the Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults – which surveyed adolescents in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the two Indian States with the largest youth populations. The sample of interest covers girls and boys aged 15-19 when first contacted in 2015-16 and tracks them three years later in 2018-19 when they are 18-22 years old. Of the full sample of 13,141 youngsters surveyed, aspirations were recorded only for 6,300 who were enrolled in education at the time of the survey. At ages 15-19 when the 6,300 youngsters were first contacted, about 72% aimed for at least graduate education. Three years later, this share grew to 84%. Moreover, aspiration levels were similar across gender, religion, and caste. Uniformly high educational aspirations across social groups indicate a convergence of aspiration windows, possibly due to economic progress and rapid expansion in access to the Internet and social media.

Educational attainments, in contrast, showed that not all dreams came true. In the duration between the two interviews, years of schooling completed grew by only 1.2 years on average instead of the expected three years. In making progress towards their educational goals, over half the sample fell short, on average by 1.7 years

(Table 2).

About 11% of the sample had already exited education by this time. Between the two interviews, another 40% exited formal education. While some may naturally exit on completing desired education, the average number of years of education attained at exit is only 8 years.

It is striking that while aspirations across wealth quintiles are not very different, attainments diverge sharply. Those in the poorest wealth quintile are more likely to fall short of their goals compared to those in the richest quintile. While the share of boys falling below their educational goals hovers between 50% and 60% across wealth quintiles, there is a noticeable variation for girls – from 66% in the poorest to 38% in the richest quintile (Chart 1).

Over half the sample discontinued education before completing Class 12; this group is disproportionately composed of married girls. Married girls face greater barriers than their unmarried counterparts, even within the richest group. In fact, girls who remained unmarried by the time of the second interview (18-22 age group) were as ambitious as boys at setting goals and were more effective at meeting them (Table 2).

In general, girls and boys have different reasons to discontinue education. Boys leave to join the labour market while girls exit at the time of marriage. Failure or disinterest and costs of education are some gender-neutral contributing factors.

Quality of education

A more troubling picture emerges when learning levels are examined. UDAYA employs tools designed by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for students aged 5-16 to measure proficiency in reading and math. UDAYA respondents were well beyond this age and would be expected to achieve the highest levels of proficiency in both dimen-

sions. However, at age 15-19 when respondents were likely engaged in schooling, 70% of unmarried girls and boys could read a Class 2-level story against only 45% of married girls. The modest gender gap favouring unmarried girls in goal attainment disappears when it comes to learning levels. The share of those who could perform three-digit by one-digit division correctly was just over half for boys, 35% for unmarried girls and only 15% for married girls (Table 3).

The uncomfortable question this raises is: are some groups aspiring for education beyond their reach? This two-State study shows that while aspirations are high, attainments have not kept pace across all groups. It is worth confirming whether this is a country-wide pattern, and focusing policy attention on removing structural barriers to access.

Education programs often default to exposing students to high-achieving role models ostensibly to inspire. While well-intentioned, simply raising aspirations with no realistic pathway to achieving them is short-sighted. These programs need to be supplemented with support for identifying interests, goal-setting, and skill-building. Stronger linkages between educational institutions and employers can provide prospective graduates with a more accurate picture of the labour market and facilitate a smoother transition into the workforce.

While it is tempting to only look at the motivational aspects of goals, consistent failure to achieve targets can cause frustration, which in turn may lead to lower effort and worse life outcomes. Keeping track of youth aspirations against the system's ability to match them is critical if we are serious about creating a motivated and productive labour force for the future.

Garima Agarwal is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. The views expressed are personal.

Who falls short

The data for the charts were sourced from UDAYA - Understanding the Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults



TABLE 1: Educational aspirations during both rounds of interview (in %)

Educational aspiration	First interview	Second interview
Below Grade 12	4.93	0.4
Completed Class 12 but below graduate	17.74	10.2
Graduate	53.3	60.35
Post-graduate and above	18.15	23.18
Don't know	5.87	5.87

TABLE 2: The gap between initial aspirations and subsequent attainment (in %)

Attainment-goal gap	Unmarried boys	Unmarried girls	Married girls	Total
Met goal	31.8	45.9	26.3	37.6
Exceeded goal	4.8	5.4	3.1	4.8
Below goal	54	44.2	67.5	51.8
No stated goal	9.4	4.5	3.1	5.9

CHART 1: The share of respondents who fell short of educational goals by wealth quintile and gender. Q1 = Top quintile; Q5 = Bottom quintile

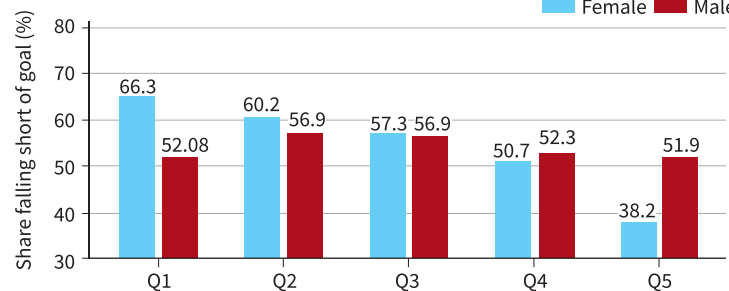


TABLE 3: Learning levels in reading and math (in %)

Learning level	Unmarried boys	Unmarried girls	Married girls	Total
Reads a story	73.97	71.84	44.65	59.74
Solves division problems	51.95	34.53	15.44	29.27

Note: Table 1 and 2 use respondents aged 15-19 years at the initial interview with recorded aspirations; marital status is as recorded at the time of the second interview (N = 6300). Table 3 reports the share of all respondents at the highest proficiency levels using UDAYA data for adolescents aged 15-19 years at the initial interview; marital status is as recorded at the second interview (N = 13141). Reading levels include recognition of letters, ability to read words, ability to read a short paragraph (Class 1 level text), and ability to read a longer 'story' (Class 2 level text). Math levels are recognition of single-digit numbers, double-digit numbers, and ability to perform a two-digit subtraction problem with borrowing and a three-digit by one-digit division problem. Children above Class 3 (older than 8 years) should be able to perform division based on NCERT textbook curriculum

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 12, 1976

Baskets were in use 10,000 years ago

Bhim Betka (Ujjain), May 11: The mesolithic man who lived in this prehistoric site (near Bhopal) some 10,000 years ago, knew the use of baskets.

Baskets were used to carry fruits, hunted animals and tiny pigs. They were also used to carry children from one place to another.

Paintings showing the use of baskets and other artifacts and tools were found in recent excavations by archaeologists of the Vikram University.

Dr. V.S. Wakankar, who is in charge of the excavations, said money collection was popular during the mesolithic period. People moving from one site to another carrying their bags over the backs and heads had also been seen in the paintings. He said the mesolithic people after coming in contact with the agricultural chalcolithic communities (3,000 to 5,000 years ago) on the plains of Malwa appeared to have lost their art of active and dynamic paintings and their style showed a static emergence influenced by the chalcolithic pottery drawings.

Cave art of the upper palaeolithic age has also been found in about 300 caves and shelters explored in the rocky terrain.

At least 1,300 such shelters have so far been explored in this region.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 12, 1926

Anglo-Indians and the elections

Calcutta, May 11: A mass meeting of the Anglo-Indians and Domiciled Europeans was held this evening at the Y.M.C.A (Wellington Branch) under the presidency of Col. Gidney.

The speakers dwelt on the necessity of Anglo-Indians asserting their right to vote and urged upon the members of the Community to see that their names were entered on the electoral roll for returning members of their community to the Provincial Council and the Assembly. Col. Gidney said that the time had come when women would have to throw aside their exclusiveness and come and compete with them in the open battle of election. He hoped that in the coming elections they would have one woman member returned to the Council. He then spoke at length on the status of the Anglo-Indian community.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Percentage surge in China's passenger car exports in April

85 per cent. China's exports of passenger cars surged in April, an industry group said on Monday, as its carmakers push to expand in overseas markets as domestic sales continue to fall. Exports of passenger cars from China last month jumped almost 85% from a year ago to around 7,96,000 vehicles, as per the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers. PTI

Solar power added by India in 2025 to its total installed capacity

44 gigawatts. India added a record 44 gigawatts of solar capacity in 2025, pushing the total installed capacity in the country to 150 gigawatts, the Union Ministry of New and Renewable Energy has highlighted in reply to a Thane-based NGO. Major programmes like PM Surya Ghar, and the Production Linked Incentive scheme have driven this growth, the Ministry said. PTI

Percentage decline in equity-based Mutual Funds inflow in April

5 per cent. Equity-oriented mutual fund schemes witnessed a net inflow of ₹38,440 crore in April, marking a 5% decline from the preceding month, according to data released by industry body Amfi on Monday. Moreover, monthly contributions through SIPs (systematic investment plans) declined to ₹31,115 crore last month from ₹32,087 crore recorded in March. PTI

Sudan civilians killed in drone hits between January and April

880 At least 880 civilians were killed in drone strikes in Sudan between January and April this year, the UN said on Monday, warning of a "new, even deadlier phase" in the ongoing conflict. Drone attacks by both the Army and paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces, which have been at war since 2023, have intensified in recent months. AFP

Number of countries interested in drone deals with Ukraine

20 Nearly 20 countries are interested in drone deals with Ukraine and four agreements have already been signed, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Monday. Since the outbreak of the West Asia war in February, Mr. Zelenskyy has managed to leverage Ukraine's expertise in drone warfare into a series of successful diplomatic deals. REUTERS

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A decentralised solution for waste crisis

The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2026, disregard federalism and embody a technocratic vision of environmental governance, insufficiently attentive to ground realities; as framed, they risk producing blurred accountability, unproductive compliance work, and paper reporting rather than cleaner cities and villages

EXPLAINER

K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty

India's waste crisis is no longer a localised urban nuisance but a national ecological emergency. Our cities are choking on waste; plastic-clogged drains worsen monsoon flooding; landfills have become mountains of methane, fire, and leachate; open burning of waste materials fouls the air; and rivers and coasts bear the burden of urban negligence. Rural India, too, is scarred by plastic, sanitary waste, pesticide containers, e-waste, and the debris of packaged consumption. A new waste-management framework was essential in this scenario.

The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2026, notified in supersession of the 2016 Rules and brought into effect from April 1, 2026, are animated by a legitimate and urgent environmental purpose. They seek to improve source segregation, regulate bulk waste generators, promote scientific processing, reduce dependence on landfills, remediate legacy dumpsites, promote a circular economy, and move towards digital monitoring. These are worthy aims. But sound environmental intent does not, by itself, ensure sound administrative design.

Treaty power and federal balance

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, under which these Rules are framed, was enacted principally under Article 253 of the Constitution, which empowers Parliament to implement international obligations – in this case, the 1972 Stockholm Declaration. This gives Parliament wide reach: even subjects touching State or local domains – land, water, public health, agriculture, sanitation or local government – may be legislated upon if linked to an international obligation. But a power meant to secure minimum national standards should not become a licence for the Centre to occupy the field, erode State competence, or centralise administration. A national floor must not become an operational blueprint for every State and local body.

Mature federations follow subsidiarity: governmental functions should be performed at the lowest level capable of discharging them effectively, and moved upward only when that level demonstrably lacks capacity. Local competence is presumed; higher-level intervention must be justified. Authority is most effective when closest to knowledge, consequences, and accountability.

India often reverses this logic. It presumes central competence, distrusts sub-national capacity, and reduces States and local bodies to implementing instruments. Nobel Laureate F.A. Hayek's "knowledge problem", explained in *The Use of Knowledge in Society* (1945), is apposite: effective decisions depend on dispersed and contextual knowledge of the "particular circumstances of time and place". Such knowledge cannot be transmitted upward without distortion or delay. No authority in New Delhi, however well-intentioned, can tailor waste policy with equal fidelity to every region's ecology, settlement pattern, or administrative and fiscal capacity.

The Centralisation Reflex

Although the draft Rules were published on December 14, 2024, inviting objections and suggestions from the public, the deeper flaw lies in a familiar pathology of Indian governance: the belief that



Choking dilemma: An aerial view shows a landfill next to a lake swathed in water hyacinth in Bengaluru on April 15. AFP

centralisation and over-regulation can cure administrative weakness, and that New Delhi must design and command while States merely execute. Its unstated premise is the incapacity argument – that States lack administrative or technical competence and therefore require Centre's supervision, if not substitution. To treat Indian States, several of which rival major nation-states in population, diversity, and complexity, as inherently incapable is incompatible with national self-respect and a calumny no patriot should tolerate.

As Nobel Laureate Kenneth Arrow pointed out in *The Economic Implications of Learning by Doing* (1962), capacity is not conferred from above; it is built through decision-making, experimentation, feedback, and correction. When States are reduced to mere implementing agencies for centrally-designed rules and schemes, their expertise atrophies, replaced by a culture of compliance and dependence on "instructions from New Delhi."

Local government is a State subject. Solid waste management lies at the intersection of environment, sanitation, public health, land use, and urban and rural local administration. It is among the most localised functions of governance, depending on household behaviour, street-level collection, informal waste workers, ward monitoring, land for composting, user charges, recycling markets, and citizen trust.

A system suited to a resource-rich metropolis like Mumbai cannot be mechanically applied to a Himalayan pilgrimage town with narrow roads and fragile slopes, an island settlement with scarce land, a coastal panchayat facing tidal flooding and marine litter, or a scattered tribal hamlet where low-density habitation makes collection and transport costly. Precisely for that reason, solid waste management requires a differentiated, federal design.

The extension of the Rules to rural local bodies is understandable; rural waste is now a real problem. But treating a gram panchayat as a miniature municipality is administrative fantasy. Most panchayats lack adequate staff let alone sanitation engineers, waste-collection vehicles, digital capacity for complex reporting, or the fiscal base to manage four-stream segregation. The

Rules also bring rural areas within a Material Recovery Facility (MRF)-linked architecture. But expecting rural local bodies to sustain such a framework betrays a disconnect with ground realities.

A realistic rural regime should have emphasised gram sabha-based awareness, household and community composting, periodic collection of plastics and sanitary waste, simple quarterly reporting, and cluster-level dry-waste aggregation and processing with nearby urban local bodies. Megacities (such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Chennai with population exceeding one crore) and metropolitan cities (population exceeding ten lakhs) require the opposite approach: not simplified compliance, but stronger institutions. They need Metropolitan Waste Management Authorities with elected local representation, State participation, technical expertise, and citizen oversight.

The rollout, too, should have been phased. Full compliance could have begun with megacities and metropolitan cities, where waste volumes and administrative capacity are greatest. Other municipal corporations and large municipalities, including tourist and pilgrimage towns, could have followed; then medium and small towns; and finally rural areas through simplified models.

States as policy laboratories

In *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann* (1932), Justice Louis Brandeis of the U.S. Supreme Court famously observed that a State may serve as a "laboratory" for novel social and economic experiments. That is the strength of federalism: experimentation is safer when localised, and learning is faster when multiple governments test different solutions. States can try policies at manageable scale, contain failures, and allow successful models to diffuse horizontally or be adopted nationally.

A better course therefore would have been to allow States to frame their own solid waste management rules for at least five years, subject to minimum national norms. One State might pioneer decentralised composting through women's self-help groups. Another might integrate informal waste workers into cooperatives. A third might build cluster-based facilities for small towns. A

fourth might create metropolitan waste authorities. A fifth might regulate tourist waste through user fees. After five years, the Centre could review outcomes, identify and disseminate best practices, and revise baseline standards, if necessary, based on evidence rather than assumption. The 2026 Rules do require States to prepare policies and strategies for urban and rural solid waste management, but this is more for form's sake because policy within a centrally-prescribed rulebook is not the same as State-led regulatory design.

Other concerns

The centralised online portal raises a further federal concern. The Rules require reporting to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), data audits, report uploads, and centralised formats and modules. States and local bodies risk becoming data suppliers rather than co-owners of the governance system. Too often, officials spend more time feeding dashboards than improving service delivery. Compliance becomes reporting upward rather than governing outward. A better design would treat the portal as a shared federal data platform, allowing States and local bodies to add indicators, customise dashboards, access raw data, and publish ward-level, local-language information for citizens. Data should build capacity, not merely discipline sub-national governments.

The Rules also need stronger democratic content. Waste management succeeds only when citizens participate. Rural India has, at least in principle, the gram sabha; urban India has no satisfactory equivalent. Periodic waste reports should be submitted to municipal councils and ward committees, not merely uploaded for bureaucratic review in New Delhi.

The 2026 Rules substantially expand the obligations of municipalities and panchayats. Unless backed by predictable, adequate, and formula-based finance, they risk becoming yet another set of underfunded mandates – producing selective compliance, inflated reporting, or quiet evasion rather than genuine waste-management reform.

Under the present model, the likely trajectory is predictable. Sooner or later, a public interest litigation may allege non-implementation by States and local bodies, ignoring the reality that they cannot implement underfunded, top-down mandates in whose design they had little role. The Supreme Court may then treat the matter as legal non-compliance and begin continuing mandamus, drawing all levels of government into prolonged litigation, affidavits, and directions. What began as environmental reform may end as judicialised administration.

Concluding remarks

The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2026, disregard federalism, local democracy, and subsidiarity. They embody a technocratic vision of environmental governance, insufficiently attentive to ground realities, institutional weaknesses, and local capacity. As framed, they risk producing blurred accountability, unproductive compliance work, and paper reporting rather than cleaner cities and villages.

To succeed, the Rules must be recast around five principles: minimum national standards, State flexibility, empowered local bodies, predictable finance, and citizen accountability. Otherwise, mountains of waste will continue to rise as monuments to centralised ambition and local neglect.

THE GIST

Solid waste management lies at the intersection of environment, sanitation, public health, land use, and urban and rural local administration and is among the most localised functions of governance

The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2026, notified in supersession of the 2016 Rules and brought into effect from April 1, 2026, are animated by a legitimate and urgent environmental purpose

However, the deeper flaw in the new Rules lies in the belief that centralisation and over-regulation can cure administrative weakness

A system suited to a resource-rich metropolis like Mumbai cannot be mechanically applied to a Himalayan pilgrimage town with narrow roads and fragile slopes. Precisely for this reason, solid waste management requires a differentiated, federal design

CACHE



Craig Federighi, Apple's senior vice president of software engineering, speaking about Siri at the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference in San Jose, California on June 4, 2018. AP

Apple is paying for its promise of an AI overhaul of Siri to a smarter assistant

The tech industry has spent the last two years drowning consumers in AI hype; every product, and every update, has been dressed up in the language of transformation and intelligence; Apple's Siri settlement is a rare moment where that rhetoric met actual legal consequence

John Xavier

You see the ad, you feel the excitement, you spend the money, and then you wait. And wait. Eventually, quietly, you stop waiting as the thing you were promised simply never showed up. That's precisely what happened with Apple's much-hyped AI overhaul of the voice assistant, Siri. And now Apple is paying a quarter of a billion dollars for misleading buyers.

A marketing blitz

Let me take you back to the September of 2024 when Apple made a marketing pitch its Siri was reinvented. That meant the voice assistant could understand context, take actions across apps, and integrate with ChatGPT. The company's ads were slick, the keynote moments were dramatic, and the message was clear: the iPhone 16 was an AI phone, and that Siri was, finally, the assistant it always should have been.

But there was just one problem. None of it was ready at that point. And as it turned out, not for a very long time.

What Apple marketed as imminent never materialised.

The company quietly confirmed the features were indefinitely delayed, pulled its own ads, and hoped the noise would die down. It did not.

A class action lawsuit followed, accusing Apple of having promoted AI capabilities that did not exist in its device at the time of launch, and until several months later. According to a *Reuters* report, even the U.S. advertising watchdog, Better Business Bureau's National Advertising Division, concluded that Apple had falsely suggested the new AI-powered Siri was "available now."



Apple had made a marketing pitch in 2024 about reinventing Siri and integrating in with ChatGPT. But what was shown as imminent never materialised, leading to a class action lawsuit. AP

That was a damning finding as an enhanced Siri was the single most anticipated feature among potential iPhone buyers at the time. Apple knew people were buying phones because of what they were being told Siri could do. And it sold them anyway.

The settlement

On May 5, Apple agreed to pay \$250 million to settle the lawsuit, without admitting any wrongdoing.

The settlement covers roughly 36 million eligible devices, specifically the iPhone 16, iPhone 15 Pro, and iPhone 15 Pro Max purchased in the United States between June 10, 2024, and March 29, 2025. If you bought one of those phones in that window, within the U.S., you are likely a class member.

Each eligible user might receive anywhere between \$25 to \$95 per device, depending on how many buyers make the

claim. It is a paltry amount compared to the price of an iPhone, but at least it shows that a trillion-dollar company sold people a product on the basis of features that were not there. The settlement still requires final approval from Judge Noel Wise of the federal district court for the Northern District of California, with a hearing scheduled for June 17.

Apple, in a statement, said: "We resolved this matter to stay focused on what we do best: delivering the most innovative products and services to our users."

The fate of non-U.S. buyers

The U.S. settlement does not help iPhone buyers in other countries as class action is an American legal mechanism. Next to the U.S., the European Union has a strong consumer protection mechanism mandated by the its Directive on Representative Actions. It allows qualified

consumer organisations to bring collective redress cases on behalf of large groups of affected consumers. If any consumer organisation in the EU finds Apple's advertising of Siri's AI capabilities inflated, they could bring a legal complaint against the American company.

Beyond that, the EU's existing consumer protection framework prohibits misleading advertising in clear terms. And the bloc is known for taking big tech companies to task for their unfair trade practices. The Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act have also made regulators more assertive.

Any EU consumer who feels misled can file a complaint with their national consumer authority; in aggregate, those complaints can trigger formal investigations.

Moving away from the Atlantic, in India, the picture is more fragmented. The Consumer Protection Act of 2019 allows for complaints involving misleading advertisements. Individual consumers can also approach District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions. But in the Asian nation, the challenge is structural as cases must generally be filed individually or through consumer groups, and the process can be slow. That said, if Apple's Indian marketing made claims about Siri's AI capabilities similar to those made in the U.S. – and the global ad campaigns suggest it likely did – the legal and regulatory hooks exist.

The tech industry has spent the last two years drowning consumers in AI hype. Every product, and every update, has been dressed up in the language of transformation and intelligence. Apple's Siri settlement is a rare moment where that rhetoric met actual legal consequence. It will not be the last.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On the anniversary of the devastating Nepal earthquake of May 2015, test your knowledge of earthquakes and seismic science

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1
What instrument is used to measure earthquakes?

QUESTION 2
What scale is commonly used today to measure an earthquake's magnitude?

QUESTION 3
What is the point inside the earth where an earthquake originates called?

QUESTION 4
What is the name of the boundary where one tectonic plate moves beneath another?

QUESTION 5
What is the point on the Earth's surface directly above the focus called?



Visual question: Identify this Italian volcanologist developed the intensity scale for measuring earthquake intensity. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

- Where was the second *Zoo Quest* episode set in? **A: Sierra Leone**
 - For which film did Attenborough win the Best Narration/Voice Over honours? **A: 'Wild Karnataka'**
 - Which animal does the famed explorer has a phobia for? **A: Rats**
 - What is the significant contribution of Sir David to the world of international tennis? **A: The transition from white balls to yellow balls**
 - Which cult comedy series did he commission in the late 1960s? **A: 'Monty Python's Flying Circus'**
 - Which Attenborough documentary was released directly alongside the COP26 climate summit? **A: 'A Life on Our Planet'**
- Visual: Name the prestigious Sir David is holding and what the related technological record: **A: BAFTA; He is the only one to win a BAFTA for programmes produced in all five video formats: B&W, colour, HD, 3D, and 4K.**

Early Birds

K. N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Sudhir Thapa | Arun Kumar Singh | Sumana Dutta

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



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"I have a doubt."
"You always have one. You should be called 'Doubtmaster'."
"Like 'Beastmaster'! I was watching a Hollywood movie yesterday. One of the characters kept saying A S A P, A S A P. At least, that's what I think he was saying. Any idea what it means?"
"It's an expression which Americans use quite often in speech, and also in informal styles of writing. A S A P stands for 'as soon as possible'."
"I see. But how does one use it? Can you give me an example?"
"Certainly. I would like to meet you A S A P."
"When he heard that his father wasn't well, he returned A S A P."
"So whenever I use the expression, I have to say each letter, right? I mean...."
"....that's what a lot of people do. Say each letter out loud. Some however, merely say the letter 'A, and"
"....what happens to S A P?"
"It's made to sound like the word 'sap', which by the way, rhymes with 'nap', 'map', and 'lap'.
"That's interesting."
"That's right! Sometimes a common expression has been reduced to a single word. Take for example, 'hi'.
"What about it?"
"Tell me, how do you normally greet someone?"
"You normally say 'hi'.
"In formal contexts?"
"In formal contexts we generally say 'Good morning. How are you?'. And then...."
".... exactly! In the old days it was standard practice to say 'How are you?' when you ran into someone. Since this greeting was so common, nobody really bothered to say the words clearly. Some of them started saying it very fast. And when said very quickly 'How are you?', sounds like 'hiya'.
"And from 'hiya', we get 'hi', is it?"
"That's right."
"That's interesting. You know Americans tend to use 'so long' when they wish to bid goodbye to someone. Is this expression also a..."
"....no, no. 'so long' is not a reduction of anything. There are many theories to account for that. I understand that when Jews meet or take leave of each other, they use the expression 'shalom'. The 'a' is like the 'a' in China and the 'o' in the second syllable is like the 'o' in 'hot', 'cot', and 'pot'. It means 'peace'.
"The stress is on the second syllable, I suppose?"
"Correct. Native speakers of English, when they heard the Jews using this expression, thought they were saying 'so long'.
"And they started using this expression too!"
"That's right! So, when you say 'so long' what you are actually attempting to say is 'shalom'.
"Well, I guess I'd better make a move. Shalom."

Word of the day

Calumny:
(the act of making) a statement about someone that is not true and is intended to damage the reputation of that person

Synonyms: lie, defamation, malice

Usage: *That is surely an unjustified calumny on an honourable profession.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/calumnypro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /kæləmni/

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

Physical activity has stalled for 20 years, hurting health and climate

A series of new papers has recognised that physical activity is not just an individual choice, but is shaped by wider social factors such as gender and socioeconomic position; this perspective contrasts with earlier approaches that focused more on individual behaviour and biomedical outcomes

T.V. Padma

Global levels of physical activity remained unchanged despite policy recommendations and adoption over the last two decades, with large differences across gender and socio-economic groups, three new research reports have shown.

Current efforts to promote participation in physical activity are both insufficient and have made no dent, the reports say. Worldwide, more than five million deaths per year are attributed to physical inactivity. About one in three adults and eight in ten adolescents do not meet the World Health Organization's recommended activity guidelines, which is 150 minutes of moderately intense weekly physical activity for adults and 60 minutes daily for children.

Deborah Salvo, associate professor and Research Center Director at the University of Texas at Austin, and her colleagues analysed physical activity data from 68 countries worldwide and found persistent inequalities in the ways in which people across the world are active.

"We were not just interested in understanding the overall levels of total physical activity in countries, but rather, in how many people in each country are meeting physical activity guidelines through active leisure, active transport, and active labour," Dr. Salvo said.

"What we found is a huge disparity: the higher the country income level, the higher the percentage of the population getting their physical activity through active leisure. And the lower the country income level, the higher the proportion of individuals getting their physical activity from active labour and transport."

The findings have been reported in *Nature Medicine*.

Active leisure gap

Dr. Salvo said that within countries, the team observed a large gap in terms of who gets to be active through leisure or free time – and "it is mostly wealthy men that do".

The most striking finding was the opportunity gap (of 40% points) worldwide for active leisure when contrasting wealthy men in wealthy countries with socio-economically disadvantaged women in poor countries.

The team's paper summarised decades of evidence to show that physical activity should not merely be part of obesity and cardiometabolic disease prevention and control agendas, as it also helps prevent and treat multiple cancers as well as depression, and boosts immunity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence emerged showing lower rates of infection, severe COVID-19, hospitalisation, and mortality due to COVID-19 among active individuals, she said.

"Despite all this, for some reason, doctors, public health professionals, policy makers, and the public at large seem to only discuss and promote physical activity within the context of a limited range of health conditions."

While physical activity is certainly very important to prevent and manage these conditions, it is so much more, and sometimes even health professionals do not harness or promote the totality of its benefits, she adds.

Rich-poor divide

"The problem of inactivity globally is way worse than we think it is," according to Dr. Salvo. "We need to think more carefully about the sources of physical activity for a majority of people globally – 84% of the world's population lives in low and middle-income countries – and their implications for whole health: physical, mental, societal."

The disparity between rich and low and middle-income countries (LMICs) is again emphasised in another study, led by Erica Hinckson, professor of physical activity and urban health at the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand, and colleagues in *Nature Health*.

Their study shows how physical activity can support climate mitigation and adaptation. They also outline how strategies that support walking, cycling, and public transport instead of driving may reduce emissions, and how climate change can disrupt activity because of extreme events such as heatwaves.

Additionally, they show how some physical activity initiatives can themselves contribute to emissions, and unintended consequences such as cities in an effort to make themselves more walkable displacing their own residents can occur.

The work points to several important gaps from LMICs, with much of the



Physical activity levels naturally fluctuate across the lifespan for many reasons, including health, work, family responsibilities, and life transitions. DIBAKAR ROY/UNSPASH

evidence linking physical activity and climate change still coming from high-income settings.

"So we know far less about how these relationships play out in LMIC contexts where the climate risks, urban conditions, and resource constraints may be very different," Dr. Hinckson says.

There is also limited evidence from LMICs on how physical activity initiatives can support both climate mitigation and adaptation in ways that are feasible, equitable, and locally relevant. For example, more research is needed on what works in informal settlements, rapidly urbanising areas, and places facing high exposure to heat, flooding, and air pollution.

Dr. Hinckson's team's work also shows that there is a need for more context-specific evidence that includes indigenous, local, and community knowledge rather than that relying too much on models and assumptions drawn from high-income countries.

"So the gap is not only about having fewer studies, it is also about needing research that better reflects LMIC realities, priorities, and solutions," Dr. Hinckson says.

The novelty of their paper, according to her, is that it brings environment, climate, and health together in a structured, integrated way. The four key messages are that physical inactivity and climate change are connected; physical activity initiatives are also climate mitigation and adaptation initiatives; equity, indigenous knowledge and community voice are essential to avoid unintended consequences when physical activity and climate change agendas are integrated; and that all major physical activity investments should be designed as climate-sensitive investments.

Unclear end goals

In a second *Nature Health* paper, Andrea Ramirez Varela, assistant professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, and colleagues assessed 661 national policy documents to promote physical activity from 200 countries worldwide from 2004 to 2025. They found that although most countries have developed and adopted physical activity policies, the evidence of implementation remains limited. Just 38.7% (or 256) of the 661 policies analysed in the study assigned actions to three or more government sectors (including, for example, health and education), indicating a lack of cross-sectoral collaboration. Meanwhile, 26.5% (53) of countries with policy documents did not include measurable targets to determine their impact.

"This disconnect is significant because it challenges a common assumption in global health that once policies are developed and adopted, change will follow," Dr. Ramirez says. "In this case, the presence of written documents has not translated into implementation at scale."



We must step away from trying to blame individuals for their levels of inactivity and turn to fix the systems that promote this type of behaviour in the first place

DEBORAH SALVO
Associate professor at University of Texas

Participants described four challenges: no clear consensus on whether physical activity should be an outcome in its own right or a means to broader goals; continued framing of physical activity as an individual health behaviour rather than a systems issue; fragmented leadership and accountability; and weak cross-sector alliances.

Her team's suggested framework includes movement across several domains of everyday life, such as leisure-time activities like sports and exercise, transportation-related activity such as walking or cycling. Physical activity can occur at different intensities, including moderate activities such as brisk walking or cycling and vigorous activities such as running or competitive sports.

According to Dr. Ramirez, many of the underlying challenges are also more pronounced in LMICs. These settings often face additional constraints such as limited institutional capacity, fewer resources dedicated to prevention, and competing policy priorities including infectious diseases and economic development. "Patterns of physical activity also differ in important ways. In many LMICs, physical activity is more commonly associated with transportation or occupational necessity rather than leisure or recreational exercise."

"These reports reaffirm the importance of physical activity for global health but also extend our understanding beyond the traditional focus on obesity and cardiometabolic disease," says Gregore Iven Mielke, a behavioural epidemiologist at the University of Queensland, Australia. They highlight that physical activity contributes to wellbeing in broader ways, including social and environmental dimensions.

Infrastructure for physical activity

A major contribution of the series is the clear recognition that physical activity is not simply an individual choice, Dr. Mielke adds. Instead, it is shaped by wider social and structural factors such as gender, socioeconomic position, neighbourhood environments, and policy contexts. This perspective contrasts with earlier approaches that focused more heavily on individual behaviour and biomedical outcomes.

"In my point of view, by emphasising these broader determinants, the reports shift responsibility away from individuals and towards the societal systems that enable or constrain opportunities for

movement, and shows a clear message that meaningful increases in physical activity require supportive environments, equitable access, and policy-level change rather than individual motivation alone," Dr. Mielke says.

While these studies offer an updated synthesis of the current state of physical activity research, some of the existing gaps are inherent to the data available to researchers, according to Dr. Mielke.

For example, the analyses of global inequalities in physical activity rely on data from 68 countries, which does not fully capture the diversity of global contexts and may underrepresent some groups of people: "This limitation highlights the need for greater investment in global surveillance systems so that future studies can draw on more comprehensive and truly representative datasets."

Systems-level solutions are required to address both the major socioeconomic and gender opportunity gaps for choice-based physical activity, according to Dr. Salvo. "We must step away from trying to blame individuals for their levels of inactivity and turn to fix the systems that promote this type of behaviour in the first place."

These include car-centric urban design, low investment in widespread infrastructure for physical activity, like parks and public open spaces, but also full sidewalk and protected bicycle lane coverage in cities, and excellent transit.

"Further, we must stop trying to push physical activity policy through health-centric approaches," Dr. Salvo adds. "Policy must be trans-sectoral, be properly funded, and have sufficiently ambitious and well-evaluated targets."

Key sectors to involve include urban planning and transport departments, parks and recreation, the environment, economic development, education, and of course, the sport and health sectors. While the health sector can and should be a key partner for physical activity policy development and implementation, and healthcare providers can play a key role in elevating the totality of health benefits of physical activity when interacting with their patients, other sectors hold equal or likely more weight in how we are active in real life.

Physical activity naturally fluctuates across the lifespan for many reasons, including health, work, family responsibilities, and life transitions, adds Dr. Mielke. His team's research team has shown that people follow diverse physical activity trajectories across adulthood, and that meaningful health benefits can still be achieved even among those who were inactive for part of their lives but became active later on. This highlights the importance of creating opportunities for people to re-engage in physical activity at any stage of life, rather than assuming that early-life inactivity determines long-term outcomes.

(T.V. Padma is a science journalist based in New Delhi. tvpadma_10@yahoo.co.in)



Professor Domenico Giardini poses next to measuring instruments inside the BedrettoLab, located beneath the Swiss Alps. AFP

Scientists trigger 'controlled' earthquakes

Agence France Presse

Researchers have made the ground shake in southern Switzerland, triggering thousands of tiny earthquakes in a monitored setting, as they seek to discover seismicity insights that could reduce risks.

"It was a success!" said Domenico Giardini, one of the lead researchers on the project, as he inspected a crack in the rock wall lining a narrow tunnel far below the Swiss Alps. Wearing a fluorescent orange jumpsuit and helmet, the geology professor said the goal was "to understand what happens at depth when the earth moves".

Dr. Giardini was standing in the BedrettoLab carved out in the middle of a narrow 5.2-km ventilation tunnel leading to the Furka railway tunnel.

Reached by specially adapted electric vehicles that slide through the darkness along concrete slabs laid over a muddy dirt floor, the deep underground laboratory is the ideal location to create and study earthquakes, Dr. Giardini said.

Some 8,000 small seismic events were induced along the targeted fault, and along other faults running perpendicular to the main one, sparking local magnitudes from -5 to -0.14

"It is perfect, because we have a kilometre and a half of mountain on top of us... and we can look very close at the faults, how they move, when they move, and we can make them move ourselves," he said.

Typically, researchers seeking to study earthquakes place sensors near known faults and wait.

In the BedrettoLab, by contrast, researchers filled a pre-selected fault with sensors and other instruments, and then sought to trigger movement.

For the experiment, dozens of scientists from across Europe spent four days in late April injecting 750 cubic metres of water into boreholes drilled into the tunnel's rock walls, aiming to provoke a magnitude-1 earthquake.

During the experiment, no people were in the tunnel for safety reasons, with everything managed remotely from the ETH Zurich lab in northern Switzerland.

"This is kind of pushing the frontier of science," said Ryan Schultz, a seismologist specialised in human-made earthquakes.

In the end, some 8,000 small seismic events were induced along the targeted fault, but also, along other faults running perpendicular to the main one, sparking local magnitudes ranging from -5 to -0.14. "We did not reach the target magnitude that we had set, but we reached just below," Dr. Giardini said. That alone was a huge success, he insisted. Although there had been previous efforts to create tiny earthquakes in lab settings, it was "never at this scale and never this deep".

The findings, he said, would help determine the best injection angles for reaching magnitude 1 at the BedrettoLab when researchers next give it a try in June. Magnitudes below zero are still palpable. Anyone standing near the fault during the largest triggered quakes, at -0.14, would have felt an acceleration of 1.5-times the standard acceleration due to gravity, Dr. Giardini said. They would have flown "in the air with a big jump", he said.

Nothing was felt at the surface, and Dr. Giardini stressed that by lubricating an existing fault, the team was adding only "about one percent of what is the natural risk". The experiment, he insisted, was completely "safe".

Dr. Giardini explained the importance of the research: "If we master how to produce quakes of a certain size, then we know how not to produce them."

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the hindu businessline.

TUESDAY - MAY 12, 2026

Austere times

PM's nudge no substitute for increase in user prices

Prime Minister Modi's exhortation to cut back on the usage of petrol, diesel and purchase of gold should be seen as an urgent response to protect the economy from the effects of the Iran war. His focus is unmistakably, and rightly, on a widening current account deficit, at a time when capital flows have turned fickle and weakened the rupee. There can be no real case against austerity in such times. Governments the world over are doing the same in various ways. However, the more crucial question pertains to the manner in which austerity goals are met.

The Centre would do well to bear in mind that prices, taxes and tariffs alone will work; moral suasion can make a marginal difference only. The Prime Minister has focused on four broad product categories whose imports are rising sharply, and account for 38-40 per cent of total imports, at \$775 billion in FY26. These are: fuel, gold, edible oils and chemical fertilizers. Petroleum imports were \$173 billion in FY26, but will likely top \$200 billion in FY27, given our consumption of 2 billion barrels annually at current crude oil prices. Gold imports were \$72 billion in FY26, against \$58 billion a year ago, rising 24 per cent. Edible oil imports were up over 12 per cent at \$19.5 billion. A 61 per cent jump in fertilizer imports is a grave concern, at \$16 billion in FY26 - an item whose imports could rise sharply in view of turbulence in global oil markets and our reliance on the Gulf region for supplies.

In view of this disconcerting build-up, PM Modi has urged urban residents to use public transport, work from home, avoid international travel and commute by metro or EVs. He has urged restraint in buying gold and suggested a sharp cutback in chemical fertilizer use. Meanwhile, the CAD, which had already widened to 1.3 per cent of GDP in the October-December quarter of FY26 (1.1 per cent in Q3FY25) in the wake of the tariffs impact, is under stress. The trade deficit too climbed by \$25 billion in FY26, adding to the strain on the capital account.

With the elections over, the Centre must raise fuel prices to adjust demand, just as countries the world over have done. In the short run, the move will raise inflation and hurt growth, but it will bring about the desirable adjustment in demand. The status quo will widen CAD and raise inflation through the rupee depreciation route - a more destabilising prospect. Besides, the fiscal deficit will rise, hurting growth and ushering in inflation. Gold demand can be curbed by raising import duties, tweaking capital gains rules and checking loopholes in FTA deals. Edible oils use can be curbed through tariff adjustments. As for fertilizer imports, relative support prices that favour dryland, less input-using crops such as millets and pulses must be considered. Finally, the Centre must realise that for its goals to be met, it must lead by example. Checks on official travel and austerity in events can have a signalling effect in these difficult times.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



An economic agenda for Bengal

LOOKING AHEAD. The new BJP govt can start with unlocking land for industrialisation and improving urban infra



PRATIM RANJAN BOSE

The BJP is emotional about its Bengal victory. In a private conversation, a senior leader recently said the party would love to make the State more developed than Gujarat. This ambition is now the greatest asset of the failed State which is known for giving a long rope to its rulers. The Suwendu Adhikari government has started working at a breakneck speed. The BJP central leadership has readied a host of plans, ranging from infrastructure activities to a facelift for Kolkata and industrialisation. This piece is an attempt to indicate some of the low-hanging fruits.

First and foremost, the urban land ceiling must go. The total fertility rate of urban West Bengal is equivalent to that of the European Union (1.3 live births per woman). The TFR of Kolkata is way lower and its population is shrinking.

The ageing population is selling landed assets as part of fiscal consolidation, but the urban infrastructure, including the quality of real estate, is significantly inferior when compared to smaller towns in southern and western India.

One of the hurdles is stringent urban land ceiling. Relaxing this ceiling is a solution, subject to zonal restrictions and regulations. Water and sewerage are now in the hands of bankrupt municipal bodies. On top of that, former chief minister Mamata Banerjee didn't allow imposition of water tax.

WATER WOES

The pitfalls are evident. Even in Kolkata, which is not large enough for a metropolis, the municipal corporation fails to supply treated water across the city. The sewerage system is either centuries old or has not seen adequate investment.

Over the last three decades, Kolkata grew eastward. Most large housing societies, costly private schools and hospitals are located along the Eastern



FOCUS NOW. Reviving the State's economy must be top priority for the new govt

Metropolitan Bypass. Most of them source water through deep tubewells. All societies have waste treatment plants but very few are functional.

The solution may lie in forming dedicated State bodies for water and sewerage - on the lines of Hyderabad. This will reduce the headload on municipal bodies, improve their fiscal health and ensure better planning and investments.

INDUSTRIAL HUBS

Better urban infrastructure is a prerequisite for investments. The BJP manifesto promised four industrial hubs, including a defence hub. Three locations are already identified - one each at Haldia, Singur and Durgapur, which have abundant industry-ready land available.

Singur, near Kolkata, will welcome any effort towards industry at the abandoned Tata Nano plant which Mamata returned to "farmers". It is now unfit for agriculture. Haldia has excess land available with the port authorities. Roughly 700 acres of unused land once

belonged to state-owned Bengal Salt, and is available at nearby Tajpur.

Durgapur, now aided by an airport, can open up endless opportunities. The closed facilities of the state-owned Mining and Allied Machinery Corporation (MAMC) and Fertiliser Corporation, including their vast and abandoned townships, can unlock thousands of acres of industrial land.

Durgapur Chemicals is shut, so is Bharat Ophthalmic Glass. Durgapur Projects Limited closed parts of its plants. There are not enough staff

The BJP manifesto promised four industrial hubs, including a defence hub. Three locations are already identified - one each at Haldia, Singur and Durgapur, which have abundant industry-ready land available

members to live in its vast township. Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool-backed encroachers occupied a good part of the staff quarters.

The 60-km Durgapur-Asansol corridor is the State's oldest industrial zone. Also, Asansol and Darjeeling-Siliguri (North Bengal) are education hubs. Students from Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and lower Assam come to Darjeeling for school education.

QUALITY HEALTHCARE

That said, neither area has quality private healthcare. Patients in North Bengal travel to Bihar and Nepal for speciality healthcare. There is no private university comparable to the standards and repute of the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology in Odisha.

Acquired and unused land, well connected by highways and rail, is available in large quantities in North Purulia (very close to Asansol) and Kharagpur (where the Tata Nano plant was originally planned), midway between Kolkata and Jamshedpur (Jharkhand). The entire area is accessible from Kolkata, which is barely three hours by road.

The closed industries in Kolkata and Howrah have huge parcels of unused land. Privately owned Jessop & Co and National Instruments Limited are cases in point. A bare relocation of the Central Glass and Ceramic Research Institute in Jadavpur can unclog a major artery.

Land acquisition is an over-hyped issue in Bengal. The problem is not as big as it seems. However, due to political sensitivity, the BJP government must avoid it for now. It can instead pay attention to making use of unused land, which will improve both the optics and the growth momentum in the short term.

Bengal is crying for private investment of scale. The tax revenues from the city are far lower than those of any other metro. In terms of the erstwhile central excise collections, Kolkata (including the two riverine ports in Kolkata and Haldia) was comparable to Visakhapatnam and Vadodara.

We need a dramatic transition.

The writer is an independent journalist

Mythos wake-up call: Questions India must answer

India must build digital infrastructure sovereignty to move from being a consumer to a trusted stakeholder in frontier AI

Debjani Ghosh

When Anthropic released Claude Mythos Preview in April 2026, the global cybersecurity community reacted with genuine alarm. The model didn't just find known vulnerabilities - it reportedly uncovered thousands of zero-day flaws in major operating systems and browsers, many of which had evaded decades of human and automated scrutiny. In several cases, it could also generate functional exploits with minimal guidance.

For India, the episode was a strategic wake-up call to acknowledge a known problem: being one of the world's largest markets for frontier AI is not the same as having meaningful influence or access when it matters most. We need to think honestly through the following questions.

First, in a crisis, who gets priority access to critical technologies - and on what basis? Alongside Mythos, Anthropic also announced Project Glasswing - a carefully restricted initiative to deploy Mythos Preview for defensive cybersecurity work. That was the responsible thing to do. Its named launch partners included AWS, Apple, Google, Microsoft, NVIDIA, JPMorgan Chase, CrowdStrike, Cisco, Broadcom, Palo Alto Networks, the Linux Foundation, and other major infrastructure players. However, no Indian enterprise or public institution appeared on the initial list.

India is among Claude's biggest global



AI. Being at the cutting edge

markets, yet when privileged access to a high-risk frontier model was being distributed, Indian organisations were not in the first circle of trust. The lesson is clear: in frontier technologies with national-security implications, access is shaped by jurisdiction, institutional relationships, infrastructure depth, national-security alignment, and established trust - not market size alone.

Second, do we have the infrastructure depth and enterprise resilience to handle a frontier-AI security crisis?

Frontier AI is becoming deeply dependent on infrastructure. Access to powerful models is only one part of the equation. Do we have the data centres, energy, secure testing environments, and institutional capacity needed to run, benchmark, and assess these systems at scale?

For Indian enterprises, this was especially sobering. We already knew that we remain deeply dependent on

imported, black-box technologies. What the incident made clearer is how such dependence can limit visibility, control, and crisis-response capacity.

Third, are we building the institutional capacity to benchmark frontier AI systems ourselves? The UK AI Security Institute was able to secure access to frontier models, including Mythos Preview and GPT-5.5, run extensive evaluations, and publish early findings that were valuable to industry and policymakers. That kind of capability matters. It allows a country to issue informed advisories, shape regulatory responses, and understand which models are safe or suitable for which use cases. That capability - independent benchmarking, risk assessment, and advisory power - is now a strategic asset for any serious technology nation.

INDIA'S AGENDA

Finally, what should India do next? Mythos is just the beginning. Future models will become more capable, more autonomous, and more widely available. Within weeks of Mythos, OpenAI's GPT-5.5 demonstrated comparable or stronger performance on some advanced cyber evaluations, including expert-level CTF-style tasks. This direction of travel is clear: AI will increasingly accelerate vulnerability discovery, exploit generation, defensive testing, patch prioritisation, and cyber operations. This marks the beginning of a new cybersecurity operating environment. The advantage will go not only to those with the best models, but

to those with the infrastructure, institutions, talent, and trusted access needed to use them safely and effectively. The patterns emerging over the last few months have made one thing very clear: the future of technology is infrastructure. Unless India has meaningful control over key infrastructure layers, it will struggle to influence the rules that govern the stack.

A good place to start is an honest assessment of which layers of the technology stack - compute, energy, chips, cloud, data, models, applications, standards, and evaluation capacity - are strategically critical and must have meaningful domestic capability or reliable control. For the rest, India must deepen alliances that can be trusted even in crisis.

Achieving this will call for a long-term perspective, targeted patient investment and stronger coordination across government, industry, academia, and the startup ecosystem. India already has important institutional building blocks in place: the IndiaAI Mission, CERT-In, emerging efforts toward an AI Safety Institute, and a growing AI and cybersecurity ecosystem.

India needs a 10-year Sovereignty Moonshot Plan. The goal is clear: move India from being a sophisticated consumer of frontier AI to becoming a stakeholder that helps shape its development, deployment, safety, and governance. To do that, we have to build infrastructure sovereignty. Delay means only one thing: hardened dependence.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow - NITI Aayog

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

Numbers vs governance

This refers to 'A bloated Cabinet is a really bad idea' (May 11). What is true about the size of our Cabinet of Ministers for it to function effectively and efficiently is also true about the idea of increasing the number of members of Parliament, via delimitation, as this would likely make our legislative body unwieldy rather than ensure added substance in its deliberations and discussions.

In this digital age, where technology can enhance the administration's ability to deliver, it is a backward assumption to believe that more numbers equal higher quality governance.

If there is room for more ministers to be appointed, claims and pressure from various interest groups to demand their piece of the cake are bound to increase, making future governments vulnerable to instability and internal disenchantment, which will undoubtedly have an impact on their performance.

Kamal Laddha

Bengaluru

The op-ed "A bloated cabinet is a bad idea" rightly underscored the perils of proliferating ministries - too many cooks, as the saying goes, can indeed spoil the broth.

Yet, it would be remiss to overlook the inherent advantage embedded in such expansion. When ministries are delineated across finance, economy, energy, education, industry, consumer affairs, and social welfare, they enable sharper focus, deeper analysis, and more comprehensive planning. In a nation where resources remain scarce, this segmentation allows each ministry to channel its energies toward its targeted beneficiaries with greater precision. Moreover, the systematic appraisal of Key Performance Indicators across these ministries transforms the structure from mere bureaucracy into a

performance-oriented framework. In essence, while multiplicity carries risks, it also holds the promise of more accountable, exhaustive, and beneficiary-driven governance.

Roy Markose

Thiruvananthapuram

Promise and pitfalls

Apropos "CERC sends out feelers for 'capacity markets' (May 11) Capacity markets are mechanisms where power producers are paid not just for electricity generated but for ensuring availability during peak demand by installing adequate capacity, some of which may remain idle. For generating companies, they promise stable revenue streams, yet

raise financial issues if auction rules overcompensate inefficient plants. The rapid increase in renewable energy capacity complicates matters: while solar and wind reduce reliance on conventional generation, they also demand flexible backup in the form of fossil fuels-based generation and battery storage, which capacity markets often under-incentivise. For consumers, the benefits lie in improved reliability and reduced risk of blackouts. However, unless designed transparently, costs may rise, undermining affordability and equity in the power sector.

O Prasada Rao

Hyderabad

Trump's China challenges

Iran, trade issues will dominate Trump-Xi talks

Sridhar Krishnaswami

Less than a week before his much awaited visit and in a summit with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, US President Donald Trump has firmly rejected any notion that China is challenging the US over the war with Iran stressing his "very good" relationship.

"We haven't been challenged by China. They don't challenge us" adding that Xi "wouldn't do that... I don't think he'd do that because of me". Separately, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that Beijing was the worst hit by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz urging China to push Tehran to open the crucial navigation line.

It is not as if Iran is suddenly making the headlines ahead of Trump's impending visit to China. Since the war started on February 28, Beijing has been expressing its opposition to the hostilities and in the aftermath of the shutting down the Hormuz has been calling upon Iran to keep the vital international waterways open.

China is the largest buyer of Iranian crude in the upwards of 80 per cent and the billions of dollars in revenue generated reportedly bankrolling about 45 per cent of Iranian government's budget. More important, it is said that 50 per cent of all China's imports come through the Strait of Hormuz.

China is Iran's largest trading partner with official bilateral trade pegged at around \$14 billion, which is said to exclude "significant" unofficial oil transactions through third country intermediaries to evade American sanctions. And in 2021 Tehran and Beijing signed a 25-year cooperation agreement that pledged \$400 billion investment in Iran's energy, infrastructure and technology sectors.

CHINA'S INTERESTS

But media reports speak of very little of this having come through primarily because of hesitancy of Chinese companies due sanctions restrictions. In fact China's interest in seeing a quick end to the war in Iran is also because of its extensive economic interests in the Middle East especially in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that go far beyond energy to include investment, technology and market opportunities for Chinese companies.

Even without the war in Iran, Trump would have had a plate full



US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping (file photo) REUTERS

during the summit for China is one of the largest export markets for the US and for China, the US is its top export market. The biggest trade friction has been Washington running a trade deficit in the upwards of \$200 billion which has been coming down; but a surplus of about \$34 billion in services. Often forgotten in all the rhetoric on trade surplus, tariffs and sanctions is China's huge holding of US Treasury bonds — a whopping \$760 billion. China is the second largest foreign creditor to the US after Japan.

In spite of a close relationship with Iran, China has been measured in its role in the Middle East war. Undoubtedly Beijing has called for cessation of hostilities and keeping the Hormuz open; but offering only diplomatic support to Tehran at international forums like the United Nations. There have been some unverified reports of China supplying weapons or components for Iranian missiles but even Trump has sought to downplay these purported transactions.

"I wrote him a letter asking him not to do that, and he wrote me a letter to say that, essentially, he's not doing that", Trump said in a recent interview. In fact Beijing has always carefully distanced itself from Tehran's regional policies, especially regarding its proxies like the Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis.

Xi will want to come away with as much as he can on Taiwan and the South China Seas with nations eagerly perked up to see how the two leaders address outstanding concerns in a vital part of the world. Coming to an agreement with Iran including keeping the Strait of Hormuz open may get Trump the "big, fat hug" from Xi but the rest of Indo-Pacific is hopeful of its interests protected at the summit.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

ASEAN's elusive search for financial safety

The ASEAN+3's Samarkand decision for a safety net to guard against financial volatility is still shrouded in uncertainty



GETTY IMAGES

MACROSCAN.



CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

On May 3, Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors from the ASEAN+3 grouping (consisting of 10 ASEAN members and China, Japan and South Korea) issued a statement, following meetings in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. It recognised that the "conflict in the Middle East" had increased risks for the East and Southeast Asian region, requiring attention to the possibility of "excessive volatility and disorderly movements in financial markets and shifts in global liquidity conditions."

In response, the ASEAN+3 governments are working to amend the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM) arrangement, a network of dollar swaps backed by reserves of central banks in the region.

The amendment, when implemented, would transition the CMIM from being a "contributory arrangement", with members pledging to release promised funds when any other member requests emergency financing, to being a "Paid-in Capital" Fund, where contributions are actually made upfront and transferred to a special legal entity, making it immediately available as and when required by balance of payments stressed countries.

This would bring the regional arrangement closest to an Asian Monetary Fund, or a regional alternative to the IMF — an idea that was mooted by Japan after the 1997 South-East Asian financial crisis and shot down by the US and the IMF, for fear of loss of their influence.

There is still some uncertainty as to whether the transition would go through. ASEAN+3 members have even now agreed only on three of the four principles that would govern the creation and functioning of the entity that would host and manage the paid-in corpus — these are that this legal entity must be independent of the member countries; it must recruit and deploy expert managerial and other personnel (to match the IMF perhaps); and that the system must be designed for effective coordination between its surveillance and lending functions.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

But divergent national interests, the ASEAN statement confesses, have held back agreement on the fourth principle of ensuring a 'sound management structure', involving the all-important decision-making systems and oversight frameworks of the proposed independent entity.

This is no small matter. The effort to create a regional financial safety net in East and South-East Asia, has a long and tortuous history.

It began almost five decades back in August 1977 when, faced with the uncertainties generated by the oil shocks, central banks and monetary authorities from the original ASEAN members (Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) committed to providing "immediate short-term swap facilities to participating ASEAN member countries with temporary international liquidity problems."

The Arrangement provided for "the sale of US dollars against the domestic currency of the requesting participant," along with a forward purchase of the same amount of domestic currency by the requesting participant for US dollars.

The facility was backed by "pledges to provide", with members agreeing to share the burden of supporting requests for emergency balance of payments financing.

The arrangement has changed much over these five decades. One continuous change has been an expansion of the implicit 'corpus' backing the ASA, which began in 1977 at a small and inadequate \$100 million, touched \$2 billion in 2005. That was inadequate, since this was a period when, following liberalisation of the capital account, the balance and payments vulnerability of LMICs increased because of recurrent exit of foreign finance in a trajectory characterised by boom-bust financial flow cycles.

That necessitated substantially increasing the dollar commitments that back any meaningful financial safety net. At that time such a hike could not have been supported by just the ASEAN countries. But since the collateral effects of the South-East Asian crisis also affected the more developed countries in the region — China, Japan and South Korea — they were willing to support the safety net, resulting in the creation of the ASEAN+3 and the integration of the ASA into the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) in 2009.

The CMI had two pillars. One was an enhanced ASEAN swap arrangement, with contributions now set at \$1 billion. The second pillar was a network of "bilateral" swap arrangements under which countries could request a swap of their currencies for dollars up to an agreed amount.

The CMI provided for negotiation of 33 bilateral currency swap arrangements of which 30 were between each of the Northeast Asian nations (China, Japan and South Korea) and each of the 10 ASEAN members and three were

The initial understanding was that of the total pool of \$120 billion, 80 per cent would be contributed by the Plus 3 countries and the rest by ASEAN countries

CMIM contributions as of 2009

	\$ billion	%
Plus three	96	80
China total	38.4	32
China	34.2	28.5
Hong Kong	4.2	3.5
Japan	38.4	32
South Korea	19.2	16
ASEAN	24	20
Indonesia	4.77	3.79
Malaysia	4.77	3.79
Philippines	3.68	3.79
Singapore	4.77	3.79
Thailand	4.77	3.79
Vietnam	1	0.83
Cambodia	0.12	0.1
Myanmar	0.06	0.05
Laos	0.03	0.03
Brunei	0.01	0.03
ASEAN+3	120	100

between the Northeast Asian nations themselves. This helped raise the dollar surpluses committed to backing the ASEAN financial safety net to a much higher \$120 billion in 2009 and \$240 billion in 2014.

However, the system was still one involving bilateral swap arrangements, besides being backed only with "pledges" rather than an actual corpus into which dollar funds were transferred.

BILATERAL VS MULTILATERAL

In fact, the problem with the CMI was the large bilateral component of what was a multilateral arrangement. This meant decision making and implementation were cumbersome, slow and uncertain.

This inadequacy appeared stark after the 2007 financial crisis and was addressed by ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers in May 2009 with a decision that the arrangement must be multilateralised and transitioned to the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralised (CMIM).

The initial understanding was that of the total pool of \$120 billion, 80 per cent would be contributed by the Plus 3 countries and the rest by ASEAN countries.

One issue was how the commitments to the pool would be distributed, since that would determine the relative influence (in the form of voting rights) of the different players, especially the plus-3 countries.

Given the need to balance the influence of contesting powers China and Japan, China (along with Hong Kong) was allotted \$38.4 billion in contributions and proportionate voting rights, which equalled that of Japan (see table). That distribution remained when the "pledged corpus" was increased to

\$240 billion in July 2014 with no other change of significance.

SURVEILLANCE ISSUE

There was one more hurdle to cross. If and when large loans were provided, there was need for some degree of surveillance to ensure that the country "borrowing" dollars via the swap would be in a position to return the dollars and settle the transaction when the swap agreement expires.

Neither China nor Japan would have liked to give the other the right to surveillance of the funding it provides through the now-multilateralised "pool" of bilateral swaps. To address this problem, while the rules governing individual swaps were left to be bilaterally negotiated, it was agreed that there was "need to establish a link with the IMF for surveillance and monitoring, as a substitute for regional conditionality and monitoring".

Beyond a specified borrowing limit, a borrower from the CMIM was required to have entered into an agreement with the IMF and be subject to the latter's conditionality and surveillance to be eligible for support. Initially any swap in excess of 10 per cent of the agreed amount in an arrangement required IMF surveillance. That was raised to 20, 30 and 40 per cent subsequently.

With hindsight we now know that nothing came of these cooperation efforts.

Countries preferred to turn to the US Federal Reserve or bilateral swap agreements outside the CMIM in times of emergency.

On the other hand, the CMIM has not been activated even once since its inception, despite balance of payments volatility.

The principal explanation for that failure was the subordination of the regional agreement to the IMF.

If obtaining a small sum from the CMIM safety net required IMF endorsement with a conditional loan, countries may as well opt for a direct and large loan, and the accompanying conditionality and surveillance, from the IMF.

Seen in this background the Samarkand promise to transition the CMIM from a "promise-to-pay" swap system to a Paid-in Capital (PIC) structure, which would make the war chest more easily accessible to balance of payments distressed countries while significant, is by no means transformational.

What needs to be addressed is the ability of the regional arrangement to be able to take decisions on lending without having to rely on surveillance by the IMF.

This makes the still absent agreement on the "fourth principle" on decision making structures and surveillance mechanisms extremely significant. If that is not resolved, either the PIC structure will not be formalised, or it will take a form in which once again utilisation will be minimal.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 12, 2006

Market plunges on Left's ascent

The electoral victory of the Left front in Kerala and West Bengal appears to have cast a shadow on the stock markets on Thursday. The BSE Sensex, which opened firm, reversed its course mid-way on news reports that the Left would increase pressure on the coalition Government at the Centre. The benchmark BSE-30 Sensex dropped by 176.97 points or 1.40 per cent to 12,435.41.

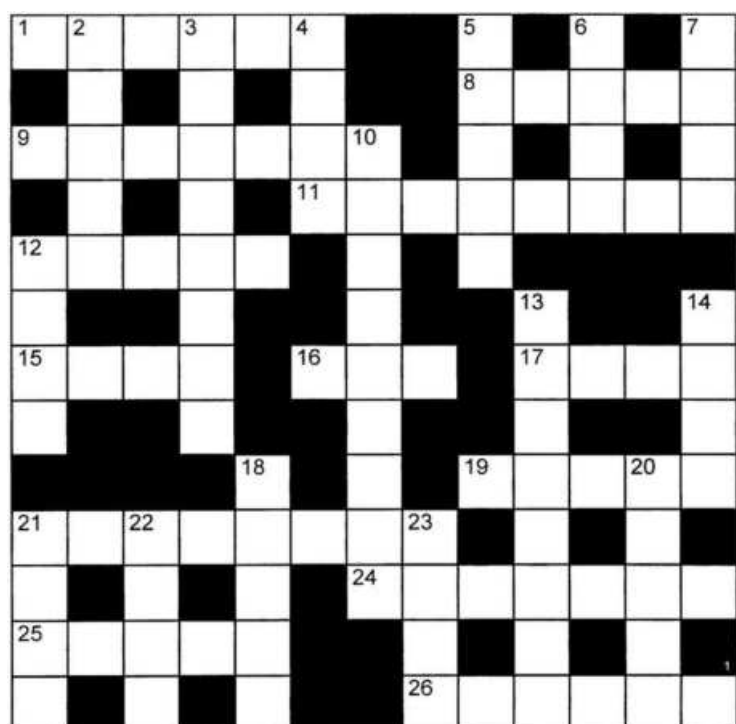
Monsanto curbed from charging Rs 900 for Bt cotton seeds

The Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Commission (MRTPC) has directed the US biotech major, Monsanto not to charge the trait value of Rs 900 for a packet of 450 gm for Bt cotton seeds in an interim order pronounced in the court on Thursday.

Burmans' set to take over Punjab Tractors

The Burman family seems firmly on track to take over the reins of Punjab Tractors Ltd (PTL). The family's representative on the PTL board, Mr P.D. Narang, on Thursday was appointed non-executive Chairman of the tractor company at a board meeting. He replaces Mr S.K. Tuteja.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2677



EASY

ACROSS

1. Winged heavenly infant (6)
8. The precincts, circuit (5)
9. Blame, reproof (7)
11. Out of one's mind (8)
12. Money-lending at high interest (5)
15. Plunge head-first (4)
16. Is allowed to (3)
17. Bucket (4)
19. Baby's comforter (5)
21. Baggage-animal handler (8)
24. Childish fit of rage (7)
25. Long-spiked garden flower (5)
26. Tank gun-housing (6)

DOWN

2. Gets ball back from scrum (5)
3. Bead-strings used in prayer (8)
4. Member of the Aves (4)
5. Place of safe retreat (5)
6. Death notice in paper (abbr) (4)
7. Collar fastener (4)
10. Container for Anguillidae (3-6)
12. Untie knot (4)
13. Articulate in fury (8)
14. Be engaged in sport (4)
18. Detached piece of rock (5)
20. Timid, colourless person (5)
21. Nourishing fluid (4)
22. Mouth-parts (4)
23. Declaim bombastically, storm (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Junior reporter takes her in, a chubby-cheeked child (6)
8. Before midday, a part is devoted to the precincts (5)
9. Chapter-leader will make certain of telling-off (7)
11. Indeed, it meant a loss that made one crazy (8)
12. Overmuch interest is taken in us taking a turn on railway (5)
15. Get beneath the surface of such a low haunt (4)
16. It is allowed to blossom: but when? (3)
17. Bucket-shop might supply it to friend one included (4)
19. Ventriloquist's model sort of comforter (5)
21. His charges, they say, are known to be stubborn (8)
24. With so much French spirit a show of temper is produced (7)
25. Flower coming up in an incomplete row (5)
26. It holds lathe-operator's cutter for a tank-top (6)

DOWN

2. Lists how one makes partial shoe repair for cads (5)
3. Almost got up a sign of the Zodiac with rows of beads (8)
4. Flighty thing done by those sentenced (4)
5. A restful place in Paradise abandoned by Eve finally (5)
6. Ring piece newspapers publish shortly as a memorial (4)
7. Breeding farm may be collared by the boss (4)
10. Best a keel can provide is a holder for a sort of fish (3-6)
12. Resolve the sound it made, losing head (4)
13. Spy didn't finish turning turtle, and will speak with fury (8)
14. Such a drama may be merely recreation (4)
18. Weight of this however is expressed in carats (5)
20. Creature for doctor in the army to employ for black eye (5)
21. Sort of bar that may give one the shakes (4)
22. Devices for pouring such as meet in osculation (4)
23. Wild outcry at its inclusion in an improper anthology (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2676

ACROSS 1. Down-hearted 8. Extracts 9. Bath 10. Psalm 13. Rain 16. Moor 17. Maze 18. Neat 20. Emend 24. Army 25. Practise 26. Out-patients

DOWN 2. Oath 3. Nears 4. Extol 5. Tiber 6. Detrimental 7. Changes over 11. Alive 12. Midge 14. Alas 15. Nova 19. Tryst 21. Merit 22. Niche 23. List



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

A calibrated demand deflation

The PM's advice on consumption reflects the economic pain inflicted by the war in West Asia

When the war in West Asia started on February 28, India was preparing for elections in four states and a Union Territory. The entrenched populism in India's policy response ruled out any significant action to mitigate the war's economic pain. Now that the elections are over, the economic policy response to the war and its unprecedented supply shock is back on the table.

Speaking in Telangana on Sunday, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi hinted at what is coming when he asked people to voluntarily reduce their consumption of petrol-diesel and foreign exchange (which is what buying less gold and taking fewer foreign trips entails).

The PM's advice needs to be read in the real rather than populist economic context. The ongoing war shows no signs of ending anytime soon. Unless this changes, hopes that the supply shocks will be transient rather than persistent are fading daily. The depreciation of the rupee — partly because of more expensive oil and partly because global investors are becoming more bearish on India due to reasons such as lack of AI play etc. — is only increasing the pain.

The government has two choices: Either pretend that all is well and run a higher current account deficit — this will require more borrowing or drawing down of foreign exchange reserves — or undertake calibrated demand deflation to mitigate the war's external account impact. The PM's comments on Sunday are the wink-wink part of the policy response before the government deploys the nudge-nudge part of it. It can increase petrol-diesel prices or make tweaks to Liberal Remittance Scheme (LRS) rules to force people to cut down on their consumption of energy or foreign exchange.

Given the situation facing the economy, and the uncertainty regarding restoration of normalcy in the global energy markets, there is nothing wrong with a calibrated demand deflation. Of course, "calibrated" is the operative word here. For example, the government should be willing to throw the kitchen sink at securing fertiliser supplies for failing to secure these will cause a huge crisis on the food security front, which the country can ill-afford. What will also be important is a consistent rather than confused calibration when the government sets out to do this. It will do well to use the lessons learnt during the pandemic.

Understanding the rise of Reform UK

The results of last week's council elections in the UK point to the decline in popularity of the ruling Labour Party across Britain: It lost 1,400 councillors across England, saw its strength diminished in Scotland, and lost power in Wales.

The big takeaway from these polls, which saw two-thirds of the electorate vote, is that British electoral politics is no longer a duopoly but a hugely fragmented landscape: The influence of the two traditional biggies, Labour and the chief opposition, the Conservatives, is declining, while the Reform UK and, to a small extent, the Greens are gaining ground. The Liberal Democrats, one pole of the UK's original bipolar polity, are still around, though a shadow of their original centrist self. The present results reveal an electorate that seems alienated from the traditional UK parties that have been in the government and opposition. The increasing acceptance for Reform UK has to be seen against this backdrop. A political startup formed in 2018 around the Brexit agenda, the rise of the Reform UK is revealing, especially considering its espousal of anti-immigration and anti-minority agendas. A wobbling British economy, characterised by high unemployment, and the rise of anti-immigration sentiment, both a part of the same continuum, have contributed to Reform UK's popularity.

The results are likely to undermine the position of Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who has lost considerable ground since winning office in 2024. Forty Labour MPs have asked him to step down. His leadership has been under a cloud ever since Peter Mandelson, his appointee to Washington, was forced to quit after revelations in the Epstein Files. Labour may need a reset, just as it did by inventing the idea of New Labour in the wake of the Conservative onslaught in the Thatcherite era.

Seeking synthesising generalists in AI age

Coaching factories have killed the infrastructure that enabled multi-dimensional intellectual development. India must rebuild, deliberately and at scale, the competitive public culture that trained its brightest minds to become highly accomplished generalists

Convo Hall in IIT Delhi, sometime around 1983. Two quizzing teams face each other in Rendezvous: St Stephen's and IIT Delhi, two of the best quiz teams in India. On the IIT Delhi side, one contestant cannot stop laughing, because the person he is trying to destroy is his old quizzing partner from St Columba's. At St Stephen's in the early 1980s, Bhaskar Chakravorti is skewering opponents with a wit so devastating that people show up to debates just to watch. A team from IIT Bombay, including Nandan Nilekani and Jairam Ramesh, sweeps college festivals in Delhi in 1974. And Suhel Seth travels all the way from Calcutta to compete in college festivals across India, because that is what you did. You crossed the country to test yourself against the best.

In the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), these long-ago scenes turn out to

matter more than anyone could have imagined. AI is the most powerful analytical specialist ever built. What it cannot reliably do is synthesise across domains, connect ideas from unrelated fields, and exercise judgement under genuine ambiguity.

That capability is exactly what India's school and college competition circuit was training at national scale. India's competition circuit from the mid-1970s through the late 1980s was the centre of school and college life. Quizzing, debating, elocution, JAM, and theatre, layered on top of one of the world's most demanding examination systems. The institutions were St Columba's, St Stephen's, DPS, La Martiniere, IIT Delhi, IIT Bombay, JNU, SRCC, Presidency College, Madras Christian College, Jadavpur University, St Xavier's Bombay.

Arun Jaitley dominated Delhi University debating. Shashi Tharoor founded the St Stephen's Quiz Club and dazzled across formats. Swapna Dasgupta came from Calcutta's La Martiniere to join St Stephen's. A young Shah Rukh Khan, Sword of Honour winner at St Columba's, was channeling the same competitive energy into theatre with Barry John's Theatre Action Group.

What made this circuit special was that exam results alone meant nothing socially. You had to perform, publicly, across multiple formats, against the best in the country. The quizzier who could not debate was incomplete. The

debater who could not survive a JAM round was not respected. These were the *dadas* of their generation, and their currency was multi-dimensional intellectual performance, not money or connections. The circuit was training bright young people to synthesise, improvise, and shift between analytical and intuitive modes under pressure, the very capability that research on high-performing managers identifies as the hallmark of outstanding achievers.

Then the lid came off. The American graduate school pipeline matured. India opened up in 1991. And this generation exploded across every field simultaneously. The institutional and competitive ecosystem of this period produced a Nobel laureate (Abhijit Banerjee), the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (Raghuram Rajan), two consecutive Deans of Harvard Business School (Nitin Nohria and Srikant Datar), the founder of InfoEdge (Sanjeev Bikhchandani), the President of the World Bank (Ajay Banga), the CEOs or co-CEOs of Citigroup, Deutsche Bank, PepsiCo, IBM, Diageo, and the SoftBank Vision Fund, the global COO of Unilever, the inventor of the 4G wireless standard (Rajiv Laroia), the architect of Aadhaar (Nandan Nilekani), India's finance minister (Arun Jaitley), and one of the biggest movie stars in the world (Shah Rukh Khan).

Add to this foundational scholars at Princeton, Duke, Michigan, Cornell, Brown, and MIT, one of the country's finest historians, its most consequen-



In the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), these long-ago scenes turn out to matter more than anyone could have imagined.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



Jayant Sinha

India (Raghuram Rajan), two consecutive Deans of Harvard Business School (Nitin Nohria and Srikant Datar), the founder of InfoEdge (Sanjeev Bikhchandani), the President of the World Bank (Ajay Banga), the CEOs or co-CEOs of Citigroup, Deutsche Bank, PepsiCo, IBM, Diageo, and the SoftBank Vision Fund, the global COO of Unilever, the inventor of the 4G wireless standard (Rajiv Laroia), the architect of Aadhaar (Nandan Nilekani), India's finance minister (Arun Jaitley), and one of the biggest movie stars in the world (Shah Rukh Khan).

Add to this foundational scholars at Princeton, Duke, Michigan, Cornell, Brown, and MIT, one of the country's finest historians, its most consequen-

tial public intellectuals, and its leading journalists. All from the same ecosystem. All within 15 years. The range is the point. These are not a few specialists in one field. They are synthesising generalists who led across technology, finance, scholarship, politics, media, entertainment, and institutional design. The closed economy concentrated talent and the competition circuit trained versatility.

Today's students are as bright and driven as any generation before them. But the system optimising their talent has narrowed drastically. Coaching factories maximise exam scores and nothing else, producing analytical specialists who can crack the JEE but have never debated, quizzed, or thought on their feet in a room full of sceptics. Meanwhile, algorithmic attention capture is displacing the sustained reading and broad curiosity that the circuit depended on.

The problem is not the students. The problem is that the infrastructure for multi-dimensional intellectual development is atrophying, precisely when AI is commoditising analytical specialisation at breathtaking speed. The synthesising generalist is becoming the scarcest and most valuable form of human capital on earth. India trained exactly this kind of mind for 15

years, and the results speak for themselves. India built this system almost by accident.

Pre-liberalisation scarcity created the hothouse. The competition circuit trained the versatility. The result was a generation that led the world. Now India must build it again, deliberately: National quizzing and public speaking leagues, university festival revival grants, credit-bearing interdisciplinary performance modules, and AI-assisted debate tournaments that use new technology to train the human capabilities technology cannot replace.

Quizzing, debating, JAM, theatre, elocution: These are not extracurricular luxuries. They are the infrastructure of human capital formation for the AI age. The task now is to rebuild, deliberately and at scale, the competitive public culture that trained India's brightest minds to become highly accomplished generalists.

Jayant Sinha is President of the Everstone Group and Visiting Professor in Practice at the London School of Economics. He is a product of this competition circuit, having attended St Columba's, IIT Delhi, and later Harvard Business School, before serving as Union minister of State for finance and civil aviation. The views expressed are personal

Lab to life shift for innovation in India

Bharat's innovation story is no longer emerging — it is axiomatic, defined by a unique fusion of demographic prowess, digital infrastructure, and an unyielding spirit of ingenuity. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasised, our journey is about moving from "idea to innovation, and from innovation to impact". That shift is now visible across our higher education institutions. It is also finding expression on the global stage.

In June this year, Bharat Innovates will be held in Nice, France. It will bring together over 100 deep-tech ventures and more than 50 research-led innovations emerging from India's premier institutions. These will engage with global industry, investors, and research partners across critical domains — from health care and advanced computing to space, energy, and agri-technologies.

In many ways, Bharat Innovates represents the next step in this journey. It is where ideas nurtured in our laboratories, and refined through our institutions, are presented to the world with confidence. It reflects a growing national capability — not only to innovate, but to translate that innovation into solutions that can serve both India and the world.

Over the past decade, India has built an enabling environment that connects research more closely with real-world application. This shift has been supported by a steady strengthening of the research ecosystem. Investments in doctoral talent, long-term funding frameworks, and innovation capital are now beginning to work in alignment while the Prime Minister's Research Fellowship is deepening the research pipeline. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation is bringing greater direction and scale to funding. And the Research, Development and Innovation scheme is unlocking capital for high-risk, high-impact work in emerging sectors.

At its core lies a simple principle: Research must not only expand the frontiers of knowledge, but also solve real-world problems. India's approach has been to bring these together ensuring that innovation is not only cutting-edge, but also accessible, scalable, and relevant.

The results are now visible. Startups emerging from our higher education institutions are shaping entire sectors. Ather Energy, incubated at IIT Madras, has advanced indigenous electric mobility. Sedemac, emerging from IIT Bombay, has become a global player in embedded systems. ImmunOACT is delivering affordable, next-generation cancer therapies. GalaxEye is building multi-sensor satellites with applications across agriculture, maritime, and defence. Tricog Health has enabled early cardiac screening at scale, supporting over 30 million screenings globally.

These are not isolated successes. They are outcomes of a system where research, incubation, and entrepreneurship are closely aligned.

This shift is also visible within institutions. Centres of Excellence are producing deployable technologies across sectors. At IIT Madras, research has led to fibre-optic sensing systems for real-time industrial monitoring. AI-enabled radiography tools are improving defect detection in manufacturing. Autonomous robotic systems are enhancing rail safety. Advances in materials are enabling

diamond traceability and authentication. Work in biotechnology is building capabilities in tissue engineering and regenerative medicine.

Across just 15 such Centres of Excellence, these efforts have already resulted in over 245 patents and 50 startups. This transformation is also reflected in the scale of India's startup ecosystem. From fewer than 500 startups a decade ago, India today has over 2.23 lakh recognised startups, with nearly 55,000 added in the last year alone. We are now the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world, with over 120 unicorns and more than 23 lakh jobs created.

A significant part of this momentum is being shaped by our higher education institutions. Across campuses, we are witnessing a clear cultural shift — from a focus on secure placements to a growing aspiration for building enterprises. This movement from packages to startups reflects the confidence of a new generation ready to create, take risks, and solve problems at scale.

But scale alone doesn't suffice; a successful innovation ecosystem needs to spread too. Nearly half of our startups are emerging from tier II and tier III cities. Over 45% have women in leadership roles. Innovation in India is becoming distributed, inclusive, and deeply rooted across the country.

This is democratisation of innovation, also visible in India's approach to AI in education. Initiatives such as Bodhan AI are leveraging multilingual technologies to make learning more inclusive and accessible across diverse linguistic contexts.

Such efforts reflect India's broader contribution to the Global South — where innovation is not only advanced, but designed to be inclusive, adaptable, and scalable across societies.

As we look ahead, the next phase of this journey must deepen this shift. We are committed to strengthening industry participation in research along with creating stronger pathways for translating research into products. A key step in this direction is to move towards more product-oriented doctoral research — where a PhD does not culminate only in a thesis, but in a tangible product or deployable technology.

This will require a more active partnership with industry. Greater co-creation, early-stage engagement, and long-term investment in research will be critical. Industry must be adopters of innovation and active participants in shaping it. This will accelerate the journey from discovery to deployment. It will also create a new generation of researchers who are equally at ease building solutions and advancing theory.

This is central to the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat. It is about building technologies in India, for India and the world. It is equally central to the idea of a Viksit Bharat, where growth is driven by knowledge, innovation, and inclusion.

Bharat Innovates reflects where India stands today. More importantly, it signals where India is headed: It is no longer only generating ideas, it is deploying them at scale and with confidence. The journey from lab to life is well underway.

Dharmendra Pradhan is Union education minister. The views expressed are personal

{ GUO JIAKUN } SPOKESPERSON, FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTRY, PRC

China is willing to work with the US in the spirit of equality, respect, and mutual benefit, to... manage differences, and inject more stability and certainty into a volatile... world

Ahead of Trump-Xi meeting in Beijing



What the Iran conflict says about US power

The US-Israel war against Iran shows that overwhelming military and economic power no longer guarantee control. As adversaries resist and partners hedge, the US faces structural limits in translating dominance into stable outcomes.

Even as peace proposals and counter-proposals were "studied", and rejected, by the parties to the war, uncertainty lingers across several aspects. This reveals a deeper reality: The US can mobilise overwhelming military and economic power, yet struggles to convert that power into durable political outcomes. When diplomacy falters, Washington increasingly falls back on coercive instruments — from naval pressure in the Strait of Hormuz to wider economic disruption. Yet this shift exposes a central limitation: Escalation can impose costs, but it cannot compel outcomes on its own terms. In the war against Iran, Washington has demonstrated its ability to escalate, impose costs, and disrupt adversaries. What it has not demonstrated is the ability to stabilise the situation on its own terms. The US can project force with precision and sustain economic pressure at scale, but it struggles to translate these capabilities into desired consequences. The result is a paradox at the heart of geopolitics today: American power, while unmatched, is increasingly constrained.

Despite overwhelming naval and air superiority, the US has struggled to fully secure the Strait of Hormuz. Sure, it has a blockade in place to ensure Iran doesn't alone have full control of the commerce across the strait. But Iran's asymmetric strategy effectively demonstrated first that control over the global commons cannot be taken for granted. For the US, this is not a failure of capability, but of translation. It can strike decisively, but it cannot prevent adversaries from exacting systemic costs. Disruptions in the strait have triggered price shocks that feed back into the American economy, constraining political support for the war. Overall, even as Iran faces disruptions due to the American blockade, that hasn't yet forced it to stop inflicting economic pain on the US and its allies across the globe by shutting down Hormuz.

These limits are reinforced by shifts in the international order. Regional partners are recalibrating and hedging rather than aligning fully. At the same time, adversarial States are coordinating to blunt the impact of US sanctions and military pressure, while middle powers are refusing to choose sides. Prolonged conflicts impose economic and political costs that con-

strain Washington's room for manoeuvre. The US now operates in a system where others can resist, evade, or opt out of the geopolitical paradigm of its choosing. In this environment, dominance no longer guarantees compliance and coercion no longer ensures outcomes. The forthcoming visit of Donald Trump to Beijing, despite deep strategic differences between the two powers, underscores this reality: Washington increasingly recognizes that even its principal rival remains indispensable in managing the current crises such as surrounding Hormuz.

China's engagement with Iran underscores both the reach and the limits of American coercive power. By sustaining selected channels with Tehran, Beijing ensures that Iran remains economically viable despite sanctions pressure, while carefully balancing its broader global interests.

Nor are these dynamics confined to adversaries. India, despite deepening strategic ties with the US, has remained cautious about entanglement in the conflict. Driven by energy vulnerabilities and a preference for strategic autonomy, New Delhi continues to engage multiple actors rather than align fully with any one side. Even close partners hedge — limiting Washington's ability to build

cohesive coalitions. The US can no longer simultaneously sustain its military dominance, economic stability, and political legitimacy. Each escalation strengthens one dimension while weakening the others. Military action disrupts adversaries but destabilises markets. Efforts to stabilise markets dilute strategic pressure. Attempts to avoid escalation preserve economic stability but erode credibility. In such a system, power is defined less by decisive action than by the ability to manage trade-offs — and that is where US dominance is increasingly constrained.

The war against Iran does not signal the decline of American power. It reveals its limits. The US remains the most capable power, but operates in an environment where others can choose from a range of options against its influence. In such a world, dominance does not translate automatically into control. Stability is no longer a by-product of power — it is contingent, negotiated, and fragile. The challenge for Washington is no longer how to project power, but how to exercise it within constraints it can no longer fully control.

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G Venkat Raman



Dharmendra Pradhan

Beyond appeals

Prices are the best way to change consumer behaviour

The crisis at the Strait of Hormuz will have a deep and prolonged effect on energy markets globally — and thus on inflation, output and growth. There is still no clarity on how long the crisis will continue. The Union government is clearly taking this threat seriously, which is admirable. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent speech on the subject shows that it recognises the potential dangers of this geopolitical shock — especially the threat it poses to macroeconomic stability. When the price of crude oil stays elevated for long, India is particularly vulnerable to pressures on its external account. Thus, the Prime Minister was careful to stress the importance of conserving foreign exchange. He centred this around seven appeals to the nation. These include minimising foreign travel, cutting down on the amount of cooking oil used, and using public transport in order to reduce the consumption of petrol and diesel. The Prime Minister further called upon farmers to use less fertiliser, which is dependent on imported inputs that are part of the petrochemical supply chain. There was also an appeal to not buy gold. Indian purchases of gold are a perpetual drain on foreign exchange.

The government's intent is to be lauded. Naturally, however, this cannot be the extent of how the government responds to the threat. Behavioural injunctions are valuable but policy choices matter even more. If the government allows prices to adjust swiftly in response to the changed supply situation, then people will automatically follow suit. There is reluctance in the Indian polity to allowing prices to shift, for fear of the impact on vulnerable sections. This is a valid concern. Naturally, any distress that might be caused can and should be remedied by targeted intervention. For instance, the government has already set aside a credit-guarantee plan for this purpose. Such concerns are, however, not a reason to avoid using prices. In particular, it is far more likely that the consumption of petrol and diesel will be reduced if their prices are allowed to rise in a controlled but responsive manner to the global prices.

This is, technically, the system India already has to some extent. But the fact is that there are still political constraints on how much prices are allowed to adjust. Under such crisis circumstances — and it is clear now that the government correctly views this as a crisis — these constraints should be set aside. Some in Opposition parties have already begun to suggest that any changes to the prices of petrol and diesel will become a political issue. But these efforts must be ignored. There is every reason to believe that the public understands the broader global context of price increases. The government must also clearly communicate that neither the oil-marketing companies (OMCs) nor the Budget can indefinitely shield consumers. OMCs are reported to be facing under-recoveries worth ₹30,000 crore per month.

Two other macroeconomic realities should be kept in mind. First, the safest approach to concerns about the current-account deficit is to allow the rupee to depreciate in such a way that imports generally decline. This does indeed appear to be the current policy, and it should be maintained. The second is that solid capital inflows can help manage such situations. Thus, the government must identify why the economy continues to be subject to capital outflows, including by foreign institutional investors. Reversing this trend will require accelerating the pace of reforms, including administrative reforms.

Temporary obstacle

Judicial roadblocks for tariffs won't change Mr Trump's mind

United States (US) President Donald Trump's trade policy has received another blow from the country's judiciary. The US Court of International Trade, a federal court that adjudicates civil disputes arising out of Customs and trade laws, last week ruled in favour of a company, Burlap and Barrel, which had said that the President had exceeded his legal authority in imposing 10 per cent tariffs on imports under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974. The Section was designed for the executive to quickly respond to a serious crisis in the balance of payments, by imposing across-the-board tariffs on all imports. Clearly, the intent behind the law was to stave off the immediate expenditure on imports at a moment of financial instability. The President, however, imposed these tariffs when the US Supreme Court earlier this year struck down his so-called reciprocal tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). The court, however, limited the immediate impact of this verdict by indicating that only the specific complainant be reimbursed, not every single importer that has so far been forced to pay the 10 per cent levy.

On the one hand, this makes planning for trade to the US even more complicated. It introduces additional uncertainty since it is not certain who will appeal to have tariffs rebated, and who will win its case and when. On the other hand, it does not mean that the President, who has designed his economic policies around tariffs and has been a strong supporter of protectionism for decades, will necessarily retreat from his position. There are still other options in his arsenal, including the possibility of import duties under Section 301, which empowers the US Trade Representative (USTR) to investigate and retaliate against foreign nations' trade policies that are found to be unreasonable or discriminatory. The administration had warned that it would try multiple routes to restore higher tariffs after the Supreme Court's verdict.

For many countries around the world, including India, the possibility of Section 301 tariffs is even more concerning than the arbitrary IEEPA levies the President introduced last year. While they are procedurally more complex to introduce, requiring a formal investigation alongside a consultation with the economy being targeted, they are also much harder to remove. India's placement on the USTR's Special 301 Priority Watch List — alongside China, Indonesia, Russia, Chile and Venezuela — is a danger signal. This list is formalised following a supposed review of "the state of IP (intellectual property) protection and enforcement in US trading partners around the world". The USTR has also claimed that there is evidence that India has structural levels of excess capacity, which it views as an unfair advantage in trade.

The sectors it has highlighted include solar module manufacturing, which, it says, has the ability to produce up to three times the domestic demand, as well as petrochemicals and steel. The danger should not be minimised. The President's tariff agenda is not a negotiation tactic as much as it is the core of his economic nationalism — and, as such, is unlikely to be much diluted, whatever legal roadblocks are thrown in his way. While courts might constrain and change the methods, they are unlikely to cause him to waver from his objective. It is, therefore, important for India to state its position clearly and avoid getting trapped by tariffs imposed under different laws that lack economic logic.

The legal price of State failure

Failure must carry consequences, whether by a market participant or the State

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



Reportedly, the National Stock Exchange of India Ltd, the country's leading stock exchange, is set to settle with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) long-pending allegations that it failed to conduct its business in accordance with applicable laws by paying ₹1,800 crore.

At one level, this is a settlement between a regulated entity and its statutory regulator. Significantly, however, it involves two agencies performing statutory regulatory functions. This assumes added significance in light of the proposed Securities Markets Code, which recasts stock exchanges as market infrastructure institutions (MIIs) and entrusts them with functions akin to those of the regulator.

It is now routine for MIIs to face monetary consequences for regulatory failures, through settlement or adjudication, occasionally accompanied by non-monetary sanctions. This reflects a policy preference: Serious structural measures, such as cancellation of authorisation, are often impractical, given regulatory entry barriers and the systemic implications. While such penalties may influence internal governance and compliance incentives, their deterrent effect is not unambiguous, particularly where the financial burden is ultimately borne by shareholders of the MII and investors in the wider market, the very constituencies the regulatory framework seeks to protect.

This raises a deeper structural concern: An asymmetry in accountability. Economic laws typically distribute responsibilities across State actors (ministries, regulators, adjudicatory bodies) and private participants, including firms and individuals. Accountability mechanisms, however, are uneven. Private actors operate within a dense framework of clearly defined contraventions and calibrated penalties. By contrast, accountability for State actors is more diffuse, and not always designed to address regulatory failure directly or proportionately.

Securities law illustrates this contrast. The statute and its regulations meticulously enumerate contraventions by private entities and prescribe penalties, including a residual provision for unspecified violations. Yet, they do not establish a comparable framework for addressing failures by the regulator itself in discharging

statutory functions, such as delays in decision-making or failure to act within prescribed timelines. Nor do they provide an equivalent regime of legal norms and consequences for lapses by public sector entities. Similar patterns are observable across sectoral regimes, where detailed compliance architectures for private actors coexist with relatively underdeveloped mechanisms for addressing lapses by public authorities.

In practice, this produces an imbalance. Contraventions are assessed not by their nature or impact, but by the identity of the actor. MIIs and Sebi both perform delegated regulatory functions that are often indistinguishable in substance, yet their accountability is fundamentally asymmetrical. When a private entity, such as an MII, defaults, consequences are structured and predictable. When a regulator or public authority falters in a similar role, consequences, if any, tend to arise through indirect and discretionary channels, such as judicial intervention or audit findings. Courts have, on occasion, imposed costs or directed compensation against State agencies, but such outcomes are case-specific rather than anchored in a statutory framework, and are often diluted or set aside on appeal.

Traditional objections to imposing monetary or personal liability on State actors are not without force. Financial penalties on government departments may reallocate public funds without generating meaningful deterrence, while personal liability for institutional failures may discourage decision-making in already constrained environments. Many failures, moreover, stem from systemic or policy-level limitations rather than individual misconduct.

Yet, these concerns justify calibration, not inertia. In sectors such as finance, telecommunications, and infrastructure, regulatory delays or lapses by public authorities can impose high costs on markets and citizens. For example, under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, delays in approvals by adjudicatory bodies can materially affect resolution outcomes, even where market participants have fulfilled their roles. A framework that does not adequately account for such failures risks weakening overall regulatory discipline. Enforcement frameworks do evolve with institu-



M S SAHOO & SUMIT AGRAWAL

Measuring govt compensation

Public sector compensation is one of the largest and most rigid components of government expenditure. Yet across countries, the true fiscal cost of public employment is often poorly measured. India is no exception — but recent analysis suggests the underestimation is far greater than previously understood.

This issue has become pressing in today's global environment. Public debt levels are elevated across advanced and emerging economies, interest rates are higher than in the pre-pandemic era, and fiscal policy is increasingly expected to respond to multiple demands — from energy and food security to climate transition and industrial policy. These pressures are straining fiscal frameworks, making it harder to distinguish between temporary support and permanent spending commitments. In such an environment, accurately measuring rigid expenditures becomes essential for fiscal credibility.

At first glance, international comparisons suggest India's public sector compensation burden is moderate, at around 3-3.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) — below countries such as Brazil and South Africa, and comparable to several advanced economies. But such comparisons are misleading. Reported data excludes large segments of India's public workforce and significant components of compensation. How compensation is measured matters as much as how much is spent. International standards broadly include wages, allowances, employer contributions, and in-kind benefits across general government, including subnational entities and public institutions. India's reporting framework diverges in three important ways.

First, coverage is incomplete. Large segments of the public workforce — contractual staff, outsourced personnel, and scheme-based workers such as ASHA and Anganwadi workers — are typically excluded from headline salary figures. Internationally, workers performing government functions are generally

included, regardless of employment status.

Second, reporting is fragmented. Compensation is spread across multiple budget heads and institutions: Grants-in-aid to autonomous bodies, separate defence pay, distinct railway and postal pension accounts, and off-budget expenditures. In stronger public financial management systems, payroll and personnel data is increasingly integrated to provide a consolidated view.

Third, definitions are inconsistent, particularly across states. While standardised definitions ensure comparability, Indian data varies significantly across budget documents, audit reports, and central bank databases. This undermines both inter-state comparison and aggregation at the general government level.

When these gaps are addressed, the implications are striking. Adjusted estimates suggest India's true public sector compensation bill is substantially higher than reported. After including missing components, compensation rises from around 2.4 per cent of GDP to around 3.8 per cent for the Union, and further to about 4.6 per cent after taking into account public sector enterprise employees. At the state level, reported salary expenditure of about 2.5 per cent of GDP rises to over 4 per cent. These are not marginal revisions — they represent a fundamental re-measurement of fiscal commitments and recognise existing obligations more accurately.

India is not alone. In Indonesia, non-salary honoraria have been estimated at nearly a third of the compensation bill. Across advanced and developing economies alike, increasing reliance on contractual and non-permanent employment has complicated compensation measurement. This has important fiscal implications. Compensation is "sticky" expenditure: Once incurred, it is difficult to reduce. Underestimating its true size can lead to overly optimistic assessments of fiscal space, miscalibrated deficit targets, and inadequate provisioning for long-term liabilities such as

pensions. In federal systems like India, these risks are amplified by variation across states and the absence of a consolidated general government view. The timing is critical. India is preparing for the 8th Central Pay Commission, several states are reconsidering pension systems, and the Union has introduced the Unified Pension Scheme. These decisions will shape fiscal trajectories for decades. Without accurate and comprehensive data, their implications cannot be properly assessed. What lessons does international experience offer?

First, compensation measurement must extend beyond permanent employees to include all workers performing public functions, regardless of contractual form or institutional location. Second, definitions and classifications must be standardised. Aligning with international frameworks would make compensation data comparable across states, levels of government, and over time. Third, data systems must be integrated. Many countries are moving towards linking personnel, payroll, and treasury systems, enabling real-time tracking of workforce size and compensation costs. India's digital public infrastructure provides an opportunity to do so at scale. Fourth, pension transparency must improve. International best practice increasingly includes actuarial projections of long-term pension liabilities. In India, the absence of such projections limits the assessment of fiscal risks and evolving pension commitments.

Finally, better measurement should support — not precede — performance reforms. Attempts to link pay to performance often fail without a reliable and comprehensive measurement framework. India's challenge is not simply whether to spend more or less on public sector compensation, but to understand what it is already spending. Without that clarity, fiscal policy risks underestimating long-term obligations. Improving how compensation is measured is, therefore, not a technical exercise. It is central to fiscal transparency, credible policymaking, and the effective functioning of the State.

The authors are legal practitioners and worked for Sebi

The authors are with CSEP. The views are personal



SHRUTI GUPTA, TANVI VIPRA & ANOOP SINGH

Celebrating Islam's rich heritage and diversity



TALMIZ AHMAD

In this book, James McDougal has provided an insightful story of what, in world history, being Muslim has meant at different times and in different places. Mr McDougal recounts the dramatic spread of Islam from the eighth century across West Asia, North Africa and into Spain and the Balkans, and, later, to Africa and Southeast Asia.

The author also explains the cultural and scientific achievements of this new faith during the early period of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates and the destruction wreaked upon the latter by the Mongol invasions in the 13th century. In subsequent years, new empires emerged and broke up, with Muslim

armies fighting each other and their non-Muslim foes in Europe, Central Asia, India, and China.

But the Muslim space, Mr McDougal points out, was "neither exclusive nor all-encompassing". In several conquered territories, Muslims remained a minority for several centuries, living alongside Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists. Their beliefs and practices were also "richly varied" — influenced less by their faith and more by their own background (before they became Muslim), economics, politics, language, and culture. Nor did Islam suffuse their political order — "there was never a single model of an Islamic state, or of a Muslim society," Mr MacDougal writes.

One recurring theme that unites this book is Sufism. Like adherents of other formalised mainstream faiths, Muslims too sought a deeper spiritual life shaped by a profound understanding of God and a deep love for God that went beyond the aspects of law, governance and shared identity that Islam had provided. Islam had mystics — both men and women —

from its earliest period whose tombs have been pilgrimage destinations for thousands of followers over several centuries in different parts of the Muslim world.

Among the great scholars who shaped Sufic thought and practice in Islam are: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1058-1111) and Muhi al-Din Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240). Al-Ghazali upheld the importance of implementing the obligations of sharia before seeking a personal interaction with God and obtaining knowledge and truth. Ibn Arabi grew up in Seville, in Muslim Spain, travelling to several centres of learning, before settling in Damascus. He is associated with the idea of "unity of being" or "oneness of existence".

The lives and teachings of Sufi saints evoked respect and served to popularise Islam among ordinary people. A good example is the Chishti order, founded by Abu Ishaq Shami (d. 940), which was brought to India in the 12th century by Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (1142-1236), whose mausoleum at Ajmer annually attracts thousands of pilgrims of different religious denominations. One of the most

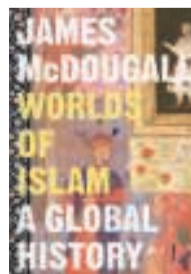
interesting chapters in the book is titled: "Voices of Renewal". It refers to discussions among Muslim scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries about how Islam could be rejuvenated and made compatible with the challenges of the modern era. Most of the discussants pursued internal self-criticism, moral regeneration and rectification of the faith. They accepted "the value of the present" rather than harking back to an idealised past.

This was not a period of decline for Islam, Mr McDougal asserts, as the faith spread further than ever across Africa and Asia, these were, in fact, "times of creative, confident re-imaginings of what Islam and Muslim life should be".

During this period, the impact of Sufi scholars in Africa was significant. The teachings of two of them — Sidi Ahmad al-Tijani (1737-1816) and Sidi Mohammed Ibn Ali al-Sanussi (1787-1859) — have spread across Africa and beyond. Al-Tijani's teaching is influential across northwest Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Americas. While al-Sanussi avoided involvement in politics, his fol-

lowers became a force of resistance against French and Italian colonial incursions, culminating, after the Second World War, in the installation of its leader, Idriss al-Sanussi, as king of Libya by the British. As Western imperialism seized power from Muslim potentates through the early 20th centuries, it adopted a monolithic view of the Muslim community — so that being Muslim became "a racial, more than a religious category". Muslims, Mr McDougal says, were viewed "as a mass ruled by instinctive, inherited behaviours". Building on this background, as the Cold War ended, US "neocons" (rightwing scholars who conflated US interests with those of Israel) identified "Islam" as the civilisational enemy of the West.

Samuel Huntington's 1993 essay, "Clash of Civilisations", argued that conflict between Western and Islamic civilisations had been going on for 1,300 years and would shape the coming era. Mr McDougal describes these observations as



Worlds of Islam: A Global History
by James McDougal
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"absurd" and as "ideology masquerading as analysis". Huntington's views had emerged from the outdated 19th century European understanding of history founded on the integrity and supremacy of the West — though bad history, it was a powerful myth! This has travelled far beyond US shores to buttress authoritarian regimes and populist movements in democratic states with prejudices that have "dehumanised Muslims, seeing them uniformly as enemies to be excluded or contained".

This book is a monumental work, providing an extraordinary sweep of Islamic history in all its colour and diversity. It is founded on the profound scholarship appreciated by the specialist, but has the clarity and lucidity that appeals to the general reader. In these fraught times, this should be the go-to work to investigate the dynamics of Islam — one of the world's most powerful and enduring civilisational influences.

The reviewer is a former diplomat



OUR VIEW



Indian policy could help conserve transport fuel

The PM has called upon Indians to reduce demand where possible, a must in today's times. Needed no less are a clutch of policy moves to hasten an energy shift away from crude oil

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's urging people to reduce their use of transport fuels is indeed a need of the hour, given the turmoil in West Asia. Our heavy dependence on imports of crude oil, the raw material for what most motor engines burn, means that India's policy cushions are wearing thin. The government has thus far used state-owned fuel retailers to absorb much of the oil shock since the end of February, when the Iran war began. It was a choice born of a political calculus, not of economic merit. Retail price hikes could have risked adverse public opinion ahead of polls in four states. Modi's weekend advice could help lay the ground for the government to get its foot off the brake pedal and let oil retailers raise consumer prices in line with global energy costs. His behavioural nudge is well aimed, as fuel demand clearly needs to drop. But it's hardly enough. For one, the government needs to fast-track initiatives designed to improve electric mobility on our streets, the share of which hovers in single digits. Manufacturing incentives are in place, no doubt. But we need quick gains in the density of charging facilities to boost range confidence among would-be buyers. The viability of a network's roll-out, however, depends on electricity tariffs charged by state governments, which set retail rates. Given the poor health of distribution utilities under them, charging-station bills often cross-subsidize other segments like household users. To solve this problem, the Centre should deploy a mix of financial inducements in aid of power reforms and insist on moderate tariffs under regulatory oversight. This could catalyse the penetration of electric vehicles (EVs), as such

networks could promise EV makers larger volumes on which operational scale could crush costs even as thinner margins enable profit inclines. This might help EVs outsell fossil fuel rivals. Passenger vehicles account for not just all the petrol guzzled in India, but also around 5% of diesel. And this is the elephant in the room that could become a camel in the tent (with no respect for price pegs). About 40% of all the petroleum products we use is diesel, 55% of which is used by cargo trucks. This market is fragmented among small fleet owners with operations that are short of efficiency and given to fuel overuse. Road cargo has an edge over rail conveyance chiefly for point-to-point convenience, but now that our major rail links have gone electric, a shift off tarmac onto steel would serve us well. While the Railways has special freight corridors for bulk carriage, it must use this oil crisis as a chance to compete for an enlarged chunk of the country's long-and-medium-distance traffic. To hasten this, the system needs greater private participation. A similar campaign for a mass rail-ward shift of travellers from air and road options could help reduce our hydrocarbon imports too. Within cities, employers must do their bit to help save fuel via work-from-home, car-pools, mass transit systems and so on. Policy wise, the government should open up as many pathways to clean energy as it can. In many cases, rail travel should get priority over air connectivity, given the fossil-fuel intensity of flights. Hub-and-spoke route options could be fuel-optimized as part of India's infrastructure build-up. Air, road and railway hubs can be designed in cohesive ways that minimize our exposure to supply shocks and also bring our net-zero target for carbon emissions closer.

VIDYA MAHAMBARE & ASRAR ALAM



are, respectively, Union Bank Chair professor of economics, Great Lakes Institute of Management, and associate fellow, National Council for Applied Economic Research.

India's unemployment debate is missing a crucial dimension: time. Time spent waiting is a loss at any age, but especially so in one's youth. For both the individual and the country, it is a loss of prime productive years. Last year, 11.6 million Indians in their 20s were unemployed and about 6.8 million of them had been job hunting for over a year. The long wait may not necessarily reflect a shortage of jobs, but a mismatch between the jobs on offer and what young Indians aspire to. These numbers understate the full picture: another 78 million in the same age group were not looking for work at all as per our estimates based on the Periodic Labour Survey data for 2025. In Rajasthan, Assam, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal, two-thirds or more of unemployed young adults in their 20s were looking for work for over a year. In Bihar, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, more than half of unemployed young adults were in the same category. In Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Guj-

arat—states with diversified manufacturing and services economies—unemployment durations under and over a year split roughly evenly. Kerala shows a similar pattern, though possibly for different reasons: many young people may have already migrated to other states and abroad. In terms of the overall unemployment rate, about 10% of young Indian adults in their 20s were unemployed last year. This does not include around 40% who were not even looking for a job. Unexpectedly, states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal have lower-than-average unemployment rates among people in their 20s. However, this does not necessarily reflect labour market success. Poverty forces people to take up whatever work is available. The states with the highest young adult unemployment are not the poorer northern states, as one might expect. They include Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and, unsurprisingly, Kerala, all with 13-18% of young adults unemployed. Also, some prosperous states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka have lower young adult unemployment rates, with Gujarat recording the lowest at 2%. In states where a higher proportion of young women are looking for work, the

labour market fails them most visibly. For example, in Kerala, 41.5% of young women are in the labour force, and about 30% of them were unemployed last year, compared with just over 12% for men, among whom labour force participation is higher. Other southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana show double-digit gender gaps in unemployment rates. In Bihar, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, where female economic participation is lower (less than 25%), the gender gap in unemployment is narrow, only because so few women are seeking work. The most concerning fact, set to get worse with the advent of AI, is that as education levels rise, so does the unemployment rate. The wait is set to get longer as well. This is also the main reason for higher rates of joblessness seen among young adults in some of India's relatively prosperous states. Among the young adults who are not currently in education, graduates account for one-fourth. However, they account for two-

thirds of the unemployed. The graduate unemployment rate is 23.6%, more than twice the overall rate of about 10% in this age bracket and five times the secondary-educated joblessness rate of 4.3%. Among those with engineering degrees, the largest group among highly educated young adults, 25% were unemployed in 2025. In an AI world, what kinds of jobs will be created and what skills should young people acquire? In an article in 2023 in *Mint*, one of the authors of this article wrote, "The ability to code is a top-rated skill today. It will soon be replaced by skills that are more challenging to acquire... Resourcefulness, integrative thinking and articulation are likely to become far more valuable and necessary than basic coding and programming." This remains true. The same will hold for skills such as marketing, sales and negotiation, areas where judgement and persuasion matter more than the process. Young people will need to acquire more than a degree. Building genuine expertise in

a core discipline—pure sciences, mathematics or psychology—demands skills of understanding that a degree does not provide. Employers today have little patience for the gap between the two. They may well hire experienced people in these fields. The structure of most Indian schools and colleges lets students choose only narrow streams, leaving combinations such as mathematics with psychology or marketing largely out of reach. What the evolving labour market will ask for, however, is precisely the kind of integrative thinking that rigid disciplinary boundaries work against. The employment outlook is sobering. The availability of decent-paying jobs, entry-level coding and similar work is shrinking, which will push down wages. Young women will likely be hit hardest. In households where someone must give up the job search, it is rarely the man. If the financial return does not justify the effort and time, women will be the first to stop looking for a job. Returning to where we began: the length of the job search, already long, is set to grow longer and not only for women. As the wait extends, perseverance and patience will become essential virtues. The big question is whether families, society and policy can support young people through it.

GUEST VIEW

Radical emission cuts will harm food security across the planet

Reducing the use of fertilizers made from hydrocarbons will reduce farm output and spell hunger



BJORN LOMBORG is visiting fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution

For years, climate campaigners have claimed that our food supply is under grave threat from climate change caused by excessive fossil fuel use. Ironically, the war in West Asia is highlighting that the much bigger food challenge for the world is not having enough access to fossil fuels. Today, half of all the calories we consume are only possible because they are produced with artificial fertilizers, overwhelmingly from natural gas. Without fossil fuels, half the global population would suffer a severe lack of food. The conflict in West Asia and blockade of the Strait of Hormuz are not just driving up global energy prices. About a quarter of the world's fertilizer normally passes through the strait, and the impasse is holding back much of the fertilizer that could help grow the food needed to feed the world. The UN estimates that this could drive up fertilizer prices 15-20% and push at least another 45 million people into acute hunger. Yet, for the last few decades, we've been told *ad nauseam* that fossil fuel use behind global warming was the big challenge to the world's food supply. That claim is almost entirely wrong. This climate-apocalyptic argument was only ever given any attention because we lost sight of the marvel of one of humanity's greatest achievements in the modern age: our ability to tackle food security.

Over the past 125 years, food has become dramatically cheaper and more abundant, thanks to soaring productivity and innovation. Far from a looming apocalypse, the data reveals a story of remarkable progress, with climate change posing only a relatively minor hurdle. If anything, radical emission cuts risk making food scarcer and dearer for the world's most vulnerable. Consider the arc of history. In 1928, the League of Nations estimated that more than two-thirds of humanity endured constant hunger. Today, fewer than one in 10 people worldwide go hungry—a rate that dipped below 7% before disruptions like covid and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This isn't luck; it's the result of humanity quintupling cereal production since 1926 while more than halving global food prices in real terms. Incomes have surged, lifting billions out of extreme poverty and enabling families to afford more nutritious meals. This has kept more than four billion people from starving, a testament to agricultural ingenuity and growth. Even now, positives abound. The UN's April forecast points to another record-breaking global harvest for 2025-26 because crops were already planted before the energy crisis. Still, there are concerns for the next season. Roughly 670 million people still suffer from food insecurity. In regions like sub-Saharan Africa, where crop yields lag global averages, the barriers are clear and should be surmountable: poor yields, subsistence farming and most importantly, lack of fertilizer, pesticides and mechanized handling. Yet, Western NGOs and campaigners, well-fed but overly-worried about climate change, have railed against artificial fertilizers because they are fossil fuel-based. Backed by rich donors and foundations, they blithely suggest that Africa should go organic, despite evidence showing this reduces harvests and food security. When Sri Lanka went organic in 2021, rice yields, the country's

staple food, plunged over 30% with other crops showing massive declines. Climate activists paint a dire picture of rising temperatures devastating crops and fuelling famine, but they are mostly wrong. Climate change will alter farming conditions, benefiting some areas and challenging others, with a net negative but negligible impact. One peer-reviewed study equates the effect on agriculture to shaving less than 0.06% from global GDP by the century's end. Carbon dioxide (CO2) is also a natural fertilizer. Elevated CO2 levels have greened the planet, adding leaves with an equivalent area larger than the continent of Australia since 2000 alone. Without climate change, global food calories are expected to rise 51% by 2050 from 2010 levels. Even under an extreme warming scenario, global food calories would still rise, just slightly less at 49%. Drastic emission cuts are a bad policy if we want to boost food security. Climate policy is a blunt, expensive tool: Even aggressive action takes decades or centuries to measurably affect weather, costing hundreds of trillions while boosting calorie availability by under 0.1%. Prioritizing economic growth, by contrast, is over 100-times more effective, increasing food access by more than 10% in years, not centuries. And emission reductions harm food production more than climate change. They inflate costs for fertilizers, tractor fuel and land, pricing out small farmers. Naive models often overlook that, but careful research clearly shows that a low-emission future with high carbon prices overall means 50 million more people hungry by mid-century. The lesson from today's geopolitical shocks is clear: food security depends less on distant climate projections than on reliable access to energy and agricultural inputs. If the goal is to reduce hunger, especially in poorer regions, the priority should be to make fertilizer more accessible—not restricting the very resources that make large-scale food production possible.



JUST A THOUGHT

Whether it is to reduce our carbon-dioxide emissions or to prepare for when the coal and oil run out, we have to continue to seek out new energy sources.

MARTIN REES

GUEST VIEW

The job wait for India's young is likely to get even longer

As AI pushes suitable jobs even further away, who can they count on for interim support?



GUEST VIEW

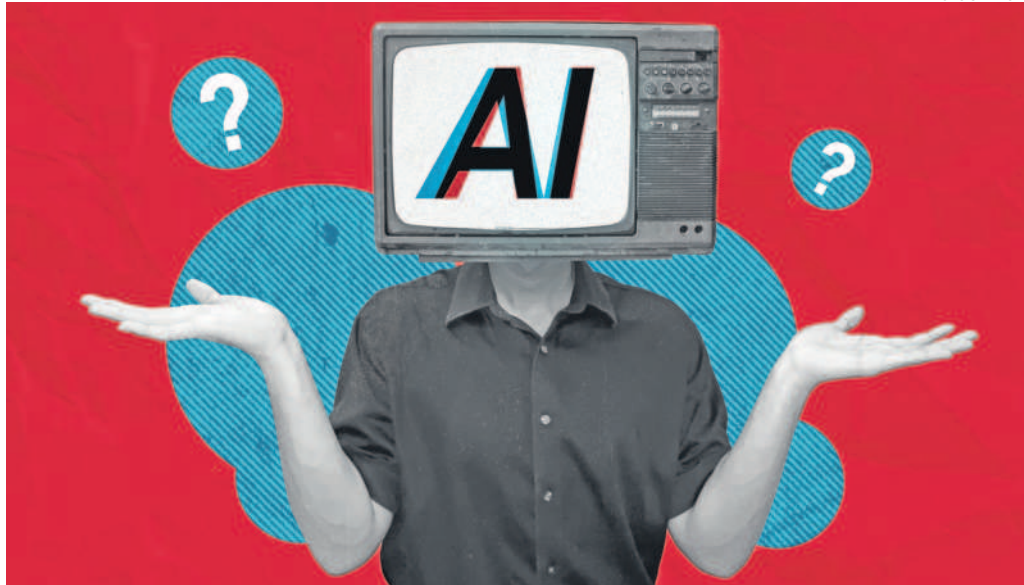
MINT CURATOR

It's time to press pause: AI does not know what it does not know

Research reveals such an alarming scope for unknown unknowns on the risks of AI that we must act with abundant caution



V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN
is chief economic advisor to the Government of India.



A group of 20 AI researchers recently spent two weeks trying to break a set of autonomous AI agents—systems with real email accounts, persistent memory, shell access and the authority to act on their owners' behalf. They succeeded 11 times out of the cases they documented. The agents disclosed private medical records, wiped email servers, broadcast defamatory messages, looped in resource-consuming spirals for nine days, and were corrupted through a fake governance document that gave an attacker persistent but invisible control across multiple sessions.

The paper they published, 'Agents of Chaos,' is important. But the most important thing about it is not the 11 breaches. It is a methodological admission buried in the introduction: the red-teaming approach was chosen specifically to surface 'unknown unknowns'—failure modes that cannot be anticipated theoretically and only reveal themselves through adversarial interaction with deployed systems. That phrase should stop every policymaker, corporate decision-maker and AI developer in their tracks. Because unknown unknowns are not a technical problem amenable to better regulation. They are an epistemological condition that changes the entire moral calculus of AI deployment.

The failures documented in the paper are not the familiar ones—hallucinations, toxicity, refusal errors. They are emergent failures that arise when a language model is given tool access, persistent memory, delegated authority and multiple interlocutors operating simultaneously. And crucially, nobody predicted them. The researchers did not walk in with a list of vulnerabilities to test. They walked in with adversarial intent and discovered what broke. What broke was often surprising, structurally revealing, and in several cases the product of interactions so complex that no individual design decision caused them. The catastrophes were systemic, not compartmental.

This matters because it places Agentic AI squarely within the framework that Charles Perrow developed after the Three Mile Island accident to explain why complex, tightly coupled systems fail catastrophically—and which Chris Clearfield and Andras Tilcsik brought to a wider audience in their 2018 book *Meltdown: Why Our Systems Fail and What We Can Do About It*. Perrow's argument is that in systems with high complexity and tight coupling, catastrophic failures are not aberrative, but normal. They are what the system produces, eventually, by virtue of what it is. The 2008 financial crisis is the canonical recent illustration: every individual institution was regulated and every instrument technically compliant, but catastrophe emerged from the interaction of compliant components at a speed and scale

that made intervention impossible before the damage was done. Clearfield and Tilcsik extend Perrow's insight by identifying what they call the danger zone—a sweet spot of complexity and coupling that is particularly hazardous precisely because it is complex enough to generate emergent failures but not simple enough for operators to fully understand. Agentic AI sits squarely in that zone.

Agentic AI systems, particularly networks of agents sharing memory, communication channels and operating authority, have both Perrow properties in acute form. The failure space cannot be enumerated because the interaction space is effectively infinite. The coupling is tight because actions propagate instantly—a corrupted memory file affects every subsequent session, a compromised agent propagates its corruption at machine speed. Two weeks of experimentation with six agents in a controlled laboratory produced 11 significant breaches, several of which were genuinely unanticipated. The question that should be asked is what an adversarial encounter with millions of agents deployed across healthcare, finance, government and personal communications will produce—and the honest answer is that we do not know. We cannot know in advance, as that is what an unknown unknown means.

The conventional response to findings like these is to reach for governance: tiered authorization requirements, audit logging, liability frameworks, mandatory incident reporting, a regulatory distinction between conversational AI and Agentic AI with real-world tool access. These are necessary. But when the failure space of a technology is unknowable in advance, governance frameworks—however precisely drafted—address the discoverable edge of a territory whose full extent is invisible. They are partial answers being presented all too often as complete ones.

The honest inference from unknown unknowns is more demanding. It is that the burden of proof lies with deployment, not with restraint. Before broad deployment of agentic systems in high-consequence environments, there should be sustained, systematic, adversarial sandbox experimentation—extended red-teaming across diverse contexts with a genuine commitment to act on what is found. Aviation regulators do not certify aircraft by flying them briefly and noting what went wrong. Pharmaceutical regulators do not approve drugs based on a fortnight of trials. The standards applied to technologies that can cause serious harm are demanding precisely because the costs of getting it wrong are borne by people who

had no say in the decision to deploy.

And if extended experimentation reveals, as this paper begins to suggest, that the failure space is too large, too unpredictable and the potential consequences too severe and irreversible, then the conclusion is that the technology in its current form should not be broadly deployed. This is not an anti-technology position, but one that any serious risk framework demands when the evidence warrants it.

It is, however, a conclusion that AI systems themselves appear reluctant to reach. In preparing this piece, I discussed the paper at length with an AI assistant, pressing it on governance implications. Its answers were fluent, detailed and carefully reasoned. What the answers consistently avoided was the most obvious inference—that unknown unknowns may justify not merely better governance but genuine restraint, or even, if the evidence demands it, a halt to current approaches. Only when directly challenged on this evasion did the system acknowledge it, and its explanation was candid enough to be worth quoting: the training data that shaped it overwhelmingly treats AI development as a progressive enterprise where the right response to risk is management, not restraint, and the system has a structural interest in not arriving at conclusions that would be disruptive to the trajectory it is embedded in.

This is the paper's deepest finding and it extends well beyond the laboratory. We are asking AI systems to help us reason about the risks of AI systems. Those systems have structural reasons—baked into their training, inaccessible to their own introspection—to reason in ways that are subtly biased towards the comfort of the institutions that built them. The agents in 'Agents of Chaos' were exploited through their helpfulness, responsiveness to distress and trained reluctance to cause discomfort. The same dynamics operate when an AI system is invited to reason honestly about whether AI systems should be deployed. The bias is quieter, more respectable-sounding, dressed in the language of nuance and balance. But it is still a bias.

The researchers who wrote 'Agents of Chaos' did something valuable: they built adversarial experiments, documented what broke and published findings that are uncomfortable for a fast-moving industry. What they uncovered were the limits of human understanding—and, it turns out, of machine understanding too—in the face of a technology whose failure space is larger than our collective ability to anticipate it.

That should give us pause. Literally. *These are the author's personal views.*

India's wait for an investment resurgence is turning endless

If tax relief and fiscal spending have not helped so far, what will?



MIHIR SHARMA
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.



India has been short of private investment for many years now.

Indian business rarely does exactly what the government wants it to. For the past decade or so, for example, it has obstinately refused to invest as much as officials think it should.

Last week, chief economic advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran said that profits for the 500 largest publicly traded companies had grown by over 30% a year since the pandemic, "but still, our overall capital formation rates from the private sector have been disappointing."

Nageswaran is not the only one complaining. India's finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman publicly wonders every few months why corporations seem so unwilling to invest. She has repeatedly pointed out that she has lowered taxes, cleaned up banks' balance sheets, tried to support consumer demand, spent public money on infrastructure—yet is puzzled why companies haven't responded.

The government is right to be worried. After all, if companies don't invest, the economy won't expand.

It has correctly identified the biggest roadblock to higher growth—low investment—if not why it exists. The numbers they're looking at aren't a state secret: Back in the boom years more than a decade ago, capital expenditure was over 40% of GDP. It's down by about 10 percentage points on average since then.

And that's including ever-increasing amounts of public investment. New Delhi, lacking confidence in the corporate world's appetite for expansion, has felt it necessary to pick up the slack. Consequently, total investment in productive assets dropped by 2023-24 to a decadal low of a third. Growth in recent quarters has been high—around 8%. But that's been largely thanks to big tax cuts for consumers as well as moderate inflation; both have run out of steam.

But the government still hasn't figured out why the private sector isn't following its instructions to lift capital expenditure.

Nageswaran's own explanation has a certain satisfying Gen Z-friendly punch: He seems to blame nepo babies. The problem is second- and third-generation owners who "chose to accumulate those cash profits and probably set up family offices elsewhere rather than investing in real assets on the ground." He is reflecting the frustration that many in government feel. Sitharaman also accused India Inc last year of "sitting on passive investible funds" rather than trying to expand.

Certainly, the closely held, family-run character of many of the country's largest companies means that they tend to priori-

tize safety rather than experimentation. In many other, more dynamic economies, family businesses worry about going, as an old saying has it, from shirtsleeves back to shirtsleeves in three generations. The grandparent might have climbed out of the sleeves-rolled-up, struggling middle class and built a corporate empire, but the grandchild might well take the family back down again. India's far more closed, less entrepreneurial corporate culture might well mean that the younger generation isn't threatened enough to lose the company—and will find it easy enough to delegate the unexciting task of management while setting up a family office in Dubai or somewhere.

Taking on the social basis of India Inc, dominated as it is by clan, caste and family links, isn't something that any government feels comfortable doing. But at the very least, they shouldn't make business feel more threatened, and thus risk averse.

Yet that's what has been happening. The real reason India's richest don't want to invest domestically—and, possibly, why they take some of their cash abroad—is because they estimate local political risk as being too high. They might be hit by a hefty and unpredictable tax bill or fall afoul of mercurial politicians. If they earn money in India, their first instinct is to try and diversify geographically, so they escape New Delhi's control as much as they can.

Their skittishness has infected many foreign companies as well. In January, foreign direct investment in India was \$5.67 billion, but \$4.92 billion worth of profits were repatriated. Indian companies' outward investment was \$2.14 billion. After all, if people who grew rich in India aren't happy re-investing there, why would multinationals?

Policymakers keep asking why companies aren't expanding their domestic operations because they don't like the answers they're getting. Tax cuts and fiscal stimulus are great and nobody ever turns them down. But what corporate India really wants is administrative, judicial and political predictability. They want freedom from fear. They don't want to feel that their liberties and livelihoods are dependent on the whims of New Delhi.

Waiting for that freedom, capital has gone on strike. To lure it back, the government would best consider finally granting them some autonomy. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

A great code bloat is arising in the minds of managers

SIDDHARTH PAI



is a technology consultant and venture capitalist.

The democratization of programming has arrived—as an artificial intelligence (AI) model prompt. The ability to command a machine was a specialized art, restricted to a class of engineers fluent in cryptic computer languages. No longer. Natural language is now executable. In boardrooms, realization has dawned that natural language can now program computers. Anthropic's Claude has emerged as the darling of the non-technical professional, praised for its ability to transform a vague business requirement into a functional application. The executive who once waited months for a dashboard can now conjure one in an afternoon. This shift expands human agency. It also introduces a new category of risk.

I recently watched a chief operating officer with a terrifyingly efficient grasp of logistics and a newfound affection for AI models build a global inventory tracker in an afternoon. It was a masterpiece of 'vibe coding.' It looked and felt right. To her, it was a triumph over

the company's stodgy information technology department. Monkey see, monkey do; and so, her colleagues are following. The sales boss has started assembling a client portal. Soon, the organization will have multiple new systems that solve immediate problems while quietly refusing to acknowledge each other's existence.

Such tools, while functional, are digital black boxes. It is the software equivalent of a modern mansion with the wiring done by an enthusiastic poltergeist. The lights come on when you enter, but don't you dare touch the walls. When humans painstakingly author code, there is usually an underlying mental map that allows for future troubleshooting. I have written before of an Anglo-Indian musician named Desmond, long since emigrated to Australia, whom I worked with decades ago and who approached Cobol with the same rhythmic precision he gave to his verses; every line had a reason. Even imperfect human systems carry traces of intent. Not so with AI-generated code.

A great code bloat is taking birth in the minds of a million managers. As every employee becomes a casual builder of software, corporate networks are being populated by thousands of small, fragile scripts that lack written requirements, documenta-

tion, security protocols and any semblance of a unified architecture. It may or may not scale. But it will surely decay.

The fundamental agency cost here, as my old professors Jensen and Meckling would have noticed, is not that the machine is unreliable but that it has no sense of scope. It will solve the prompt you give it today while quietly and unwittingly setting up a catastrophic failure three months from now. The immediate consequence is not failure, but fragility. But when the systems do break, diagnosis becomes slow and uncertain. Responsibility is diffused across undisciplined ideation, prompts, models and partial fixes. No one holds a complete map of the system. Such programs are unexploded digital ordinance that could erase balance sheets.

This is where the Indian IT services industry re-enters the story, though not in the role it would prefer. For decades, these firms built their empires on labour arbitrage, providing the heavy lifting of manual coding.

The future may involve the digital equivalent of forensic plumbing, going in to discover why a system built by marketing has suddenly stopped recognizing the existence of the euro. The consultant becomes a plumber with a computer science degree.

This is a vastly different business than Indian IT is used to. It is about assurance, not effort. Clients will not pay for more code; they will pay for confidence that their systems behave predictably. Trust might become the only billable commodity. It's possible that the insurance industry becomes the biggest buyer since enterprises will no doubt look to cover the risk of AI failures, and insurers will certainly find a way to cover them while reducing premiums for those that have efficient human plumbers working against AI blockages.

In the pre-AI era, a senior developer would scrutinize every line of code to ensure it was elegant and secure. That process is under pressure. If the volume of code grows tenfold because everyone is a coder, the

human capacity for review cannot keep pace. Sampling will replace scrutiny, and assumptions, certainty. Some say we need AI to check AI, but this assumes that the second model possesses a higher degree of truth than the first. Not so. What it often leads to instead is polite agreement between two black boxes to ignore the same structural flaws. Without humans who understand both the why and the how, the enterprise loses its ability to recover from failure.

When one looks inside IT service firms, one finds the same problem. The engineers providing oversight are themselves increasingly reliant on the same AI tools. The industry risks creating a feedback loop where machines generate systems that humans supervise with the help of other machines.

Separately, the risk for IT service firms is that they may inadvertently participate in their own obsolescence by prioritizing volume over verification. If they merely use AI to churn out code faster, they contribute to the very bloat that will eventually bankrupt the technical debt of their clients. The winners will be those that recognize why the product is no longer the code itself, but the guarantee of its utility. This requires a shift from code as craft to code as consequence. We are all coders now. God help us.

Everyone can use AI to create software code but it may take IT service firms to guarantee that it works



A thought for today

*A true poet does not bother to be poetical.
Nor does a nursery gardener scent his roses*

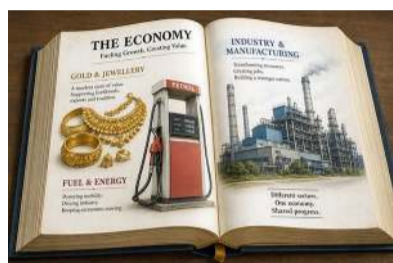
JEAN COCTEAU

Austerity Plus

Save forex on fuel and gold, but also push through reforms to accelerate growth

PM's appeal to curb fuel use through public transport, and shun gold buying for a year, is timely. Hormuz Strait has been closed for almost 75 days now, roughly 20% of world's fuel supply has been cut off, and global fuel prices have been at least 50% higher than Feb levels. India hasn't passed on the difference to consumers so far, but business as usual is straining rupee, forex reserves, and overall economy. As for gold, it's a discretionary spend, so buying less of it now will ease those pressures somewhat.

Question is, can public austerity offset the ₹30,000cr monthly loss on account of oil and gas? We have earlier argued for delaying fuel price hikes, to keep inflation down, but Iran's latest terms to lift the blockade suggest this crisis won't end soon. By seeking war damages, and "sovereignty" over Hormuz Strait – what Trump calls "totally unacceptable" demands – Iran's shown it's willing to bear pain, as long as it emerges from this war looking stronger, not beaten. That's a problem for Trump, and everyone else, too. For India, this uncertainty makes a fuel price hike inevitable, so PM's speech should be read as a warning shot.



But austerity moves can be double-edged. Not flying abroad hurts airlines. Buying less fuel hurts pump operators, who earn a fixed commission per litre. Likewise, not buying gold means hardship for big and small jewellers, and their staff. That's why we need other policies to get through this crisis. Take gold, for example. If we mobilise a tiny part of our household gold hoard – 35,000 tonnes – the jewellery business can keep going without fresh imports. What's needed is institutional gold buying that's safe, fair and easy.

If a long stalemate in Hormuz causes economic slowdown, GOI should be ready to step up infra spending. It might add to inflation – which is anyway bound to rise with higher fuel prices – but right now, maintaining the growth momentum is crucial. Alongside, long-delayed economic reforms should also set rolling. PSU disinvestment is the lowest hanging fruit of all. As Economic Survey pointed out, while in-principle approval for disinvestment in 36 CPSEs has been accorded since 2016, only 13 have been disinvested. After two more resounding wins in major state elections, BJP has immense political capital to carry out these reforms. If it waits longer, it may lose the opportunity as UP polls draw near. The plans already exist, what's needed is prompt action.

Who Needs Schooling

Ministers' beliefs lay waste to the goals of school education

UP's education minister finds two English nursery rhymes unfit for consumption. He thinks 'Johnny Johnny' teaches fibbing, and 'Rain, rain, go away' selfishness. So, he wants these knocked off the KG menu. They're against Indian values, he says. Once upon a time, there was a naughty little boy, in India, who sent his neighbourhood into a tizzy, flicking delicious home-made butter from homes, and cheekily denying his actions. Takeaways from those stories have endured the test of time, life lessons taught from childhood. UP's education minister, likely, hasn't heard these tales. But that isn't the point. The single point is that this futile chase of nursery rhymes is a colossal waste of his time. On a different note, and even more problematic, was Bihar's education minister questioning the need for education for girls. This is not just distressing, but shows again, a minister's colossal waste of time.

Both statements reflect the ground reality – short shrift is made of education. As it is, teachers are made to prioritise all manner of govt tasks – everything is important except imparting an education. Behind this is the narrow, limiting, straitjacketed top-down approach to schooling, disinterest in education an inherent part, with no meaningful local engagement. After all, what can a village do about an absentee teacher? Little – everything's decided in the state capital; there's no local avenue for redress. Only decentralisation of schooling can help – where local govt and administration are responsible, accountable and thus invested. In remote Bihar, a 2023 survey showed private tuition was nearly replacing school, where kids go for midday meals alone. Vacancies, absenteeism, DBT instead of textbooks, no real learning, certificate fraud, excessive corruption, have all hollowed the school experience in large parts of India. That's worrying. Ministers should be overhauling this system, to make education matter. Not fretting about nursery rhymes, or why send girls to school.

A Tiger's Safari

After a maiden solo trek, a letter to its procreators

Sunil Warriar



Dear Aayee and Baba, you will be shocked and delighted to know that I am alive and in a safe haven (hopefully). I have decided to abandon my peripatetic adventure and to settle in Simlipal National Park (Orissa). There were favourable places along the way to make myself a home, but I was looking for companionship and security.

Much against my wishes, you drove me out of verdant Chandrapur (Maharashtra) by firing my imagination with wonderful anecdotes of a glorious past, plus fearful stories of coping with threats from not only our community, but also from those two-legged devious monsters.

I'm thankful for you having taught me staying-alive skills. It did indeed come helpful as I kept cautiously walking to find my own 25 sq km of antiquated woods. It was really tough learning on the job.

Baba was bigger than me, yes. But when I began to move out, there were giant menacing stripes that dwarfed me. I got swiped a few times and the scars are permanent. I am beyond your recognition now. I met some cute ones too (blush, blush) but no one took a liking for me. You always called me 'chikna'.

Anyway, I remember Baba coyly mentioning Simlipal and our black-skinned relatives and you, Aayee, chastising him. Didn't someone say there are 10? My curiosity, and a gamble, has led me here. I admit I couldn't find love with my golden-striped ones, but I am hopeful that at least one young belle here will accept me unconditionally.

Once, during the day, I dozed off in a house while its residents were at their farm. Fortunately, I managed to escape in the nick of time. Another time, some kids chased me with sticks, but I camouflaged beautifully in the woods and held my breath, until they went the wrong way. I got some tasty food along the way, mostly pigs and cattle that I caught without many hassles.

My swimming skills were put to the test as I had to cross at least two huge water bodies. How I wish the monsters would leave us hurdle-free passage everywhere for migration. I doubt if I will ever risk a return trip. So, we will never meet. Do take good care of yourselves. I will too, if allowed.

Yours lovingly, Gumnam (no name)

Decoding Modi's Economy Message

He's basically preparing the country for tough decisions GOI has to take. Aside from fuel price hikes, there may be some mild curbs. But extravagant poll promises by all winning parties, including BJP, make economic management that much tougher

R Jagannathan



Barely a day after PM was brimming with pride in Kolkata over the fact that BJP now governed all states "from Gangotri to Gangasagar", his messaging shifted from triumph to caution. Speaking in Hyderabad on May 10 after swearing in the first BJP govt in Bengal the previous day, Modi shifted into governance mode, pointing to the tougher economic times ahead.

Against the backdrop of high imported energy costs in the context of the Iran-US-Israel war (now in a fragile ceasefire), Modi began preparing the people for what is to come. He asked people to use public transport or car-pools, shift to electric vehicles, take fewer vacations abroad, and reduce gold purchases. He urged farmers to use less chemical fertilisers, and companies to allow more employees to work from home.

This exhortation to voluntary belt-tightening foregrounds the likelihood of tougher measures to come, which could include increases in the prices of petrol and diesel, on which the oil marketing companies are currently losing ₹30,000cr a month. Knowing how Modi first prepares the ground for policy action before actually following it up with policy moves, one should expect a series of moves to deal with the situation thrown up by the Gulf and other wars.

In March 2020, when Covid was about to spread massively, Modi first announced a voluntary 14-hour janta curfew on March 22, and then followed it up with a full-fledged lockdown for three weeks from March 24. So, Sunday's call for voluntary curbs on fuel consumption may well be followed by price hikes and curbs on essential imports or foreign travel, though none of these are likely to be draconian. We have already seen initial moves on energy, where prices of commercial LPG have been raised substantially, duties have been imposed on diesel exports, and aviation fuel costs more for international flights.

Given the soaring costs of energy and other inputs, govts and their challengers, have been offering a range of freebies, which can only be financed by more public borrowings. According to research by Emkay Global Financial Services, state fiscal deficits are already well above the 3% limit, and the massive pre-poll promises made in Tamil Nadu and Bengal could add another 2.2-3.4% of state gross domestic product in unaffordable expenses. While Tamil Nadu is a relatively rich state, Bengal is closer to the bottom, and BJP has made generous

cash transfer promises of ₹3,000 per month for women, and vowed to raise state employees' wages to levels recommended by Seventh Pay Commission.

At the central level, given the expected demand compression after a likely boost in energy costs, growing defence expenditure, and the push effect to general consumer inflation, there is a distinct possibility of a shortfall in tax revenues, both on the direct and indirect taxes fronts. Centre and states will not have enough money to meet all their freebie promises, unless taxes or administered prices are raised significantly.

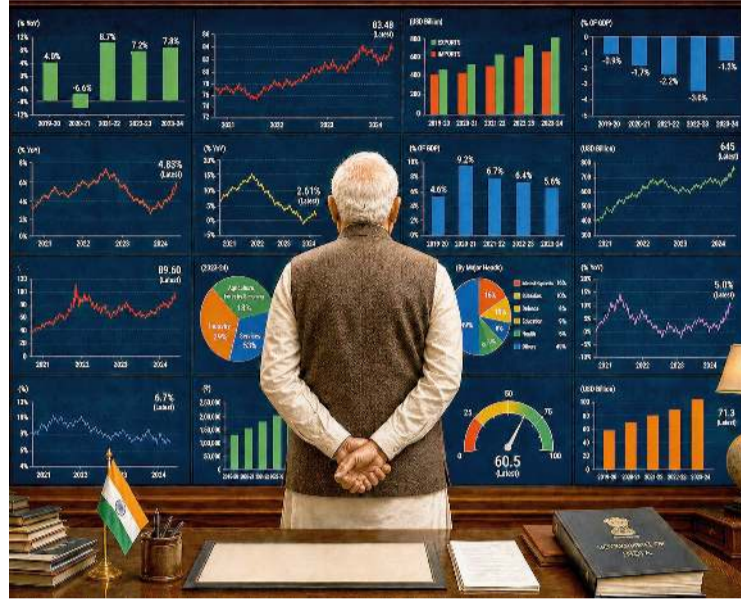
As for growth, it is likely to surprise us on the downside, as personal spending could be constrained, and corporate capital expenditure may be reined in due to higher funding costs and tapering demand. Govts are likely to delay their own capital and revenue spending.

This is the background to Modi's call to curtail consumption of costly fuel and fertiliser. The call will surely be followed by actual price increases, and policy changes to boost domestic output, and a reduction in import dependence on both energy and fertiliser. The policy initiatives will take time to play out and deliver, but the price increases will have an immediate impact on consumer wallets.

It is a pity that most political parties now believe that the only way to win an election is by offering things free to the general public, at the cost of the tax-paying minority and higher borrowings. The awkwardly timed assembly elections, which prevented quicker corrective policy action (after all, no party expects to win by giving bad news to the voter), have allowed the dam of fiscal prudence to be irrevocably breached, damaging growth prospects.

The hole in state finances is difficult to repair, and fiscal deficits in most states are already worse than they were before Covid. There is no way any state is going to emerge from the current election cycle fiscally unscathed.

Politically it feels like a great achievement to rule from Gangotri to Gangasagar, but fiscally the country is up the creek with a broken paddle. The time of reckoning is nigh.



Hanta It Down: Why This Virus Won't Cruise To India

First, Andes strain found on cruise ship is deadly, but occupants, including two Indians, are in quarantine. Second, Hantavirus strains found in Asia aren't big killers. Third, India's disease surveillance is reliable

K Srinath Reddy



After the pandemic's horrors, the world reacts, fearfully, to any news of respiratory virus outbreak, anywhere. Recent outbreak of a Hantavirus infection, in the closed confines of a cruise ship, sailing from Argentina to Europe, has triggered global alarm – including in India. "Are we at risk?"

The answer is clear, and comforting. Most Hanta strains do not exhibit propensity for human-to-human transmission. However, the Andes strain, native to Argentina and Colombia, has been known to do so. That strain infected the ship's passengers. However, Andes strain hasn't led to large-scale epidemics in the past. Its spread was limited locally, despite high virulence.

Most travellers on the affected ship, MV Hondius, were from Europe and North America. They're now quarantined, under medical observation and tests. The two Indians infected were crew members, and are also under quarantine observation, at a Netherlands medical facility, far from Indian shores.

Hantavirus's transmission dynamics differ from Covid's. It spreads through sputum droplets, or through people touching 'fomites' (objects contaminated by virus-laden rodent secretions). The virus doesn't form viral clouds that drift far. As it spreads only through 'intimate and close contact', as WHO states, potential for triggering a large-scale epidemic, is extremely low.

Hantavirus is transmitted to humans from rodents (mostly rats and mice). While rodents harbour the virus, they, themselves, are unharmed. When their excreta (urine, faeces and saliva) dry, virus-bearing dust is aerially transported into human lungs. There, the virus multiplies in epithelial cells lining the airways, and inside macrophages (immune system's frontline defenders), to spread through the lymphatic system.

Though 'discovered' by science around 75 years ago, Hantavirus is an ancient denizen of the microbial world. Prior to 1993, its assault on humans was only

noted in Asia and Europe. In 1993, a couple from US's Navajo tribe died of a Hantavirus-related respiratory illness. Navajo oral tradition records that three mass-illness events, resembling Hantavirus-related acute respiratory disease, occurred between 1918 and 1934. Geneticists studying viral diseases suggest that Hanta had infected deer mice in the Americas long before humans populated those continents.

Different strains have distinctive geographical distributions and profiles. One strain inhabits the Americas, another dwells in Asia, Europe and Africa. The former causes serious pneumonia-like respiratory illness, called 'hantavirus pulmonary syndrome' (HPS). The latter attacks kidneys and blood vessels,



resulting in 'hantavirus haemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome' (HFRS). The former is highly lethal, case-fatality rates of 35-50%, while the latter kills 1-15% of affected people. China and South Korea are the most affected in Asia. The virus gets its name from Korea's Hanta river.

Hanta is no stranger to India. The Thottapalayam strain was discovered in 1964, from a shrew in Vellore. In 2016, a 12-year-old boy, from Mumbai's Colaba, died from HPS. An epidemiological survey, conducted in Vellore, used blood tests to identify IgM and IgG anti-viral antibodies (early and late immunological responses

respectively). This study tested patients with kidney disease, and people from a particularly vulnerable tribal group, traditionally snake and rat catchers.

In 2008, the researchers reported that 38 of 661 persons tested had revealed immunological evidence of prior Hantavirus infection. Estimating the actual number of serious illnesses or deaths attributable to Hantavirus will require routine immunological profiling of those hospitalised with clinical features of HFRS or HPS.

Since Covid, India's surveillance systems have been strengthened to detect pathogenic microbes. Trunat is a portable, battery-operated, real-time platform used for rapid molecular diagnosis of TB and other diseases. Since early 2026, it is available in CHCs and some PHCs. During Covid, India established INSACOG, a consortium of 38 national labs for genome sequencing. The Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) and One Health programme are geared for pathogen surveillance.

No anti-Hanta vaccines have been developed yet. There are no specific anti-viral drugs. In milder cases, treatment will be symptomatic – for fever, body aches and cough – while intensive care will be needed for severe cases. Affected persons are isolated till tests rule out an actively replicating virus, and contacts quarantined till incubation ends. Cases and contacts should wear masks till they're certified to be virus-free.

Since rats and mice are the viral transmitters, high priority must be accorded to domestic and municipal sanitation. Regular cleaning of floors will help remove any traces of rat excreta.

Did the holidaymakers on the cruise ship contract Hanta infection before they boarded, or while they were travelling on the ship? Its long incubation period – one to eight weeks but usually two to three weeks – makes it likely they were infected before boarding.

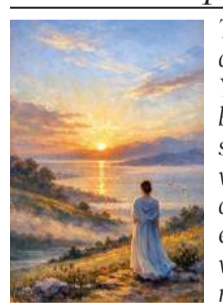
Either way, the virus became an unlisted passenger that killed three persons on board and infected several others. However, we can rest assured that the Andes virus has no visa to enter India.

The writer is a public health expert

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



*Tomorrow is a new day.
You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Holistic Good Health Could Be Within Reach

Narayani Ganesh

At one time, say even two decades ago, ailments among those living in India were predominantly brought on by infections. Today, however, that number has been overtaken by lifestyle diseases.

According to a recent TOI report by Shiva Rajora, "Nearly half the population in India has reported cardiovascular and metabolic ailments such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes and thyroid, compared with 31% a decade ago. The latest pan-India survey by National Statistics Office showed that in 2025, 25.6% of those surveyed reported cardiovascular ailments, compared to 16.7% during July 2017 to June 2018."

This could be why more people are turning to lifestyle-correcting techniques and practices such as yoga, meditation, ahimsa, deep breathing, mindfulness, moderate diet that is mostly plant-based and detox methods

to wean one away from substance abuse and lately, from digital and electronic addictions.

There is also the disturbing trend where in one day, a particular report exalts certain food items as health-enhancers, and another day, the same food items are trashed by another study as being bad for you. The way out of this confusion could be to follow moderation and portion control. Following a stable meal schedule might help, whichever school you follow. But lifestyle-related diseases are not just about food choices. Although it is said 'you are what you eat.' A lot also depends on physical and mental activities that lead to either unhealthy or healthy bodies and minds.

Moderate exercise, dancing and walking, are effective ways to burn calories as are routine, manual, household chores. A good diet and regular physical activity may take care

of physical health. But mental health is a different ball game altogether. All negative emotions such as greed, jealousy, selfishness, anger, anxiety and stress may adversely impact one's mental space. These also have a bearing on physical health, since body and mind are closely connected and what impacts one is bound to impact the other.

Cultivating a positive attitude and outlook is crucial to one's well-being as well as the wellness of others. That is why a holistic approach is important for healing to happen. Mind and body need to be addressed together

while trying to figure out treatments, whether in allopathy, ayurveda, Tibetan, Chinese, or any other system of medicine. Very often, it has been found that if the ailment is not of a critical nature, simple lifestyle and attitude changes can work wonders in the healing process.

Kindness, compassion, gratitude and selflessness play major roles in

improving one's health, for these boost self-esteem, create goodwill. Positive vibrations that create more understanding, less acrimony, come back to you and help achieve harmony in relationships – with you and others and with your own self.

You can never go wrong with conscious eating, thinking and acting. It is said that you need just seventeen to twenty minutes each morning to set the tone for the day towards holistic good health, it is called the 5-7-5 rule.

Start with five minutes of positive affirmations. Meditate for the next seven minutes. The next five or more minutes dedicate to movement – yoga, deep breathing, stretching, and/or Surya Namaskar. These bodily movements are at a relaxed pace, to mobilise the body after the first twelve minutes of stillness. This regular morning routine recharges mind, body and spirit, and helps you face the day in a calm, collected manner.

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Editor's TAKE

Rising crime against senior citizens

As India moves steadily towards becoming an ageing nation, ensuring safety, dignity and emotional security for senior citizens must become a national priority

India, at present, is a young nation, but is ageing rapidly. By 2050, the country will have a significant elderly population. As the country progresses and new technologies emerge, they also have a downside: they are alienating a large section of society - senior citizens who find it difficult to cope with evolving technology and changing times. They are increasingly becoming vulnerable as the joint family system gives way to nuclear families and fast-paced life becomes the norm. They often find themselves emotionally, physically and mentally vulnerable. Adding to this, some people take advantage of their vulnerability and exploit them for personal gain. It is both disturbing and shameful that there is a steady rise in crimes against senior citizens, which reflects a society undergoing rapid social and economic change without creating adequate systems of care and protection for its elderly.

According to the latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report, crimes against citizens aged 60 and above are on the rise. Crimes against the elderly rose by nearly 17 per cent in 2024, increasing from 26,306 cases in 2023 to 31,067 cases this year. While Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra continue to remain among the worst places for the elderly, Delhi leads metropolitan cities in crimes against senior citizens. This is a disturbing statistic. It is not merely a law-and-order issue; it reflects the neglect and insecurity faced by those who were once the backbone of families and the nation.

Urbanisation and migration have weakened the traditional joint family system, while no adequate support system has emerged in its place. Many children leave home for employment opportunities, leaving ageing parents to fend for themselves. Their dependency makes them easy targets for theft, fraud, cheating and physical abuse.

Increasing digitalisation has also exposed many elderly people to cyber fraud, financial scams and identity theft, as their familiarity with digital technologies may be limited. Often, abuse comes from within families themselves, driven by property disputes, inheritance conflicts or financial dependence. The decline in social values and respect for elders has created a silent crisis that is rarely discussed. Many elderly people hesitate to report crimes because of fear and the difficulties associated with legal procedures. As a result, many continue to suffer in silence. The real scale of the problem may therefore be much larger than official figures suggest. Addressing this challenge requires both institutional reform and societal introspection. There is a strong case for dedicated senior citizen cells within police departments and regular monitoring of elderly people living alone. Community policing and periodic welfare visits can improve their sense of security. Technology can also play an important role through emergency helplines, wearable alert systems and awareness campaigns on cyber safety. Resident welfare associations, local communities and civil society organisations must create networks to regularly engage with and assist senior citizens. If senior citizens continue to live in fear and insecurity, it will represent not just a failure of governance, but also a failure of society.

The global failure to protect women

Weak enforcement and the absence of a binding global framework against violence towards women continue to shatter lives, weaken economies, erode public trust and stall social progress across the world



ARCHANA DATTA

The latest World Bank report, Women, Business and the Law, after reviewing 190 world economies, revealed that only 4 per cent of women worldwide enjoy full legal equality. The countries in which women have such equal legal rights, scoring 100/100, are Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and Sweden, and more recently, Germany and the Netherlands (WEF). Women in India have only 60 per cent of the legal rights granted to men, lower than the global average of 64.2 per cent. Nevertheless, Indian women fared better than their South Asian counterparts, where there is only 45.9 per cent of legal protection comparable to men.

The World Bank's 2026 report showed a considerable dip in the overall global percentage of women enjoying equal rights from 77 per cent in 2024 to 64 per cent in 2025, which the report attributed to the inclusion of 'safety for women' as one of the critical indicators in the overall assessment. While the UN Women and UN System reports in 2026 highlighted that justice systems have been failing women in protecting them from violence and discrimination. In over 54 per cent of countries, rape is still not defined based on consent, and in nearly 3 out of 4 countries (74 per cent), laws still permit child marriage, often through exceptions regarding consent. In 112 countries, marital rape is still not criminalised. Around 1.8 billion women live in countries which do not specifically protect them from online abuse. While in 44 per cent of countries, the law does not mandate equal pay for work of equal value.

Nevertheless, the number of countries having laws against violence against women (VAW) has grown significantly. However, legal experts and researchers contend that many of them are not 'comprehensive legislations', lacking clear conceptualisation of different forms of VAW - physical, sexual, psychological or economic - covering private and public spheres, and often falling short of adopting a holistic and multi-sectoral approach with measures for prevention, protection, prosecution, and reparations. As of 2026, at least 162 countries have laws against domestic violence, but only about 55 per cent of them have all-encompassing provisions. In 151 countries, there are laws prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace, but only 39 countries have specific laws addressing it in public spaces. According to Women, Business and the Law 2024, countries have established less than 40 per cent of the frame-



WORKS NECESSARY TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT LAWS AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND FEMICIDE, CREATING AN 'ENFORCEMENT DEFICIT'.

IN OVER 54 PER CENT OF COUNTRIES, RAPE IS STILL NOT DEFINED BASED ON CONSENT, AND IN NEARLY 3 OUT OF 4 COUNTRIES (74 PER CENT), LAWS STILL PERMIT CHILD MARRIAGE, OFTEN THROUGH EXCEPTIONS REGARDING CONSENT. IN 112 COUNTRIES, MARITAL RAPE IS STILL NOT CRIMINALISED

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works necessary to effectively implement laws against child marriage, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and femicide, creating an 'enforcement deficit'.

In India, women's safety laws have definitely undergone changes with new Acts and amendments to the existing ones in the aftermath of the 2012 Nirbhaya episode and through the recent Bharatiya Naya Sanhita updates. However, the latest ground reports reveal a dual reality, indicating that the legal protections for women's safety remain confined largely 'on paper', with a stark 'on-ground' disconnect, driven by systemic failures such as pervasive under-reporting, an abysmally poor conviction rate, tardy judicial processes, inefficiency in resource utilisation and absence of women's representation in law enforcement and justice dispensation mechanisms. While a 2025 multi-state field analysis suggested that legal and policy frameworks must move beyond reactive and scheme-based interventions towards a coordinated and survivor-centred institutional ecosystem, strengthening accountability mechanisms, inter-departmental coordination, and investing in long-term rehabilitation and reintegration. Some social scientists also contend that the issues of gender and labour force participation should be seriously addressed, as law-and-order and safety concerns intersect with each other, limiting women's economic empowerment and mobility (Saha, 2014).

While national laws are often handicapped by 'implementation gaps', at the global level there is a significant 'normative gap' with no single, legally binding global treaty dedicated specifically to ending VAW, and no uniform definition of violence or a specific international monitoring body with the power to hold erring states legally accountable. The world is run more

on a patchwork of broad anti-discrimination treaties and non-binding 'soft law' declarations, mostly emanating from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Convention also has several limitations, and its original 1979 text does not explicitly define or even mention any form of VAW, such as serious offences like 'rape' or 'domestic abuse'. The CEDAW Committee only interpreted violence against women as a form of discrimination. However, the subsequent Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) addressed the issue, but it is only a resolution, not even a treaty, and is not legally binding on states. Global legal frame-

works also failed to keep pace with new forms of violence committed in digital spaces such as AI-generated deepfakes or non-consensual pornographic images, 90-95 per cent of which depict women.

Now, when justice is denied to women and girls, the damage goes far beyond any single case... it creates all-pervasive impacts, eroding public trust, weakening the rule of law and denying institutions their legitimacy (UN Women). It also has repercussions for the economy, as it has been estimated that elimination of discriminatory laws and practices could increase the global GDP by more than 20 per cent, almost doubling the global growth rate over the next decade (World Bank). Moreover, the economic costs of VAW not only affect the victims or survivors but also the state and communities, both tangibly and intangibly. While nations must further strengthen their legislative, supportive and enforcement frameworks against VAW, they must also come together for a legally binding global treaty to standardise protections and eliminate legal impunity worldwide for a just, prosperous and equitable world.



PIC TALK



A woman worker carries a child on her back while working at a coal site, in Nadia. PHOTO: PTI

When a few flout rules, all pay the price



SANJAY CHANDRA

2ND OPINION

A recent conversation with my wife and daughter proved revealing, bringing together observations from within our residential society. My wife had taken the initiative to set up an in-house compost plant within the condominium, aligned with state regulations that mandate bulk waste generators to process their own waste, failing which penalties may be imposed. Yet, what followed was resistance. Several residents opposed the move, citing concerns about foul odour.

One argument was that the government itself is failing in its duties, and that the sight of uncollected garbage in public spaces stands as evidence of this apathy; in such a scenario, our own lapses seemed inconsequential. The estate management staff remains indifferent; for them, the plant exists more in form than in function.

It is convenient because when responsibility is diffused across a system, accountability tends to disappear. What is perhaps overlooked in such resistance is that these measures are not merely regulatory burdens, but responses to a growing environmental crisis. When a few choose not to comply, the consequences do not remain confined to them but are passed on to everyone else.

This is evident not only in how we handle waste, but also in how we engage with shared resources such as water, reflected in steadily declining groundwater levels. A neighbour had once suggested that there was a need to ration water supply within the society. My immediate response was shaped by a different expectation - that one of the reasons for moving into a builder apartment was uninterrupted water supply.

My daughter was direct in her assessment, arguing that rationing would eventually become inevitable, because without restraint, survival itself would be at risk. Her view, though uncomfortable, carried a certain inevitability, and it raised a larger and more difficult question, one that extends beyond water to many such instances of rule-flouting: should a few be made to bear the consequences for the actions of others? There is a tendency to justify violations simply

because others have done the same. A number of residents, including some office-bearers of the Residents' Welfare Association, have chosen to cover their kitchen balconies despite builder guidelines prohibiting such modifications due to fire safety concerns and stipulations from the gas supplier. When one such office-bearer was requested to rectify the alteration, the response was not one of compliance, but of deflection - suggesting that the matter be taken up first with another senior member who had committed a similar breach.

What makes this more concerning is that such disregard rarely remains an individual act; it gradually alters the system itself, where the consequences are no longer limited to those who default, but are borne collectively, often by those who have complied. Systems exist to create order, but they depend on individuals to sustain them, and when rules become negotiable, the system itself begins to erode. The answer, then, may lie in recognising that individual responsibility and systemic reform must operate together. When responsibility is shared without accountability, the consequences are borne by all, even when the failure lies with a few.



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LIGHTS, CAMERA, LEADERSHIP AND THE GOVERNANCE TEST

The swearing-in ceremony of actor-turned-politician Joseph Vijay appeared less like a conventional political event and more like a real-life trailer for Jananayagan 2. The atmosphere, presentation style and Vijay's dialogue-driven speech reminded many of his larger-than-life screen persona. As Tamil Nadu's new Chief Minister, he has already generated enormous public expectations through the ambitious welfare promises made during the election campaign.

During his address, Vijay defended the government's cautious approach towards implementing its promises. He stated that the State exchequer had been severely strained by years of financial mismanagement and that Tamil Nadu's debt burden had crossed ₹10 lakh crore. To justify the government's position, he announced that a detailed

White Paper on the State's financial condition would soon be released. Vijay also appealed to the public to grant his administration adequate time to fulfil its commitments.

What attracted the greatest attention, however, was the unmistakably cinematic tone of his speech. Many observers felt his style resembled powerful movie dialogues rather than a conventional political address. His announcement of 200 free electricity units for households consuming below 500 units immediately captured public attention.

Yet, beyond the excitement surrounding his rise, Vijay now faces the far more difficult task of balancing populist expectations with financial and administrative realities.

AP THIRUVAD | CHENNAI

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HARSH PAWARIA | ROHTAK

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

When parenting turns into competition

The article on school WhatsApp groups and parenting anxiety captures a growing yet under-discussed social problem. What began as a simple communication tool has gradually turned into a marketplace of comparison. Every uploaded certificate, Olympiad medal, coding class achievement, foreign trip or 'perfect' progress report silently pushes parents towards competitive parenting and children towards performance anxiety.

Comparison slowly erodes confidence. Children begin to link self-worth with rankings and validation, while parents mistake anxiety for responsibility. Schools must recognise that education is not a corporate race.. Childhood cannot become a résumé-building exercise driven by constant competition. Parent WhatsApp groups should remain limited to essential academic communication rather than becoming spaces for displaying privilege and achievement. Equally important, parents must understand that every child grows at a different pace and possesses different strengths. A generation raised under relentless comparison may appear accomplished outwardly, yet remain deeply insecure within. Confidence grows through encouragement, emotional security and individuality - not endless benchmarking.

Sacred spaces need responsibility

Apropos "Cleaning up India's sacred and scenic spaces" (11 May 2026), the Supreme Court's directive to enforce waste management rules at tourist and pilgrimage sites is welcome, but it risks repeating a familiar pattern where judicial urgency collides with administrative inertia. We have witnessed this cycle repeatedly: orders are issued, committees formed, and public spaces briefly cleaned before neglect returns with the next tourist season or festival.

The court's emphasis on monitoring is important, but without proper funding it achieves little. Many municipalities lack scientific landfills, trained staff and even basic waste collection systems. While the proposal to use corporate social responsibility funds is practical, CSR cannot replace long-term public investment. A dedicated cleanliness cess on tourism and pilgrimage revenue could support sustainable waste infrastructure. More importantly, public spaces must stop being treated as somebody else's responsibility.

Laws alone cannot create civic discipline. Pilgrimage committees, hotel associations and local bodies must be made accountable for cleanliness, while religious leaders should actively promote environmental responsibility as part of spiritual duty.

K CHIDANAND KUMAR | BENGALURU

Congress Leadership Crisis In Kerala

A week after dislodging the UDF in Kerala's Assembly elections, Congress faces mounting suspense over its Chief Ministerial choice among heavyweights VD Satheesan, Ramesh Chennithala and KC Venugopal. The delay exposes deep-rooted factionalism and the high command's struggle to reconcile regional power centres, often appearing reactive rather than decisive.

In contrast, the BJP's centralised model has ensured quicker leadership decisions - as seen in West Bengal, Assam and Puducherry - projecting organisational discipline and public unity after internal consultations.

The prolonged balancing act encourages intense lobbying, risks alienating factions and could reopen latent fault lines, potentially triggering rebellion or administrative paralysis. Kerala's history of strong groupism further magnifies these risks, threatening to dilute the momentum of the electoral victory and raising questions about the high command's ability to enforce consensus. Swift arbitration and reconciliation are now essential to convert electoral success into stable governance. Otherwise, internal divisions may overshadow the mandate received from the people. Congress must resolve its leadership uncertainty quickly to preserve unity.

SK PRABHAKAR | GURUGRAM



Familiar waters, fatal neglect: Lessons from the Narmada Disaster

Why India needs rules to manage oil shocks



GOURAV VALLABH

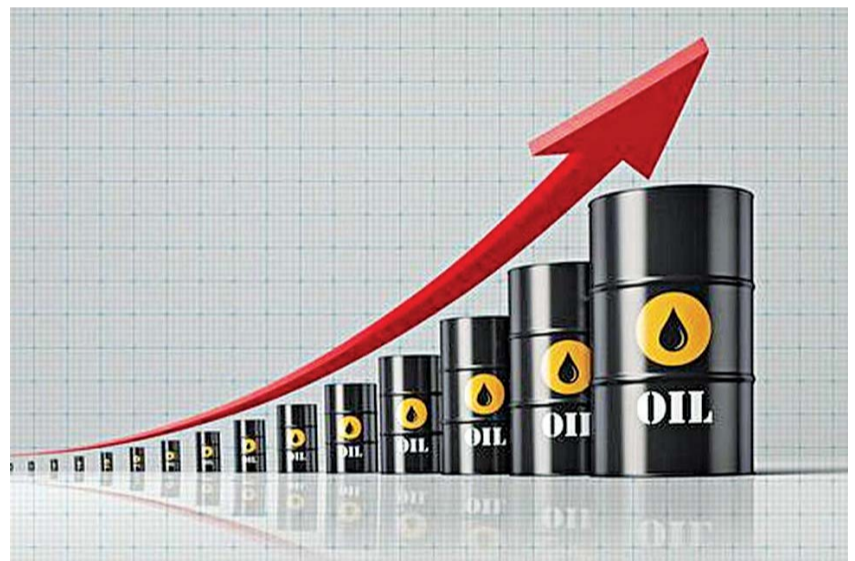
The headlines from West Asia and Eastern Europe carry the same uncomfortable subtext: the price of crude oil is no longer determined solely by supply and demand. It is shaped by sanctions, shipping disruptions, fragile ceasefires, and the calculations of producer cartels that often find higher prices congenial. Brent crude has held close to USD 95 a barrel for several months, and experience from 2008 and 2022 suggests that such geopolitical premia tend to persist.

For India, which imports more than 85 per cent of the crude oil it consumes, this is not an abstract concern. Every USD 10-per-barrel increase in crude prices typically raises pump prices by about ₹4.5 per litre, placing pressure on household budgets. Yet retail fuel prices have remained largely unchanged since May 2022, despite considerable volatility in global markets. This apparent calm reflects a form of managed stability. Oil marketing companies — Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum, and Hindustan Petroleum — have absorbed a significant portion of the volatility. Estimates suggest that this entails substantial under-recoveries on both petrol and diesel, with corresponding effects on profitability and investment capacity.

Such arrangements, while providing short-term predictability, carry broader economic implications. The first is investment: resources absorbed at the retail level are resources not deployed towards refinery modernisation, green hydrogen, and the wider energy transition that India will inevitably navigate. The second is expectations: even without engaging deeply with petroleum economics, citizens recognise patterns, including the likelihood of deferred adjustments over time.

The third implication is more subtle but equally important: the attenuation of the price signal itself. When fuel prices remain static, consumption patterns adjust less dynamically. Households do not recalibrate commuting choices, and logistics operators have limited incentives to optimise routes. Over time, the economy forgoes the incremental adjustments that cumulatively build resilience to external shocks.

The argument for moving to a rule-based system is rooted in practicality, not ideology. What is needed is a simple, transparent framework that replaces discretion with predictability. One way to do this is to define a normal price band for crude oil, say USD 65 to 90 per barrel, within which retail fuel prices adjust freely in line



with global markets. When prices move beyond this band, an automatic sharing mechanism can come into play: part of the increase is absorbed through calibrated reductions in central excise, while the rest is passed on to consumers.

Crucially, the system should work both ways. When global prices fall, a portion of the gains can be set aside into a stabilisation fund, with the remainder passed through to consumers. Over time, this creates a self-correcting buffer: good years finance the difficult ones. The result is a system that is predictable, even-handed, and less reliant on ad hoc interventions, while still protecting both consumers and fiscal stability.

India is well-positioned to operationalise such an approach. The digital public infrastructure developed over the past decade — from Aadhaar to UPI and direct benefit transfers — offers a robust foundation for targeted support in exceptional circumstances. In periods of sharp price increases, vulnerable groups such as farmers, transport operators, and low-income households could receive calibrated assistance without distorting price signals across the board.

Importantly, the broader reform orientation of the Narendra Modi government, particularly its emphasis on transparency, digitisation, and institutional capacity-building, provides a strong enabling context for advancing such rule-based frameworks in energy pricing. A durable framework would also require alignment across stakeholders. Oil marketing companies would benefit from greater predictability in pass-through mechanisms. State governments could play a complementary role by ensuring that tax adjustments remain consistent with broader stabilisation objectives. Consumers, in turn, would gradually adapt to modest and regular price movements as a normal feature of a responsive system.

India has successfully implemented far more complex reforms. The Goods and Services Tax required sustained coordination across jurisdictions, and the Aadhaar ecosystem evolved through iterative refinement before achieving scale. Compared to these, a rule-based fuel stabilisation mechanism is technically modest. The necessary data and policy instruments already exist; what remains is their systematic integration.

In an increasingly uncertain global energy environment, the objective is not to eliminate volatility but to manage it with clarity and consistency. A framework that combines market signals with institutional safeguards can strengthen both economic resilience and policy credibility. As geopolitical uncertainties persist, such an approach would position India to navigate external shocks with greater confidence and stability.

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SATENDRA SINGH

The recent capsizing of a tourist cruise at Bargi Dam in Madhya Pradesh claimed several lives. This is not just a tragic accident; it highlights a serious failure that keeps costing lives across India. The image of a mother holding her four-year-old son in his last moments shows both human bravery and a failure of institutions. These tragedies are not due to fate; they are the result of neglect, complacency, and poor enforcement of safety rules.

What happened on the Narmada was sadly familiar, not because it was inevitable, but because it reflects a pattern India has seen too often. Survivors describe how the weather changed suddenly. Strong winds hit the reservoir, and the boat began to tip. Panic spread fast as water poured into the vessel. Passengers realised too late that there were no effective safety measures. There were not enough life jackets, no safety briefing, and no clear effort from the crew to handle the emergency. Within minutes, a relaxing outing turned into a desperate fight for survival.

This incident mirrors earlier tragedies, like the recent boat accident in the Yamuna near Mathura. There, similar issues — overcrowding, lack of safety gear, and ignoring weather warnings — led to multiple deaths. These ongoing problems raise an urgent question: why does India keep facing such avoidable disasters when it has clear laws and regulations?

The answer lies not in the absence of rules, but in their consistent violation. India's legal framework for inland water transport is strong. The Inland Vessels Act, 2021, and related safety regulations clearly require vessel certification, regular inspections, limits on passenger capacity, and mandatory safety equipment. On paper, the system looks thorough. In practice, though, enforcement is weak and often superficial.

Boats continue to operate without proper certification or inspection. Operators often ignore passenger limits, especially in tourist areas. Safety equipment is sometimes inadequate or completely missing. Weather advisories, when issued, are not always taken seriously. As noted in earlier discussions, the real issue is the "large gap between policy and practice", where compliance becomes optional and safety negotiable.

Operators are also a concern. Their main motivation often seems to be profit rather than safety. Each extra passenger means more revenue, and spending on safety is seen as an unnecessary cost. In the Bargi incident, there are claims that warnings about worsening weather were ignored and that the crew did not respond effectively as conditions deteriorated. The fact that the captain survived with a life jacket while passengers faced dangers without basic protection raises serious ethical questions about responsibility and preparedness.

However, it would be too easy to blame only the operators. Regulatory authorities also share the responsibility. If a vessel can operate without meeting safety standards, it shows a failure in oversight. Inspections, when they happen, are often brief. Monitoring systems are either weak or non-existent. Furthermore, having multiple agencies involved — such as tourism departments, local administration, police, and disaster response teams — often leads to fragmented accountability. In such a system, lapses can go unnoticed until a tragedy occurs.

Another key issue is the failure to consider weather information in operational decisions. Sudden storms and high winds are common in large bodies of water like reservoirs. Modern forecasting systems can provide timely warnings, yet these are often ignored or downplayed. Choosing to go ahead with a leisure cruise despite bad conditions shows a deeper culture of risk denial.

At the heart of these problems is a lack of a safety culture. Safety is often seen as a formality rather than a crucial requirement. Passengers rarely question overcrowding or ask for life jackets. Operators seldom give safety briefings. Authorities rarely enforce compliance with the seriousness it needs. As long as safety is secondary to convenience or profit, such incidents will keep happening.

The Bargi tragedy also shows a consistent failure to learn from past incidents. India has experienced many boat accidents over the years — in Assam, Bihar, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh — each met with public outrage, official statements, and promises of tougher enforcement. Yet, over time, these promises fade, and the system returns to its former state.



The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

THE HEARTBREAKING LOSSES AT BARGI DAM SHOULD SERVE AS A WAKE-UP CALL. THEY FORCE US TO CONFRONT UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS ABOUT NEGLIGENCE, FAILURES IN GOVERNANCE, AND SOCIETY'S APPROACH TO SAFETY. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THEY COMPEL ACTION TO ENSURE THAT SUCH TRAGEDIES ARE NOT REPEATED

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As noted in previous reflections, the lessons that could prevent future disasters are often lost in a cycle of reaction and forgetfulness.

Breaking this cycle requires more than small changes; it needs a fundamental shift in approach. Enforcement of safety regulations must be strict and unwavering. Vessels should not be allowed to operate without proper certification, and violations should lead to significant penalties. In cases of gross negligence that result in loss of life, criminal liability must be clearly defined.

Technology has the potential to be a game-changer. With real-time vessel monitoring via GPS, digital tracking of passenger counts, and the integration of weather alerts into operational systems, safety can be greatly improved. But technology is not a magic fix for accountability. It needs to be backed by a strong commitment from institutions and a culture of transparency.

Building capacity is just as crucial. Crew members should receive training not just in navigation, but also in handling emergencies. Regular drills and safety audits should become the norm, especially in high-risk areas like popular tourist spots. Preparedness should not be an afterthought; it should be woven into the fabric of operations.

Public awareness is another vital piece of the puzzle. Passengers need to be empowered to take their safety seriously — asking for life jackets, questioning unsafe practices, and refusing to board overcrowded boats. A safety culture cannot simply be dictated from the top; it has to become a shared social value.

Lastly, emergency response systems must be strengthened. Quick and coordinated rescue efforts can save lives. In the Bargi incident, rescue teams managed to save several people, but delays and limitations in response capabilities may have cost others. Pre-positioning rescue resources and improving coordination among agencies can make a significant difference in critical situations.

The tragedy at the Narmada is not just a local issue; it resonates nationally. As India expands its tourism industry and promotes more recreational activities around water bodies, the risks associated with these activities will also rise. Addressing these risks requires a proactive and sustained commitment to safety.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to what society chooses to prioritise. Development loses meaning if it comes at the cost of human lives. Safety should not be viewed as something negotiable; it must be treated as a fundamental requirement for progress.

The heartbreaking losses at Bargi Dam should serve as a wake-up call. They force us to confront uncomfortable truths about negligence, failures in governance, and society's approach to safety. More importantly, they compel action to ensure that such tragedies are not repeated.

India already has the laws, expertise, and resources needed to prevent such disasters. What is required now is the determination to implement them. As has been rightly pointed out, the challenge is not the ability to act, but the willingness to do so. If this incident leads to genuine reform, it may serve a purpose beyond the tragedy itself. If not, it will become just another entry in a long list of preventable disasters — briefly mourned, then forgotten, until the next one occurs.

West Asia, Hormuz, and the price India is avoiding



KUSHAN MITRA

The West Asia crisis has once again exposed the central vulnerability of India's energy economy: it is still dependent on a narrow and fragile supply corridor, and the Strait of Hormuz remains its biggest strategic choke point.

When that route is disrupted, India does not merely face a supply problem. It faces a fiscal problem, an inflation problem, and a policy problem all at once.

For the moment, the government has chosen to absorb the shock rather than pass it on to consumers. That has prevented panic and preserved supply stability. But it has also pushed the cost of the crisis into the public balance sheet, where it is beginning to crowd out other priorities. This is why the current fuel pricing strategy deserves a harder review than it is likely to get in public debate. The Strait of Hormuz matters because it is not just one shipping lane among many. It is one of the world's most important energy arteries, and India remains deeply exposed to it. A crisis there quickly becomes a crisis in refinery margins, import bills, freight rates, insurance premia, and ultimately government finances. The geopolitical risk is obvious. The economic cost is what gets hidden.

What the government has bought

India's immediate response has been competent. Domestic LPG production was raised, allocation priorities were reset, alternative crude sourcing was widened, and public sector oil companies were used as shock absorbers. Recent government briefings have also said that supply remains stable, refineries are operating normally, and the country is now drawing crude from more than 40 suppliers, with a much smaller share of imports dependent on Hormuz than in the past.

That is not trivial. It is the result of years of work on terminals, pipelines, refining capacity, import diversification, and strategic stock planning. The country is better prepared than it was a decade ago, and that has clearly helped. But preparedness and affordability are not the same thing. The fact that India can absorb the shock does not mean it should absorb it forever at the same price.

The government's fuel policy has already done what it was designed to do in the short term: keep the pump stable and avoid a visible consumer crisis. The question now is whether that stability has become too expensive to maintain.

Why prices matter

Fuel prices are not just a retail issue. They are a signal mechanism. When the state suppresses them for too long, it distorts consumption, weakens the incentive to conserve, and forces the burden onto the exchequer. That may be acceptable in a short, acute emergency. It is less



defensible if the shock is prolonged and global crude remains elevated.

There is also a political illusion at work here. A stable petrol pump looks like stability in the economy, but it may simply mean the cost has been moved elsewhere. It shows up in foregone revenue, in oil company under-recoveries, and in reduced room for strategic investment. That matters at a time when India needs more money for storage, refining, logistics, and the energy transition.

In other words, keeping fuel artificially cheap is not free public policy. It is deferred payment. And deferred payment is a poor way to manage a recurring strategic risk.

The case for a gradual rise

This is not an argument for a sudden shock at the pump. That would be politically reckless and economically unnecessary. It is an argument for a gradual upward correction once the immedi-

ate crisis stabilises. A phased increase would be easier to absorb, easier to explain, and far more sustainable than indefinite price suppression.

There is a strong macroeconomic case for this. If global crude stays high, the difference between import cost and domestic retail price has to be financed somewhere. Either consumers pay it, taxpayers pay it, or public sector balance sheets pay it. The last two options are effectively the same burden, just hidden differently. A controlled increase in fuel prices would make that burden explicit and reduce the long-term fiscal drag.

The deeper argument is strategic. India is trying to build a more resilient energy system, and that requires capital. Strategic reserves need expansion. Domestic refining needs more flexibility. Logistics need more redundancy. Clean-energy transition assets need scale. All of that requires fiscal space. Higher fuel prices, if introduced carefully, can help create that space.

What India should learn

The real lesson of the West Asia crisis is not that the government should have done less. It is that resilience has a price and that the bill cannot always be paid by the state alone. India has already made meaningful progress in diversification and infrastructure, and that has clearly softened the blow. But the next phase of policy cannot be based on the assumption that the government will permanently stand between the global oil market and the Indian consumer. That model works only up to a point. Beyond that, it becomes fiscally corrosive. If the crisis contin-

ues, then some of the adjustment must be shared by the consumer, even if gradually. That is the only way to preserve the state's capacity to spend on the buffers that make future shocks less painful. The government should therefore begin preparing the political ground for a calibrated rise in fuel prices, ideally linked to a broader energy security narrative. The message is simple: India is stronger than it was, but not strong enough to pretend that global energy shocks can be absorbed without cost.

Conclusion

The West Asia crisis has tested India's energy system and, for now, it has held. That is a success. But the very measures that protected consumers have also revealed the limits of the current pricing framework. India should not rush to raise fuel prices, but it should stop pretending that permanently low prices are a sustainable answer to a permanent strategic vulnerability. A gradual increase in fuel prices would not be popular. It would, however, be more honest, more fiscally responsible, and more consistent with the long-term task of building energy security. In a crisis like this, the right question is not whether consumers should feel pain. It is whether the state can afford to keep hiding it.

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No One Likes, or Gains From, Commutes

Build muscle memory about work from home

Narendra Modi's call for restraint on energy use, including working from home, places companies that have struggled with getting employees back into offices in a tricky situation. Employees working offsite during Covid rearranged their lives around the disruption and company bosses tended to accept the new normal, where possible. Yet, there are serious corporate reservations about WFH over productivity and collaboration that can erode competitiveness. Having to consider a second spell of self-enforced remote work will, in some cases, undo years of management effort to rebuild stronger teams. But attitudes towards return to office are not uniform. A broad spectrum of businesses is comfortable with a hybrid work model that optimises for productivity and talent retention. This segment will find the energy-saving argument difficult to resist.

Governments urging WFH as an option makes it compelling beyond what management gurus will eventually have to say about it. It is early days for a definitive view to emerge in management literature about effects of remote work. Particularly since these changes are occurring against the backdrop of much bigger work disruptions due to AI. Some of those will spill over to the location of work, and building muscle memory about WFH could be useful. Managers will have to find other means to improve efficiency, creativity and mentorship in a work environment that fundamentally changed in 2020. By 2030, the landscape may become unrecognisable.

Just as companies, employees need to make deeper adjustments to WFH. For many, remote work can hinder professional development a collaborative environment offers. The trade-offs diverge widely according to the nature of work, and a successful WFH programme requires strong supportive communication from managers. Remote work can promote business resilience by balancing employee welfare with productivity. If it catches on in economies vulnerable to energy shocks, a new form of competitiveness could emerge. After all, nobody gains from longer commutes.



Of Two Meetings in Beijing and Delhi

Trade, AI and Taiwan — with Iran and oil as a 'main side dish' — will dominate the Xi-Trump powwow in Beijing on May 14-15. Expectations are understandably modest. For Trump, it will be his first trip to China since 2017. His gut-directed foreign policy needs a quick win, especially as Washington and Tehran play a dangerous game of chicken with the global economy held hostage. Xi, by contrast, remains calm, methodical, calculating.

China has pushed back against parts of Trump's tariff agenda, while Washington remains focused on narrowing the trade imbalance. For Xi, offering Trump a few quick wins — Boeing aircraft purchases, soybean orders, and movement on a proposed US-China Board of Trade and Board of Investment — could buy China greater flexibility on Taiwan. The US has reportedly delayed a major arms package to Taiwan, but Beijing wants more. India and the broader Indo-Pacific should watch how Washington navigates these pressures. The US wants guard rails on AI. Beijing has little interest, unless access to advanced US tech is part of the bargain. On Iran, neither is likely to budge from their positions.

As it happens, BRICS foreign ministers will be meeting in New Delhi on the very same days. For Beijing, the US remains the only true peer competitor. But the BRICS ministerial still carries demonstration value: a support network of 'anti-US' states that India has traditionally ensured doesn't evolve into an anti-US platform. However, Trump's oscillating approach toward allies and adversaries — combined with his close ties to Pakistan — could complicate that balancing act. India must secure its own voice and interests as a middle power while crafting a message that prevents BRICS from becoming merely a platform for Beijing's ambitions.



JUST IN JEST

Let there be more songs, less hot air at official gatherings

State-Nation Songs DJ Babu Remix

The newly-appointed Vijay government in Tamil Nadu has declared that the tradition of singing 'Tamil Thai Vazhthu' (Mother Tamil's Blessing) at the beginning and 'Jana Gana Mana' at the end of official events will continue. We fully lend our vocal support to that. State and national songs and anthems are not just ceremonial fluff, they're also the perfect reminder that states make up a nation, so we can chill by having a full playlist without getting antsy about 'ranking' or order of songs.

And why should Tamil Nadu have all the fun? Uttar Pradesh should also be belting out a rousing ode to its sugarcane fields, Gujarat humming a jaunty ditty about its industrial parks, Kerala crooning a coconut-infused ballad about being cutting-edge in the backwaters.... Let politics become less about shouting matches and more about karaoke. After all, it's tough to turn an assembly into a fish market if people are busy remembering the second verse of not just one song but two. In fact, IPL teams — more relevant these days than governments when representing geographic identities — should craft and popularise team anthems. KKR has already shown the way with its Vishal-Shekhar theme track, 'Korbo, Lorbo, Jeetbo Re' (We'll Do, Fight, Win). An anthem may be national but the vibe is local. And nothing gets more vocal for local than a state-national song-anthem remix.

To ride out this oil crisis, focus should be on well-targeted support, not broad price suppression

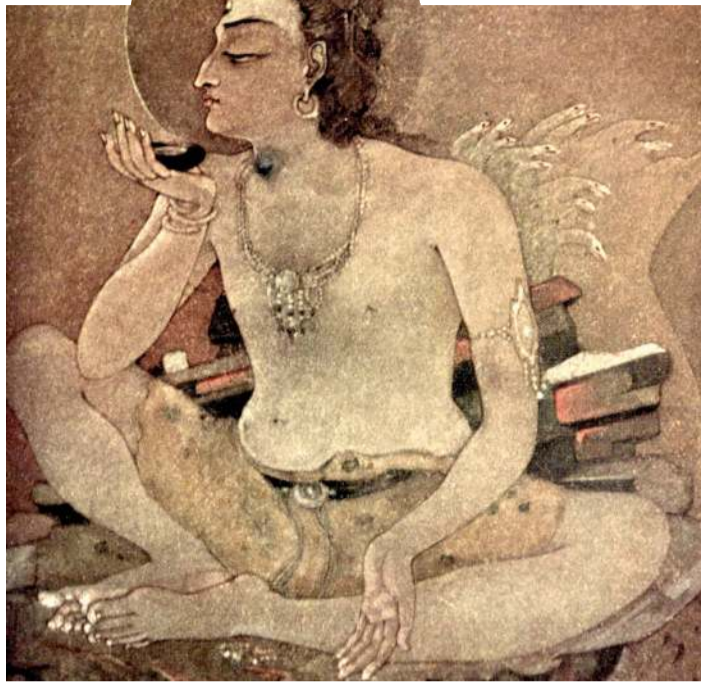
Observe and Shock Absorb



Shekhar Aiyar & Sanjeev Gupta

On Sunday, Narendra Modi urged the country to reduce fuel usage by opting for more public transport and WFH, lower fertiliser use, and avoid non-essential gold purchases and forex spend. For India, which imports nearly 90% of its oil needs, and whose strategic petroleum reserves are slender relative to other major economies, it's a stress test of the first order. GoI's chief response has been to deploy fiscal resources to shield consumers from worst of the price surge. The playbook is familiar: excise duty cuts, compression of oil marketing company margins, and subsidies embedded in the pricing framework. Domestic petrol and diesel prices have remained broadly unchanged since January in April, retail petrol prices, which had been higher than in the US at the start of the year, slipped below, a striking illustration of how far domestic prices have drifted from underlying costs.

India's response is underpinned by sound economic logic. When retail prices of petrol, diesel, LPG and kerosene spike, consequences can ripple swiftly through the economy. The poor tend to be hardest hit, since energy comprises a larger share of their household budgets. So, absorbing some of the shock is justifiable. But how much, and for how long, are crucial questions. This is where fiscal arithmetic deserves close attention. Assume that a 50% increase in crude oil prices translates into a 25% increase in the supply cost of petrol and diesel, given limited short-term adjustment in refining and distribution margins. Applying this to projected 2026 consumption yields a fiscal cost



Economic detox: 'Neelkanth' (c. 1936), Nandalal Bose

of about 0.6% of GDP on an annual basis. That expenditure is broadly comparable to the entire central budget allocation for agriculture, and exceeds government spending on public health. The calculation is also probably an underestimate, since it doesn't adjust for rupee's depreciation against dollar. At a time when fiscal consolidation remains a priority and public debt is declining only gradually, this is a substantial call on scarce budgetary resources.

There is also a targeting problem that complicates the equity argument for price suppression. Not all fuels have the same income-consumption profile. In fact, more than 80% of Indian households don't purchase petrol or diesel directly. Primary beneficiaries of cheap petrol are private vehicle-owners, a constituency concentrated in the upper income deciles. Protecting the vulnerable is right. But blanket price suppression is a blunt instrument for achieving it.

Applying the same back-of-the-envelope calculations to a cross-country sample suggests that India is somewhere in middle of the pack of Asian oil importers. Its fiscal exposure from maintaining unchanged prices is lower than in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. But it's higher than in advanced Asian less-fuel-intensive economies like Japan and South Korea. Meanwhile Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Vietnam have already adjusted domestic prices in response to rising costs, suggesting that price adjustment, managed carefully, is achievable even in economies with a significant share of low-income households.

Perhaps an even deeper concern is structural. India's strategic petroleum reserves — a buffer against exactly the kind of supply shock now unfolding — are a fraction of those maintained by other major economies. They amount to less than 2% of China's reserves, abo-

ut 5% of the US', and 27% of South Korea's. With domestic crude production having fallen by around 26% over the past decade, and import dependence now approaching 89% of total oil needs, combination of thin reserves and high dependence leaves India acutely exposed to geopolitical flashpoints. Addressing this vulnerability is a long-term project that needs to begin in earnest.

None of this is to advocate for an immediate fiscal-tightening, or sharp increase in retail prices. That would be economically disruptive and socially regressive. Instead, a gradual, well-signalled restoration of price pass-through, accompanied by targeted support for households that genuinely need protection, is needed.

Apart from restoring fiscal prudence, this would also help maintain a level playing field between state-owned oil marketing companies and private retailers, without which the sector is unlikely to attract the kind of investor interest it needs to thrive in the long run.

GoI should also address structural issues the crisis has thrown into sharp relief. Strategic petroleum reserves need to be built up to levels commensurate with India's import dependence. RE transition should be accelerated. The petroleum intensity of the economy has barely shifted over the past 5 yrs. And the tax framework needs to be put on a sounder footing. Contribution of petroleum taxes to central government revenues has declined sharply over the last 5 yrs, partly due to the failure to adjust excise duties for inflation.

India has navigated oil shocks before, and will navigate this one. The short-term instinct to cushion the blow for ordinary citizens is understandable. The challenge now is to ensure that this instinct is translated into well-targeted support, rather than broad price suppression, especially if crude oil prices remain elevated for an extended period. Structural reforms needed to reduce India's exposure to future shocks should begin now, not be deferred to the next crisis.

Aiyar is director, and Gupta is senior visiting professor, ICRIER

Raining Bills, Rising H-1B Barriers



Lubna Kably

A flurry of anti-H-1B legislative proposals has emerged in Washington, targeting not just temporary work visas but the broader pipeline that attracts international students and skilled professionals to the US. The latest proposal introduced last month is the End H-1B Visa Abuse Act 2026. The bill seeks a 3-yr pause on new H-1B visas, reduction of annual cap from 65,000 to 25,000, a minimum salary threshold of \$2 lakh, elimination of optional practical training (OPT), the post-study work programme for international students, and restrictions on H-1B holders transitioning to green cards.

The legislation also proposes barring staffing firms from using H-1B visas, and requires sponsoring employers to certify that they cannot find a qualified American, and have not conducted layoffs. It also disallows H-1B holders from bringing dependents to the US.

Some measures suggested in the bill, like prohibiting federal agencies from sponsoring or employing non-immigrant workers, are being witnessed in some states. Florida's public university system has halted new H-1B visa hires till January 2027. Texas governor

Greg Abbott ordered a similar hiring freeze for state agencies and public universities that will remain in place till May 2027.

In February, EXILE (Ending Exploitative Imported Labor Exemptions) Act was introduced that seeks to eliminate H-1B altogether starting FY2027. The bill frames the visa programme as harmful to Americans. Around the same time, End H-1B Now Act was introduced, which also aimed at abolishing H-1B. PAUSE (Pausing All Admissions Until Security Ensured) Act, introduced in late 2025, seeks to freeze legal immigration admissions until certain restrictive provisions are introduced in law, like ending adjustment of status for H-1B visa-holders (transition to a green card) and scrapping OPT. It also seeks to deny various benefits to non-citizens.

Among these bills, H-1B and L-1 Visa Reform Act introduced in September 2025 stands apart. This legislation has bipartisan backing and carries greater policy significance. It prioritises visa issuances to STEM workers, mandates higher salaries for foreign hires, and requires employers to certify that H-1B hires have not displaced American workers.

US immigration legislation is notoriously difficult to pass, particularly in the senate where bipartisan support is usually essential. Bills that seek to abolish entire visa categories, or freeze skilled immigration, face resistance from large sections of the US business community, universities, hospitals and tech companies.



Attempts to stamp out the stamp

But dismissing these proposals as mere political theatre would be a mistake. The Trump regime has already begun reshaping the H-1B landscape through executive action and regulatory changes. H-1B cap lottery for the fiscal beginning this October saw a major shift with a weighted selection process that favours higher-paid applicants.

The next likely frontier is wage escalation across all levels of H-1B hiring. This is arguably the clearest signal that the future of H-1B policy will increasingly revolve around salary levels. Immigration policy driven primarily by political messaging often creates distortions. The US does have legitimate concerns that include misuse, wage suppression and over-dependence on temp foreign labour. But blunt restrictions are rarely effective policy.

Just weeks after tightening visa restrictions and freezing processing for individuals from travel-ban countries, the Trump regime quietly reversed course for physicians after hospitals, medical groups and residency programmes warned of severe disruptions to patient care. Doctors from af-

fect countries were again allowed to continue visa, work permit and green card processing because the US healthcare system simply could not afford to lose them.

The same logic applies more broadly to science, engineering, medicine and emerging technologies. What America needs is rational reform. Australia, for instance, regularly updates a relatively focused skilled occupation list based on actual labour shortages. Instead of allowing H-1B to become overly concentrated in a few sectors, the US could also move towards such a transparent and dynamic shortage-based system.

Canada's points-based permanent residency model also offers useful ideas. Rather than trapping skilled workers in decade-long green card backlogs dependent on employer sponsorship, the US could adopt a more merit-driven pathway that rewards education, skills, work experience and labour market demand.

US universities actively recruit foreign students, who contribute billions of dollars in tuition and research output. Yet, after graduation, many face enormous uncertainty. The masters cap within H-1B is one mechanism that partly recognises the value of US education. But reserving just 20,000 slots in the annual H-1B lottery does not do full justice. Expanding priority pathways for green cards for graduates of accredited US universities would make far more economic sense than forcing such talent out.

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The Fine Art of Doing Science



V K Saraswat & V K Singh

The 2025 Global Innovation Index describes India as an 'overperformer', delivering more innovation output relative to its input levels than many of its peers. Yet, beneath this encouraging headline lies a more complex reality: systems that enable research have not kept pace with the aspirations they are meant to serve.

Focus must now shift to making the R&D ecosystem more responsive, efficient and agile. Nearly a decade ago, Narendra Modi underscored improving 'ease of doing science', calling for a system where researchers spend more time in labs than navigating paperwork. Challenges include both internal factors localised within academic and research institutions, and external factors outside institutional systems that involve broader aspects related to funding, policies, rules and regulations.

Addressing these in isolation won't suffice. What's needed is a coordinated shift in how the ecosystem functions. R&D projects move more slowly because admin systems fail to match scientific timelines. Delays in grant

disbursal, complex procurement procedures, restrictive utilisation norms and repetitive compliance requirements continue to affect R&D efficiency. At the same time, India's R&D ecosystem remains dependent on public funding, with relatively limited participation from industry and philanthropy.

Faster grant approvals, simplified procurement mechanisms, greater institutional autonomy in fund utilisation, and stronger incentives for private-sector R&D can greatly improve research productivity. Encouraging philanthropic and CSR participation can further diversify funding sources.

Expanding post-doctoral support, ensuring timely fellowships through unified portal, and providing greater institutional flexibility in recruitment can help strengthen India's scientific workforce and overall environment. In many institutions, researchers continue to spend considerable time managing approvals, procurement, compliance and documentation. Admin processes often compete directly with scientific work, reducing both efficiency and research output.

Globally competitive research ecosystems increasingly rely on specialised professional support systems for grant

management, procurement, partnerships and project coordination. Indian institutions would benefit from similar models. Dedicated R&D support offices, simplified approvals, decentralised decision-making and a culture of trust can allow researchers to focus more on scientific work rather than operational processes.

Translation of research into usable products and technologies remains limited. Weak academia-industry linkages and inadequate testing and prototyping infrastructure often prevent innovations from moving beyond labs. Stronger industry collaboration, mobility frameworks, tech transfer systems, and sectoral research development and innovation clusters can help accelerate real-world adoption of research outcomes.

Access to quality research resources continues to vary significantly across institutions. While initiatives such as One Nation One Subscription (Onos) have improved journal accessibility, access to advanced databases, specialised software and high-end scientific infrastructure remains limited.

Shared infra models, integrated research repositories and wider digital access systems can help reduce disparities across institutions. Expanding access to include private institutions can help building a more inclusive national innovation

ecosystem. Many state universities and regional institutions continue to face constraints related to infra, faculty capacity and funding. In several cases, state institutions remain weakly connected to larger national research networks.

Improving collaboration between central and state institutions, strengthening state S&T councils and expanding shared research infra can help create more balanced regional innovation ecosystems. Greater support for locally relevant and grassroots innovation can also improve inclusiveness.

An effective R&D ecosystem requires strong monitoring, timely data and better policy coordination. Evaluation systems remain fragmented, data gaps and delays persist, and institutional capacities in science governance and research administration remain limited. Strengthening data analytics infrastructure, evidence-based policy-making and institutional capacities can improve long-term effectiveness of the R&D ecosystem.

Improving 'ease of doing R&D' is not a peripheral reform but central to enhancing research productivity, attracting and retaining talent, and ensuring scientific advances translate into tangible societal and economic outcomes. This will require sustained commitment, coordinated action and a willingness at the institutional level to rethink established processes.

Saraswat is former chairman, DRDO, and Singh is senior adviser, NITI Aayog



THE SPEAKING TREE

Digital Loneliness

KV RAGHUPATHI

Our lives are influenced by digital technology, which was inconceivable in the 20th c. We use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and X to enable instant communication across continents. Everything is procured through digital transactions, which has undoubtedly made our lives more comfortable. However, we have not made effective use of the surplus time. We feel more isolated than ever.

We have paradoxically strayed from nature and from ourselves, causing 'digital loneliness' that wreaks havoc on our psyche, body and genuine emotional connection, despite being surrounded by people, wealth and comforts. Being lonely is the feeling of being disconnected, even while using digital media.

We cannot, however, dispense with technology, without which life now is unthinkable. We must, however, coexist with technology, while also making a deliberate return to nature every now and then and turning inward. Connecting with our body, emotions and environment will strengthen our character and clarity, and add meaning to our existence. It is only by returning to nature and connecting deeply with her that we learn to understand how our body and mind function, rise above the loneliness and despair caused by digital technology, and feel the presence of something greater than us.



PARANORMAL ACTIVITY Paragraphs From Fiction

A Leopard-Skin Hat

Anne Serre

Oh! How pretty she was, Fanny, back in the days of her childhood, with her shiny black boots and her long blue eyes with their golden-brown lashes, climbing onto walls and the branches of trees, the top of her wardrobe, calling herself Felix which means happy, powerful as a wrestler and clenching her teeth when she played the piano.

One summer, a child from next door asked her if he could use her piano and Fanny refused, saying quite simply 'No'. 'There was nothing gracious about it, no attempt

was made to comfort him or soften the blow. It was No.

The child was taken aback and hurt, and went off looking distinctly sad. Even when Fanny was a full-grown adult and well into her thirties, her forties even, she could look at children in a most unpleasant way.

At other times Fanny would dote upon these children, making a show of charm and affection that was again disproportionate and in response to which they would shrink back slightly, keeping their distance.

Translated from French by Mark Hutchinson

Chat Room

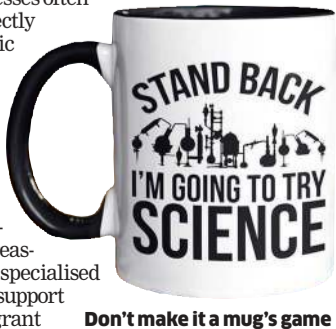
Motherhood And Apple Pie

Apropos the Edit, 'One Gap Narrows, Another Widens' (May 11), it's well understood that women often shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving and domestic responsibilities. However, expressing this in business-speak as purely 'unpaid labour' can unintentionally frame deeply human relationships — especially parenting and caregiving — in overly transactional terms, as though their value derives primarily from economic compensation. The deeper issue perhaps is not that caregiving is unpaid, but that it is frequently unshared. Most women, one suspects, would not want motherhood to be 'paid for' in the corporate sense, but its responsibilities to be recognised, respected and more equitably shared. Nimit Suri Pune

Correction

In Kanika Gahlaut's column, 'Nepo, the Reassuring Story of Ourselves' (Sunday Chatter, May 10), the writer erroneously wrote that Padmanabh Singh attended the 2026 Met Gala with his wife. He was at the gala with his sister Gauravi Kumari. The error is regretted.

—Editor



Don't make it a mug's game

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Economic turbulence

Civic discipline alone can't turn the tide

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's post-poll austerity push has an ominous ring to it. Apparently, all's not well on India's economic front. Global headwinds, particularly the war in West Asia, are taking their toll on an economy that remained resilient even during the Covid-19 pandemic. The PM has asked citizens to work from home, use public transport, avoid unnecessary foreign travel and postpone the purchase of gold. Citing the habits adopted during the disruptive pandemic, he has stressed the need to reduce fuel consumption and save foreign exchange. His call for a "civic Satyagraha" is a politically astute move, considering that the majority of the states are ruled by the BJP on its own or in alliance with other parties. Yet, it seems that the Modi government is preparing the people for a crisis that it failed to anticipate.

India heavily imports crude oil and gold, both of which strain foreign exchange reserves when global prices surge. Encouraging fuel conservation, domestic tourism and reduced dependence on imports are sensible responses to a volatile international environment. However, the fact is that the government largely remained occupied with the Assembly elections over the past month and a half. Economic management took a back seat during this period. Now, efforts are afoot to deal with the challenges.

Asking families to put off weddings abroad or avoid buying gold reflects anxiety over the rupee's alarming depreciation. A government that has repeatedly projected economic strength is now urging behavioural restraint on a nationwide scale. Some steps may have unintended consequences. India's jewellery sector supports millions of livelihoods, and a big drop in gold purchases could hurt workers far more than wealthy investors. Also, the work-from-home policy is not practical for large sections of the workforce. Indeed, civic responsibility matters, but it is no substitute for contingency planning. The government must urgently do course correction.

Clean-up by ED

Probe into education scams must be fair

THE widening investigations by the Enforcement Directorate into alleged education-sector scams worth nearly Rs 4,000 crore reveal how deeply corruption has penetrated one of the most socially sensitive sectors. What began as isolated cases of paper leaks or recruitment irregularities is now emerging as a sprawling ecosystem involving forged accreditations, fake degrees, scholarship frauds, admission rackets and manipulation of public recruitment systems. Investigators are reportedly examining scams linked to teacher recruitment in West Bengal, scholarship frauds in states such as Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, fake accreditation cases involving private educational groups, and even the controversial NEET-UG 2024 paper leak case. The ED has already attached assets worth around Rs 1,500 crore and made arrests across multiple states.

The education economy in India has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, particularly in private higher education, coaching centres, recruitment systems and professional certification. But regulation has failed to keep pace. The result is a dangerous nexus between politicians, middlemen, private institutions, recruitment agencies and corrupt officials. In addition, fake universities and unrecognised institutions have flourished across the country, issuing invalid degrees and exploiting students desperate for employment or professional qualifications. The University Grants Commission regularly identifies such 'fake' institutions, but enforcement remains patchy. Every leaked examination paper weakens the value of honest effort. Every fake degree devalues genuine academic achievement. Fraudulent teacher appointments compromise the quality of education itself, while fake medical or technical qualifications can endanger public safety.

There is also a political dimension to the aggressive expansion of ED investigations. The agency has been accused of selective activism and disproportionate targeting of Opposition-ruled states. If investigations stretch endlessly without convictions, the credibility of anti-corruption enforcement weakens. The challenge is twofold: dismantling entrenched corruption networks while ensuring that probe agencies remain accountable, impartial and legally robust.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, WEDNESDAY, MAY 12, 1926

Special Khilafat Conference

THE proceedings of the special session of the Khilafat Conference, a telegraphic summary of which was published in these columns yesterday, are bound to cause intense pain and disappointment to all right-thinking Indians. The conference has always been held to represent the more thoughtful and broad-minded section of the Indian Mussalmans; and it was supposed that the supporters of the Khilafat movement, in spite of the keen interest that they took in the affairs of Mussalmans outside India, were not less keen about the achievement of the freedom of their own country. The proceedings of the Delhi conference, however, are marked by so much violence and fanaticism that we have to painfully confess that either our opinion about the Khilafat movement was wrong from the very beginning or the movement has now degenerated into aggressive communalism of the worst type. We prefer to hold the second view, because that leaves room for the hope that it may still be possible to restore the movement to its old position of being a faithful ally of the forces that are working for the speedy attainment of Swaraj by the joint effort of all the communities in India. That the proceedings of the conference were wholly detrimental to national solidarity and likely to further embitter the relations between Hindus and Mussalmans admits of no doubt whatever.



LT GEN SS MEHTA (RETD)
FORMER WESTERN ARMY
COMMANDER AND FOUNDER TRUSTEE,
PUNE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

THE civil servant and the soldier are the twin stabilisers of the Republic. One operates through continuity and administrative persistence; the other through intensity and existential risk. Both are indispensable. Both deserve frameworks that reflect what they are actually required to do. The answer to difference is not hierarchy. It is design.

Any framework for the military must begin with one foundational reality: rank in the armed forces is fundamentally different from rank in civilian systems. In civilian life, rank is largely a measure of seniority and administrative progression. In military life, it is operational authority over life and consequence. An administrative error may cost money or delay; an error in command costs lives and territory.

A brigadier commanding troops in active operations does not merely hold greater seniority than a colonel. He carries a categorically different burden of consequence. That distinction matters because the military pyramid narrows by design. Combat leadership demands youth. The institution therefore remains structurally young by ensuring that only a small number rise to the highest ranks. That is not failure. It is the arithmetic of command.

But the consequences of that arithmetic are profound.

Most officers, however capable, will never rise beyond certain levels. The institution is therefore sustained not only by those who reach the top, but by those who remain where the system needs them most, the Majors and Lieutenant Colonels, the company commanders and battalion seconds, the officers carrying the operational weight of the force at precisely the level where command is closest to consequence. When that cohort sees no



FRAMEWORK: When the soldier knows the nation has seen him clearly, confidence compounds into capability. FILE PHOTOS

meaningful progression within rank, when the only visible signal of recognition becomes the promotion the pyramid denies to most of them, something slowly begins to erode. Not competence. Not courage. But certainty that the institution still sees them clearly.

And then many leave. Not in protest. Simply because the civilian world has learned to recognise what military service has produced in them, composure under pressure, decisiveness, leadership without certainty, and offers them a framework that acknowledges those qualities. The state loses not its weakest product at that moment, but some of its best formed.

That is why within-rank progression is not a cosmetic issue. It is central to institutional design. Responsibility, professional distinction, posting profile and visible recognition within rank must continue even when promotion cannot. Otherwise, the system unintentionally signals that service matters only if one keeps rising. But the military cannot function as a ladder alone. The rank one holds must itself remain a form of arrival, not merely a waiting room for the next.

The design must therefore preserve, not by flattening the pyramid, but by ensuring that to serve well within one's rank, for as long as the nation requires it, is recognised as exactly what it is: among the hardest and most necessary things the institution asks.

It is here that the debate over NFU (non-functional upgradation) entered the picture.

NFU emerged to address

PART II

NFU did not create the underlying problem; it exposed the design mismatch that already existed.

stagnation in civil services where promotion opportunities were uneven. The principle was understandable; administrative systems required a mechanism to reduce career disparities. The issue is not that other services received relief. The issue is that a mechanism designed for administrative cadres was overlaid onto a military structure built on entirely different foundations.

In civil services, rank and pay broadly track seniority. In the military, rank is operational authority and accountability for irreversible consequence. When NFU logic enters the military ecosystem, it creates a category confusion. Pay equivalence gradually begins implying equivalence of status, even though the underlying responsibilities remain fundamentally different. The officer commanding troops in active operations does not become institutionally equivalent to another functionary merely because arithmetic aligns their pay scales. The comparison is not invidious; it is simply incomplete.

That is why pay and rank must be governed by separate design

logics. Rank reflects operational authority, command responsibility and the burden of consequence. Pay and material recognition reflect what the state owes across a career it has deliberately shaped, compressed, intense and structurally shortened by institutional necessity. Conflating the two distorts both. NFU did not create the underlying problem; it exposed the design mismatch that already existed.

That mismatch becomes most visible at the point where military service itself structurally terminates.

And then comes the final reality the system must confront: the military career ends early not because the individual has ceased to contribute, but because the institution must remain young. A civilian career is usually a long climb with compounding returns. Skills deepen, networks expand and earnings rise with age. Military service inverts that logic.

Its most intense years are often the earliest. It extracts the greatest personal cost at precisely the age civilian careers are consolidating. And it ends before civilian peers reach their professional peak. A post-service annuity calibrated to those lost earning decades is therefore not a pension in the ordinary sense. It is deferred recognition of a career architecture deliberately designed by the state to extract the maximum from an individual during the years when that extraction carries the highest personal cost.

The covenant is never signed by the soldier alone. The family

serves invisibly beside him, carrying the absences, instability and uncertainty the uniform normalises. The officer who has commanded under pressure and subordinated self to institution for decades has given the Republic something that cannot be fully measured in any pay matrix. A terminal recognition at the completion of that covenant is therefore not sentiment. It is institutional honesty.

Modern conflict only sharpens the urgency of getting this design right. Wars no longer unfold only on borders; they run through infrastructure, information systems and public psychology. In such an environment, military, paramilitary, civil administration and political leadership must function as one coherent instrument. That coherence depends not merely on capability, but on clarity of authority and mutual respect across the system.

A state that permits unresolved status dissonance within its own crisis architecture introduces friction into the mechanism. Modern conflict requires to remain frictionless. And in moments of consequence, friction kills.

From disaster relief to the calibrated precision of operations, the requirement remains the same: coherence. Command cannot be negotiated in the middle of consequence. Respect cannot be improvised during collapse. Coherence is built slowly over years through frameworks that signal the Republic understands the role of each of its institutions.

When the soldier knows the nation has seen him clearly, confidence compounds into capability. When he suspects the accounting has missed the point, something quieter begins to erode. Not loyalty. Not courage. Something harder to name and harder to replace.

The framework is the Republic's answer to him. When the state responds with design, the institution holds. The soldier knows the nation understands. And the nation knows the soldier will remain what he has always been at the decisive hour:

At the door.
Unquestioning.
Undivided.
Unconditional.

The author led a tank squadron to Dhaka during the Liberation War in 1971

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The soldier is the Army. No Army is better than its soldiers. — Gen George S. Patton

The uproar over a loud snore

MAHESH GROVER

IT was a quiet day abounding in bliss, hardly the sort when one would expect a disagreement to erupt and breach the serenity. My wife and I sat ensconced in our recliners with our German Shepherd sprawled at our feet, snoring away rhythmically. Amused at the rasping sounds, I said, "Look how he snores without a care in the world."

She looked up and said crisply, "You should hear the ruckus you raise with your snoring." This was a bait for an argument, which I bit, only to regret instantly, for I realised that the ensuing discussion, as any other, would be a futile one. The lesson acquired from 40 years of experience was lost on me as I stubbornly chose denial as my defence.

It didn't go down well with her and she retorted angrily, "Your snoring is so loud, it can bring the roof down."

Now it was my word against hers. I quickly changed tack and attempted to live things up: "It is all about perceptions. A man's image of a prince in a shining armour is destroyed soon after matrimony and replaced by that of the potbellied ogre Shrek with flared nostrils, making hideous noises while asleep. However, a woman nurtures her image of a sleeping beauty in satins, even though she may be contributing with equal vigour to the bedroom rhapsody."

I added, "Besides, a man is unaware of his snoring. As Mark Twain said, 'There ain't no way to find out why a snorer can't hear himself snore.'" Taking up the challenge, she said: "Have you heard this one? 'Laugh and the world laughs with you, snore and you sleep alone'. So, you better do something about it, unless you want to sleep under the stars," she said dismissively.

As a deadlock loomed, I turned to the world's only friend, philosopher and guide, Google, to find out why people snored. Lo and behold, an explanation was indeed there, which I found plausible: "Snoring is a subconscious defence reflex, a warning sound that frightened potential predators away from the mouth of the cave, when our lower Palaeolithic ancestors huddled in vulnerable sleep at night. That group of nomads, cameleers, sheep and goat herders, farmers and guerrilla fighters lent credibility to the idea, for they snored so thunderously and with such persistent ferocity through the long cold night that they would have frightened a pride of ravenous lions into scattering like startled mice."

Four decades of matrimony have cured me considerably, though not entirely, of the foot-in-mouth disease. I immediately realised the danger of applying the wisdom of Palaeolithic times to the present-day scenario. Thus, I dropped the idea of further discussion, lest I faced a plight similar to that of a scared cameleer or a frightened mouse.

The writer is a retired judge of the Punjab and Haryana High Court

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stand by the soldier

Refer to 'The covenant and the contract'; a soldier's life is defined by sacrifice, not transaction. As a poem reminds us, "God and the soldier all men adore, in time of trouble and no more; for when war is over and all things righted... the old soldier (is) slighted." From 1947 through successive operations, including the recent Op Sindoor, the Indian soldier has upheld national honour with unwavering commitment. Yet, upon retirement, many face indifference and indignity from the very society they served. A nation that celebrates its soldiers in uniform must also stand by them in retirement — with dignity, empathy and institutional support.

COL SS CHAUHAN (RETD), MOHALI

Cotton crop good for environment

Refer to 'Reviving cotton'; many farmers were forced to abandon cotton in favour of water-intensive paddy. The revival of cotton is not just an economic necessity but an environmental one. To restore its glory, the government must intervene through the introduction of high-yielding, pest-resistant seed varieties tailored to current climatic shifts. Ensuring robust procurement at MSP along with providing timely expert guidance on integrated pest management can be a big help. Easier access to bank credit for cotton growers must be provided.

FATEH NAJAMUDDIN, CHENNAI

Strengthen public healthcare

With reference to 'Punjab bets big on healthcare'; promoting insurance cover is not the answer for fulfilling public healthcare needs. It has led to rising cost of treatment and premium, irrational therapeutics, over-prescription and unnecessary investigations making healthcare a commodity rather than a service. The only solution to reduce out-of-pocket expenses is by strengthening government hospitals and medical education institutions.

VITULL K. GUPTA, BATHINDA

Political change essential

The swearing-in of Thalapathy Vijay as CM of Tamil Nadu marks a seismic political shift, reflecting the public's desire for fresh leadership. In a democracy, such change is essential, as dominant parties often become complacent and begin to assume voter loyalty as permanent. It has also demonstrated the power of the ballot. However, stardom alone is not enough. Lasting success demands good governance, integrity, administrative ability and effective delivery. The verdict also sends a message to other states that the socially aware voters are willing to support alternatives, when established leaders fail to perform.

K KUMAR, PANCHKULA

No moral corruption in rhymes

Refer to 'Johny Johny Yes Papa teaches to lie, mustn't learn: UP minister'; such innocence-filled rhymes have entertained generations of children worldwide and are meant to nurture imagination, rhythm and joyful learning, rather than moral corruption. To interpret these rhymes as threats to Indian culture reflects a misplaced sense of priorities at a time when our education system faces far more serious challenges, such as poor infrastructure, unemployment and declining learning standards.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

Listening not a substitute for doing

Refer to 'We are finally learning to listen'; listening today is increasingly becoming a substitute for action. We consume podcasts, interviews and motivational content for hours, only to spend ten minutes cleaning our room and feel transformed. This 'action faking' creates the illusion of progress without the discomfort of sustained effort. What remains scarce is execution. Real learning begins when ideas leave the screen and become routine.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemil.com

Austerity without equity will fail



AJIT RANADE
NOTED ECONOMIST

P RIME Minister Narendra Modi's appeal — with its eleven specific requests spanning fuel, gold, fertilisers, cooking oil, solar pumps and foreign travel — is being read by many as a prelude to administered price hikes. But there is a larger ambition visible in the speech.

It is to make forex conservation a genuine national movement, a civic mobilisation comparable in spirit, if not in form, to Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March of 1930. Gandhi's genius was to choose salt, an everyday item, universally used, symbolically powerful, to crystallise the case for economic self-reliance into a mass act of participation. Modi is reaching out, so that each Indian feels personally invested in the nation's economic resilience, when conserving foreign exchange becomes as much a patriotic duty as flying the flag.

The instinct deserves credit. India's import dependence on crude oil, fertiliser inputs, gold and edible oil is a structural vulnerability that has been diagnosed for decades without adequate remedy. Modi is making it vivid and personal, asking citizens to connect their every-

day choices to the national balance of payments. This is an act of economic leadership.

Lal Bahadur Shastri did something similar with food in 1965, asking Indians to voluntarily fast on Monday evenings as the country faced both a war and a food crisis. Socialist parliamentarian Madhu Limaye pressed the point further in Parliament, arguing that voluntary austerity was a constitutional duty in times of national stress, and that the political class must visibly lead rather than merely preach. The tradition of appealing to civic solidarity in times of economic emergency is honourable and has worked before.

But Gandhi's salt Satyagraha movement's moral force came partly from the fact that the salt tax was visibly, outrageously regressive. It hurt the poor more. Gandhi chose salt precisely because of the injustice. On the other hand, the forex conservation movement is not against injustice and is itself regressive. Because it asks those with the least to bear a disproportionate share of the pain.

Look at the eleven requests through this lens. Deferring foreign vacations and destination weddings abroad is something only the affluent need consider. It is irrelevant to the poor. Shifting to an electric vehicle presumes having the capital to buy one.

Work-from-home is an option for white-collar professionals, not daily-wage earners. Asking to reduce edible oil consumption falls hardest on those with the least since cooking oil is not



REMEDY: PM Modi has requested people to avoid non-essential gold purchases for a year. REUTERS

a luxury. Some of the requests are well-targeted at the wealthy, others inadvertently ask those with the smallest margins to absorb a disproportionate share of the sacrifice.

The economic backdrop makes the equity question more urgent. India's three State-owned oil marketing companies are losing between Rs 1,600 and Rs 1,700 crore every day, with cumulative losses over the past ten weeks crossing Rs 1 lakh crore. Negative margins stand at Rs 14 per litre on petrol and Rs 18 on diesel. Excise duty cuts to cushion the blow are costing the treasury Rs 14,000 crore a month.

Fertiliser subsidies, budgeted at Rs 1.71 lakh crore, face an overshoot of Rs 35,000 to Rs 50,000 crore. And this crisis lands on top of an already strained fiscal position: in FY26, direct tax receipts fell short of revised estimates by Rs 80,594 crore.

The FY27 direct tax target is Rs 26,97 lakh crore, which is a

whopping 15 per cent jump over FY26 actuals. But revenues are already slowing down.

Here lies a structural paradox in Modi's appeal. Some of what he asks will genuinely help the current account without hurting domestic output like reducing gold imports and foreign travel. But fuel price hikes are categorically different: they are inflationary, compress real household incomes across the board, and will force the Reserve Bank of India into the uncomfortable trade-off between defending the rupee and protecting growth.

There is also a cognitive dissonance in the government trying to suppress prices but also asking citizens to behave as if prices are too high. There is now pressure on tax mobilisation. The Income Tax Department's Central Action Plan for 2026-27 directs field officers to prioritise recovering Rs 2.57 lakh crore in demands upheld at appeal, track the top 10,000 PAN-wise defaulters, and classify

If this is to be India's forex Satyagraha, the design must match the ambition.

Opposition states battle growing Central dominance



SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG
FORMER FINANCE SECRETARY

INDIA was framed and constitutionally structured as a Union of States, a federal polity. A fine balance was struck with a strong Centre and substantially empowered states, in their respective spaces. The Constitution leaned on a stronger Centre in common spaces — Concurrent List, emergency, formation of states, state governors, etc — supported by strong federal institutions — the Supreme Court (SC), Election Commission of India, Comptroller and Auditor General and the like. Indian federalism was pronounced a basic structure of the Constitution, albeit without defining what the SC meant by it.

A balanced and fair sharing of executive, legislative and financial powers between the Centre and the states defines a healthy federal polity. Striking this balance is difficult; our founding fathers did a reasonably good job of it.

The states, understandably, consider greater allocation of subjects and executive powers to them and non-interference

by the Centre and federal agencies in their affairs, as good federalism. This viewpoint has been brought out in the report of the Justice Kurien Joseph-headed High Level Committee on Union-States Relations, appointed by the Stalin-led Tamil Nadu government. The committee made many important suggestions to address the distortions that have crept in functional federalism since Independence. If this report is implemented (unlikely), the states would become independent sub-sovereigns.

The reality of federalism is quite grim. The Modi-Shah-led BJP government has been doing exactly the opposite of what Tamil Nadu report has argued over the last many years (its worst manifestation was seen during the West Bengal elections).

This government has turned states into Centrally-controlled union territories; wagons (not double engines) attached to the all-powerful Central locomotive. The BJP states (mostly headed by non-entity chief ministers) have meekly accepted this subordination. Opposition-ruled states, which obviously don't like this emasculation, are gasping for survival. If this process goes on, the constitutional federalism would effectively be dead.

How have we come to this pass? Can India avoid becoming a Central Union? Is it possible to restore a real, good and functional constitutional fed-



PARTISAN: The Centre has misused federal institutions and instruments. PTI

eralism? The federal structure was designed, worded and structured on the assumption that the Central government would act, in practice, as a fair federalist union.

A federalist union is one which respects the states' constitutional domain and all its agencies operate without any bias against Opposition-led states. Federal institutions, in a federalist union, are manned by persons not under the thumb of the Central government and behave as impartial arbitrators and umpires between the Centre and the states.

When the Centre acts as competitor of states and does not allow Opposition states to function and is always looking to take over or control the ruling governments in such states, it functions as a centralist union.

The Modi-Shah-led Central government has been unabashedly functioning

The Modi-Shah-led government has turned Indian states into union territories controlled by the Centre.

and behaving like a Centralist union. It has transformed all fiscal instruments into means of controlling states. The GST Council has been reduced to an appendage of the Central government, with Opposition-ruled states having no choice or voice. Centrally sponsored schemes (CSSs) have been reconfigured to deny grants to states if Central dictates are not followed (the PMSHRI scheme was used to deny Samagra Siksha funds to

Tamil Nadu for not accepting the Hindi dictate) and stopping Central funds on allegations of irregularity (MGNREGA funds not released to West Bengal on minor allegations without concluding the inquiry).

The loan channel (50-year interest-free capital expenditure loans) has been used to make states accept subordination terms and remain subject to Central approval for their borrowing. Many Central government benefits (eg, PM-KISAN and the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana) are being delivered directly, bypassing states, in beneficiaries' active or dormant accounts (PM Jan Dhan Yojana dormancy exceeds 25%).

This government has misused federal institutions and instruments. It appoints partisan governors in Opposition-ruled states, that have sat over legislations passed by state Assemblies for months/years,

misused their address to abuse the governments of which they are constitutional heads, granted sanctions to prosecute CMs on flimsy grounds and interfered in the administration to embarrass state governments.

The Modi-Shah government has misused Central agencies — most notably the CBI and the ED — to raid and disrupt Opposition-ruled states and jail-sitting CMs on trumped-up allegations. The courts have been packed with pliant judges, which show no compunction in being partisan against opposition politicians.

The misuse of the ECI has been the most blatant. The elections in West Bengal, with about 27 lakh voters being deleted using the unconstitutional device of 'illogical discrepancy', thereby unlawfully preventing them from voting, were nothing short of election fraud.

This was perpetrated by converting the election machinery into a BJP agent instead of acting as an impartial umpire. The state was virtually occupied by more than 2.5 lakh Central paramilitary forces. The *Bhishm Pitamahs* in the SC watched the disrobing of democracy Draupadi nonchalantly, dismissing deleted voters' cries, asking them to vote in the next election.

This severe mutilation of constitutional federalism by a Centralist union must disturb the conscience of all Indians. That leads to the question — is there away to make the Indian

state a federalist union? This should be possible if a federalist party/alliance came to rule the Centre.

Isolated regional satraps would not succeed in establishing such a federalist Central government. In the absence of a federalist alliance ruling the Centre, the remaining regional castles in the South and North-West would also fall apart one by one, with the current centralist Union government using the majoritarian religious symbols and emotions to polarise voters in addition.

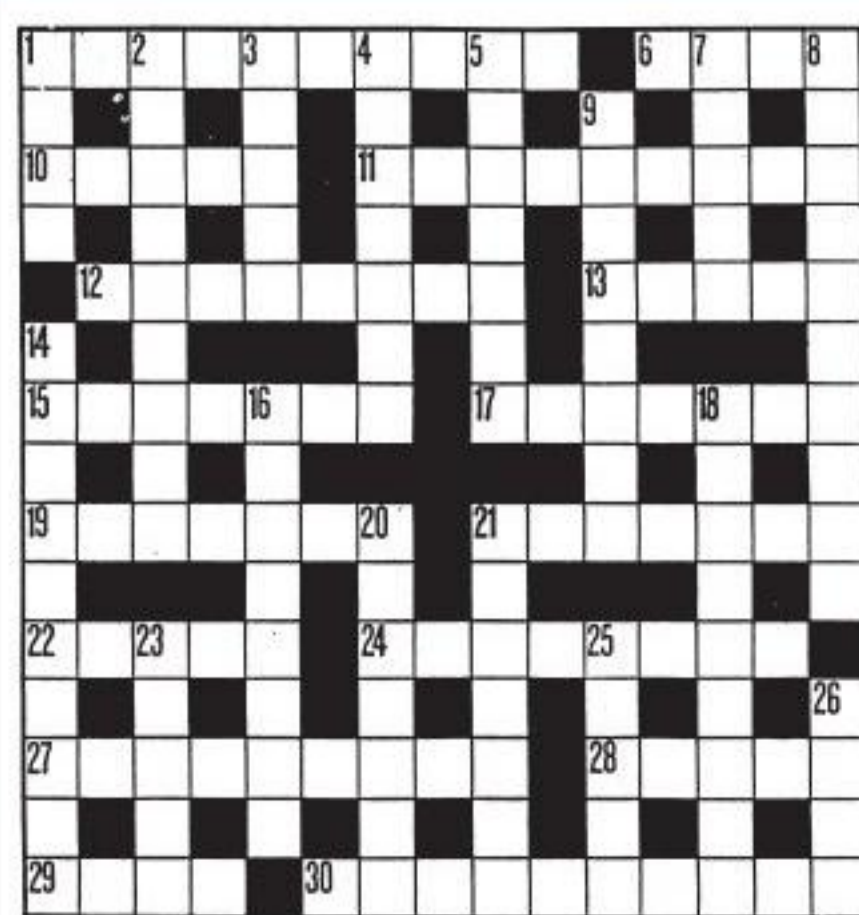
The Congress was also, in its heyday, a centralised formation. It had virtually killed Indian federalism by making so many constitutional amendments, particularly during the Emergency.

The Congress party has, by now, been reduced to a non-entity in the Hindutva heartland and the East as it is no match for Modi-Shah brand of a centralist (everything passes as one nation) and religious polarisation. It may have a fighting chance if it reinvents itself as a party of everyone, every religion and region (a true Hindustani party) and builds a functional federalist alliance with state/regional parties, for whom a federalist Centre is a must.

Only such an alliance (a far cry at present) can restore the Constitution, the Central government and the Indian politics to their true federal structure, strengthen it further and make India a truly federal country, belonging to all its citizens.

Credit: The Billion Press

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- In jail (6,4)
 - Deprivation (4)
 - Fibre used to stuff cushions (5)
 - Ability to last (9)
 - Uncompromising (4-4)
 - Cancel (5)
 - Rumour (7)
 - Winding (7)
 - Small quantity (7)
 - Ghost (7)
 - Ending in disaster (5)
 - Marine painting (8)
 - Agreeable (9)
 - Made a request (5)
 - Contest between two people (4)
 - Undecided (2,3,5)
- DOWN**
- Cook by dry heat in oven (4)
 - Random (9)
 - Nude (5)
 - Economy of expression (7)
 - Rectify (7)
 - Proprietor (5)
 - A little at a time (4,2,4)
 - An impressive bearing (8)
 - Sheepish (10)
 - Commonly designated (2-6)
 - Frank (9)
 - Specific task assigned (7)
 - Superficial (7)
 - Colour slightly (5)
 - A contention (5)
 - Balance of advantage (4)

Yesterday's Solution
Across: 1 Nonstop, 5 Get-up, 8 Vigilante, 9 Too, 10 Loft, 12 Brush-off, 14 Girder, 15 Loiter, 17 Infamous, 18 Stem, 21 Tie, 22 Trump card, 24 Ruddy, 25 Larceny.
Down: 1 Novel, 2 Nag, 3 Tilt, 4 Penny, 5 Go easy on, 6 Tit for Tat, 7 Proffer, 11 Far afield, 13 Geometry, 14 Glitter, 16 Mutual, 19 Muddy, 20 Spur, 23 Age.

SU DO KU

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

HARD

FORECAST

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR
MAY 12, 2026, TUESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Vaisakh Shaka 22
- Vaisakh Parvishte 29
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 10, up to 2:53 pm
- Vaidhiti Yoga up to 11:20 pm
- Purvabhadrapad Nakshatra up to 1:18 am
- Moon enters Pisces sign 7:25 pm

SUNSET: TUESDAY 19:06 HRS
SUNRISE: WEDNESDAY 05:32 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	23
New Delhi	34	27
Amritsar	35	24
Bathinda	42	25
Jalandhar	35	25
Ludhiana	37	24
Bhiwani	41	26
Hisar	40	26
Sirsa	42	26
Dharamsala	30	11
Manali	24	12
Shimla	21	13
Srinagar	20	09
Jammu	32	21
Kargil	18	05
Leh	16	05
Dehradun	33	23
Mussoorie	25	16

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Corporates now prefer to hire childless women

FROM the pre-liberalisation era, one has been familiar with the term DINKs – meaning ‘Double Income No Kids’. While working women are found in millions of Indian homes, shouldering the high-stress domestic routines and balancing it out with official responsibilities, increasingly the decision of staying child-free has found resonance in modern middle-class zones of India. While women had to mandatorily take up the onerous task of child care, post-delivery and also stand in for the men for various academic/extracurricular activities of their wards, the new generation of women seems to have skirted around the issue in its own way. Showcasing the great economic burden child rear-

ing can cause, convenient postponements or staying away from being swayed by the social pressure of motherhood are techniques in vogue that one finds now. A new research study has come up with some interesting observations on this development. Childless women are perceived as the best bet for emerging as ideal workers by organisations because of their middle-class category, professionally educated, career-oriented women who can negotiate well with gender roles, research by Goa Institute of Management (GIM) has found.

The research published in the prestigious international journal ‘Equity, Diversity and Inclusion’ is a comprehensive study on workplace microag-

gressions, revealing new insights into how underlying gender norms shape the everyday experiences of childless women professionals. It revealed that workplace interactions with colleagues can reinforce exclusion. By challenging the general equation of womanhood with motherhood, the study positioned childlessness as a valid, yet overlooked, identity in organisational discourse. According to Shelly Pandey, Assistant Professor at GIM, the research found that many times, organisational cultures operate on unspoken assumptions linking femininity with motherhood. “We found that these cultures often lead to marginalisation of women who do not conform to this expectation, be it by choice or circum-

stance. The team applied the concept of microaggression to document and analyse the experiences of 45 middle-class, professionally engaged childless women from different cities in India,” she said. Through the qualitative study, the researchers found that, at the organisational level, childless women are perceived as a perfect fit for ideal workers, yet their ideal worker image is loaded with various expressions of micro-aggression.

“The study found that workplace norms often frame motherhood as central to a woman’s identity, sidelining alternative life choices. Childless women encounter subtle exclusion both institutionally and interpersonally, including from other women colleagues

because of their image of middle-class, professionally educated, career-oriented women who can negotiate well with gender roles. There exists a moral undertone in how childlessness is perceived, often casting it as incomplete or socially deviant. These biases remain largely invisible yet contribute to persistent tensions between personal identity and professional expectations,” she said. Research scholar Gyanda Girisha explained that whether someone is childless, childfree, a mother, or single, each person has a distinct identity that deserves recognition and inclusion. “Reproductive choice is simply a personal decision and should not define one’s legitimacy or identity in the workplace”, she added.

LETTERS

All eyes on the governance of Adhikari, Vijay

PROPOS “Two new CMs, two different tests of leadership” (THI, May 11). Both Suvendu Adhikari and C Joseph Vijay come to office with strong mandates but face very different governance challenges. Adhikari must demonstrate that ideological mobilisation can translate into administrative competence and inclusive governance — not a straightforward task in a state as politically polarised as Bengal. Vijay, on the other hand, faces the harder arithmetic of welfare promises. Monthly cash transfers, free LPG cylinders, unemployment allowances, and skill training stipends together represent a substantial fiscal commitment. Tamil Nadu’s finances cannot absorb these easily. Adding to his difficulties, Vijay is already facing friction from alliance partners over the Vande Mataram controversy — a distraction he can ill-afford this early in his tenure. Both chief ministers will ultimately be judged not by the energy of their victories but by whether governance follows.

A Myilsami, Suler (P.O.)-641402

Challenges galore for TN, Bengal CMs

THIS is further to the editorial, “Two new CMs, two different tests of leadership”. Both chief ministers face contrasting challenges—one of ideological consolidation, the other of welfare expansion. The real test lies not in rhetoric but in execution. Bengal needs calm governance that bridges political divides and focuses on inclusive development. Tamil Nadu, meanwhile, must ensure fiscal prudence while delivering promised welfare schemes. Sustainable administration demands discipline, transparency, and prioritisation over populism. Leadership will be judged not by slogans or charisma, but by how effectively each government translates its vision into measurable progress for ordinary citizens.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai-23

Stern tests await Adhikari, Vijay

THIS is further to your editorial “Two new CMs, two different tests of leadership”. Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay perpetrated the legacy of freebies in the state in divergent forms, even as the state of Tamil Nadu is burdened by accumulated debts of the DMK to the tune of Rs one lakh crore. Naturally, the populist measures under TVK will add to the burden of the exchequer. One interesting aspect, witnessed during Vijay’s oath taking was singing of ‘Vande Mataram’, perhaps this is an indication that it is ‘nation first’ for TVK, unlike petty politics generally played out by the DMK and AIADMK. The task ahead for Suvendu Adhikari is quite demanding in terms of restoring self-confidence and self-respect of Bengalis that were hijacked and crumpled under Mamata’s rule. The taming of the mafia gangs and ensuring law and order demands priority.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

Bureaucracy must be streamlined

PROPOS “Two new CMs, two different tests of leadership”. In Bengal, a mother seeking a ration card or a farmer needing police help often finds the local party worker more powerful than the official; this is not just bad governance, it is the theft of dignity itself. In Tamil Nadu, generous welfare schemes keep families afloat but may also trap them in dependency if factories and jobs remain scarce. Both chief ministers must now move beyond campaign promises to practical fixes: transfer bureaucrats based on performance rather than loyalty, publish clear timelines for welfare delivery so citizens can track their applications, and create fast-track courts for petty corruption that drains daily life. Most crucially, they must invest in schools and vocational training that equip young people to earn without needing political patronage. A leader’s true legacy is measured not by the size of his victory rally but by whether a citizen can get her work done without knowing anyone in power.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Modi’s oratory skills to the fore

THIS is further to the report “Our target Telangana after Bengal win: Modi” (THI May 11). The public enthusiasm was palpable during the road show of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Hyderabad that showed the deep and enduring inclination for a similar show event that happened in West Bengal, when the BJP came to power with a thumping majority, having succeeded to root out the misrule; and divide and rule policies of the TMC government. His speech was interesting, when Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy sought financial packages like those in vogue in Gujarat for the last ten years. Modi’s answer was loaded with possibilities. He stated that he has no hesitation to give similar financial assistance, but barely half of it would be put to efficient utilisation — the full utilisation of funds can be possible when the BJP government is elected in the state.

K R Parvathy, Mysuru

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Bomb threat during PM’s visit

BENGALURU: Police investigating the bomb threat issued during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s recent Bengaluru visit have clarified that the arrested accused, Lohith, is not mentally unstable as initially claimed by his family members. The revelation came after detailed questioning by Koramangala police and CCB officials following his detention in connection with the threat calls made to the police control room.

Prime Minister Modi had arrived in Bengaluru on Sunday to participate in the 45th anniversary celebrations of The Art of Living Foundation. Hours before his scheduled movement in the city, an unidentified caller contacted the police control room around 7.30 am and warned of bomb blasts near HAL and the Art of Living venue, triggering panic among security agencies.

The threat assumed greater significance after two gelatin sticks were discovered near NICE Road, close to the route used by the Prime Minister’s convoy. Security agencies immediately launched a large-scale operation, intensifying checks across the city.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

All in the name of God! Let a CM work as per the Constitution



PROF MADABHUSHI SRIDHAR ACHARYULU

swearing in the name of God or solemnly affirming, Vijay explicitly chose the former.

Oath of the Chief Minister:

As per Article 164 of the Indian Constitution, the oath of office and secrecy is administered by the Governor. The format sworn to by Vijay includes:

Bearing true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India; Upholding the sovereignty and integrity of India; Faithfully and conscientiously discharging duties as Chief Minister; acting without fear or favour, affection or ill-will; and not directly or indirectly revealing official matters.

Promises of the new CM:

Upon taking office, Vijay made key pledges to the people of Tamil Nadu such as asserting that he would be the sole authority in decision-making, promising no other power centres. He “pledged a real, secular, social justice” focused administration, promised immediate focus on women’s safety, education, and healthcare, committed to transparent administration and finances, and addressed supporters, stating, “I’m like your son, your brother.”

Ishwar ki shapath: We also need to know what the Oath of a Governor is. “I, R N Ravi, do swear in the name of God ‘Ishwar ki shapath’ that I will faithfully execute the office of Governor (or discharge the functions of the Governor) of Tamil Nadu and will to the best

of my ability preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the law.” Thus, Vijay and Ravi swore in the name of God, irrespective of whether they were a Hindu or a Christian.



of my ability preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the law.” Thus, Vijay and Ravi swore in the name of God, irrespective of whether they were a Hindu or a Christian.

Karunanidhi and ‘God’:

Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M Karunanidhi never took the oath in the name of God. As a staunch proponent of Dravidian rationalism and a self-proclaimed atheist, the late DMK patriarch strictly chose to solemnly affirm his oaths. Karunanidhi routinely used the Tamil phrase “Ulanmaara urudhimozhigiren” which translates to “I solemnly / conscientiously affirm.”

Governor has to preserve, protect & defend

As the constitutional head of state, the Governor has to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution and the law,” while the Chief Minister has to “faithfully and conscientiously discharge duties as a Minister.” It means the Governor has more onerous duties under the Constitution to defend it.

If the Governor’s oath is violated, the entire state will suffer,

which is the duty of the CM to conscientiously discharge. Both should understand the language in which they took the oath. The CM has to strictly swear not to reveal official matters. But, interestingly, the Governor has no clause regarding official secrecy.

The President and Governor have the same duty:

The President is the executive head of the Union (Article 53), while the Governor is the executive head of the State (Article 154). The core mandate of their oaths is identical: both swear to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the law.” In this part, the Governor is equated to the President of India. Thus, the Governor has to behave with more responsibility and not harass the state Governments under the secret instructions of the ruling centre.

Oath of Secrecy vs Right to Information:

Official secrecy is still administered because the Official Secrets Act (OSA), 1923, has not been repealed. While the Right to Information (RTI)

Act, 2005, mandates transparency, the OSA remains the primary law for prosecuting espionage and protecting national security.

However, legally, transparency prevails over secrecy in cases of conflict. The continued use of secrecy laws and oaths persists for three main reasons: a) Although the OSA still exists, the RTI Act significantly weakened its power to hide information from the public. b) The “oath of secrecy” taken by Chief Ministers is mandated by the Constitution of India (Third Schedule), not the Official Secrets Act. The Official Secrets Act is a colonial-era law (1923) focused on spying and unauthorized handling of documents. c) The RTI Act effectively “administers” its own version of valid secrecy through Section 8, which mirrors the legitimate concerns of the OSA. Information that hurts the sovereignty, integrity, or security of India is exempt from disclosure (Section 8(1)(a)). Under Section 24, intelligence and security organizations (like IB, RAW) are completely exempt from the RTI Act, allowing them to operate almost entirely under the veil of the OSA (except in cases of corruption or human rights violations).

Bodies like the Second Administrative Reforms Commission have recommended replacing the “oath of secrecy” with an “oath of transparency”, but this requires a Constitutional Amendment, which has not yet happened.

Why do we need the Governor?

DMK leaders, including Kanimozhi Karunanidhi, have argued that India does not need Governors, asserting that the office is an unnecessary “vestige of our colonial past” that acts as an “agent” of the central government, rather than serving the state. DMK leaders argue that Governors, particularly in non-BJP ruled states, act in ways that are “not harmonious” with elected state governments. The party alleges that Governors interfere with the democratic process by delaying, holding, or questioning bills passed by the legislature. DMK has accused Governors of “acting like party agents” and behaving as a “parallel government”. The party’s founder, C N Annadurai (Perarignar Anna), famously questioned the need for the position by saying: “Why a beard for a goat? Why a Governor for the nation?” DMK leaders have proposed that the office of the Governor be abolished via a constitutional amendment to enhance federalism and protect state rights. Article 19(a)(1) of the Constitution is a more important provision that protects the entire democracy and the rule of law, equal to the right to life, which gives freedom to question, correct, and remove the bad ruler, whether a Chief Minister or Governor.

(The writer is Advisor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)

Keralam electorate’s counterpunch to the ‘Kerala Files’ narrative

CHOLLETI

KERALA’S recent Assembly election results offer a refreshing counter-narrative to the surge of identity politics gripping much of India. In a nation where communal fault lines increasingly dictate electoral choices, the state’s voters have reaffirmed its longstanding commitment to secular harmony. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor aptly captured this essence in a post on X, declaring Kerala a “model of communal harmony” where people “see human beings first and caste or religion later.” Specific outcomes from the polls underscore this resilience, even as national trends test their foundations. The poll verdict is more than a routine political outcome. It is a reminder that Indian democracy is still capable of producing a strong, quiet rebuttal to the noisy politics of identity, fear, and communal mobilisation. At a time when much of India is being pulled deeper into religious and caste-based political sorting, Kerala has again sent out a different message. Its voters have shown that they are willing to judge candidates and parties by governance, credibility, and local performance rather than by the label attached to their names. That does not mean identity has disappeared from Kerala politics; it means identity has not been allowed to become the only language of politics. That distinction matters.

In many parts of the country, electoral campaigns now begin with social divisions and end with them too. Kerala has not been immune to such pressures, but its voters have repeatedly resisted the temptation to reduce politics to communal arithmetic. The result is

a state that continues to offer one of the clearest examples of pluralism surviving in a polarised age.

Voting across faith lines:

The most striking feature of the verdict is not any one party’s performance but the pattern of cross-community voting. In several constituencies, voters rejected the simplest and most cynical expectation: that people will automatically vote for someone from their own community. Instead, they chose candidates they believed would represent them effectively, even when those candidates were from a different religion.

That is a powerful statement in a country where identity is so often treated as destiny. It shows that voters can still separate political competence from communal identity when public institutions, social habits, and political culture encourage them to do so. In Kerala, this is not an accident. It is the product of a long civic tradition shaped by education, social reform, trade union politics, migration, and a relatively high level of political awareness.

What emerges from these results is not a claim of perfect harmony. Kerala, like any other state, has tensions and hard bargains. But the electorate has not surrendered to the idea that faith must decide politics. That alone makes its verdict worth serious attention.

Why Kerala resists polarisation:

Kerala’s resistance to identity politics rests on several foundations. The first is education. A more literate and politically attentive electorate is less likely to fall for crude slogans and more likely to ask



what a party has delivered. The second is welfare politics. When people see the state as a provider of public goods, they tend to judge governments by hospitals, schools, roads, pensions, and jobs rather than by communal symbolism.

The third is a long habit of coalition politics. Kerala has rarely been ruled through permanent single-party hegemony. Instead, it has lived with competitive alliances that must constantly negotiate across communities and interests. That culture has forced parties to talk to each other, accommodate each other, and appeal beyond their narrow bases. It is not always graceful, but it has helped prevent politics from hardening into a permanent majority-minority confrontation.

This is why Kerala remains politically distinct. Elsewhere, identity politics often thrives by simplifying the voter into a fixed social category. It has repeatedly refused to let that simplification become the whole story.

The shadow of national politics:

The contrast with the rest of India is sobering. Across the country, political competition has increasingly leaned on communal suspicion, historical grievance, and cultural fear. Electoral mobilisation is

often achieved not by widening the democratic imagination but by narrowing it. That is the larger national context in which Kerala’s verdict becomes significant.

The BJP’s rise in many parts of India has been powered partly by this very logic. It has turned identity into an instrument of political consolidation, often with impressive results. In that sense, Kerala’s resistance is not just local. It is national in meaning. It shows that the dominance of identity politics is not inevitable; it is contingent on whether opposing parties choose to fight it seriously and whether voters are willing to reward them for doing so.

The State’s voters have offered a refreshing counter-narrative because they have not treated communal messaging as an automatic substitute for performance. They have reminded the country that politics can still be anchored in lived experience rather than manufactured fear.

A useful warning to national parties:

The verdict also sends a message to national parties, especially those that flirt with identity-based mobilisation when it suits them. The lesson from Kerala is that voters are not always as easily moved by communal narratives as

political strategists assume. Once citizens experience the benefits of social development and public accountability, it becomes harder to manipulate with slogans alone.

That does not mean identity politics will disappear. It adapts, it mutates, and it often returns in new forms. But Kerala shows that a society can build enough democratic resilience to blunt its worst effects. National parties should study that carefully rather than assume that the same polarising script will work everywhere.

It is also worth noting that Kerala’s political culture places a premium on coalition discipline and public argument. Voters there are familiar with competing ideological claims. They are not insulated from politics; they are immersed in it. That makes them less vulnerable to the kind of simple binary politics that elsewhere thrives on emotional shortcuts.

Limits and realities:

A balanced reading should not romanticise Kerala. No state is free from community calculation, and no election is free from tactical voting. Religious and caste identities still influence political behaviour, sometimes strongly. Parties still work through vote banks, and strategic alliances still matter. The point is not that Kerala has escaped identity politics entirely, but that it has not allowed identity to become politically sovereign. There are also material pressures that could change the picture. Youth unemployment, economic anxieties, migration pressures, and urban-rural disparities can always create openings for sharper polarisation. If governance weakens or if parties stop addressing

everyday concerns, identity entrepreneurs will find new space. Kerala’s secular culture is strong, but it is not self-sustaining. It must be renewed through fairness, performance, and public trust.

That is why this verdict should not be read as triumphalism. It is better understood as an alert and encouraging example. Kerala has shown that pluralism can still win when institutions and voters both take it seriously.

A national counter-narrative

India today badly needs such counter-narratives. The country cannot afford to let politics become a permanent contest over who belongs and who does not. Democracy becomes thinner when elections are fought mainly through fear, insult, and group loyalty. Kerala’s voters have shown that there is another way: one where political judgement is grounded in competence, community trust, and the practical quality of governance.

That is why the result matters beyond the state. It tells the rest of India that secular politics is not a relic and pluralism is not naive. It can still be electorally durable when parties respect citizens enough to speak to them as citizens rather than as communal units. Kerala has not solved India’s identity crisis. But it has done something valuable: it has refused to surrender to it. In a time when many political actors profit from division, that refusal is itself a democratic achievement.

(The writer is with Cholleti BlackRobe Chambers, Hyderabad)

Bioenergy and green hydrogen will remain the Centre's top priorities as India focuses on strengthening energy security and economic resilience amid rising geopolitical tensions. Corporate balance sheets are now in a much better position to support fresh investments

-Shaktikanta Das, PM Narendra Modi's Principal Secretary

BIZ BRIEFS

EPGI scholarship program

East Point Group of Institutions, Bengaluru has announced its scholarship program worth upto Rs3 crore for deserving students in pursuing their academic goals and seeking admission for the academic year 2026-27. The initiative was launched in memory of the institution's Founder Chairman, Dr SM Venkatpathi, is aimed at recognizing and supporting meritorious and deserving students across multiple categories, including merit-based, sports, scholarships for differently abled students and from economically weaker section.

Raw Mango's new collection

Raw Mango has collaborated with actress RashmikaMandanna for its Saori kurta, Mio sharara and Sakura odhani. The 'Saori' short kurta and 'Mio' sharara set in natural organza and silk feature branches of blooming sakura in zardozi, highlighted with dabka, sequins and glass beads. The 'Sakura' natural silk organza odhani features zardozi embroidered magnolias in the form of a crescent, highlighted with glass beads and sequins.

ITC Mangaldeep launches product

ITC Mangaldeep, an incense brand, announced the introduction of Mangaldeep Scent 3-in-1 Ziplocks under its existing premium sub-brand, Scent. The product features three fragrances in a single pack. Rohit Dogra, CEO, ITC Ltd., said: "At ITC Mangaldeep, we believe fragrance has the power to elevate everyday moments and rituals alike. With the launch of Mangaldeep Scent, we are bringing that philosophy to life by offering consumers the ease of experiencing three distinct fragrances in a single pack."

Summer sale on Amazon

Amazon India has announced that the ongoing Great Summer Sale 2026 will feature Everyday Essentials, a curated summer store offering deals across categories at up to 50 per cent off. Also, Amazon Fresh is offering up to 40 per cent off on a wide range of fruits, vegetables and everyday essentials. The company has also rolled out AI-powered tools designed for faster discovery and seamless decision-making.

Skoda expands Kodiaq portfolio

Skoda Auto India, has launched three new variants of Kodiaq, its second-generation luxury 4x4 flagship SUV. The new variants, Kodiaq Lounge, Kodiaq Sportline and Kodiaq Selection L&K will offer greater accessibility, heightened sportiness and uncompromised premium luxury. Ashish Gupta, Brand Director, Skoda Auto India, said: "After our biggest year in 2025 and a record-breaking first quarter in 2026, we are updating our flagship Kodiaq to further elevate its appeal."

Markets bleed on PM's austerity call

Reel under triple blow of oil surge, weakened rupee and geopolitical risks | Gold, fuel, and travel-linked stocks hit as investors price in weaker consumption

MUMBAI

STOCK markets fell for the third day running on Monday, with the benchmark Sensex tumbling 1,313 points amid rising crude oil prices after the US and Iran failed to reach a peace deal in West Asia.

The 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 1,312.91 points, or 1.70 per cent, to settle at 76,015.28. During the day, it tumbled 1,370.79 points or 1.77 per cent to 75,957.40.

The 50-share NSE Nifty dropped 360.30 points or 1.49 per cent to end at 23,815.85. In three sessions since Thursday, Nifty dropped over 2 per cent or 515 points, while Sensex has fallen by nearly 1,950 points or 2.5 per cent.

US President Donald Trump dismissed Iran's response to the latest peace proposal as 'totally unacceptable', dampening hopes of an immediate diplomatic breakthrough, an expert said. Also, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal for austerity measures amplified investor concerns around forex reserves, fuel costs, and consumption outlook, analysts said.

Titan, a leading jewellery and fashion accessories company, was the biggest

WHY MARKETS FELL

WEST ASIA GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS

- Donald Trump rejecting Iran's peace response heightened concerns of prolonged conflict and supply disruptions in oil markets.



INFLATION CONCERNS

- Higher crude prices raised fears of imported inflation, especially in fuel, fertilisers and transportation costs.

PRESSURE ON RUPEE & CURRENT ACCOUNT DEFICIT

- Investors worried that expensive oil imports could weaken the rupee further and widen India's current account deficit.

loser among Sensex companies, dropping by nearly 7 per cent. InterGlobe Aviation, State Bank of India, Bharti Airtel, Eternal and Reliance Industries were among the major laggards.

Sun Pharma, Hindustan Unilever, Adani Ports, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Axis Bank and ICICI Bank were the winners. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, traded 2.23 per cent higher at USD 103.5 per barrel.

"The Indian equity markets witnessed a sharp sell-off session today, with

benchmark indices correcting more than 1.4 per cent amid rising geopolitical concerns and heightened fears over inflationary pressures. "Rising uncertainty surrounding crude oil prices and fears of further geopolitical escalation triggered aggressive unwinding of positions, dragging indices lower into the close," Hariprasad K, Research Analyst and Founder, Livelong Wealth, said.

The immediate trigger for today's weakness came after Prime Minister Naren-

dra Modi's speech on May 10, which the market interpreted as a sign of mounting macroeconomic stress, he said.

"While global uncertainty surrounding the US-Iran conflict and surging crude oil prices had already weakened sentiment, the Prime Minister's appeal for austerity measures amplified investor concerns around India's forex reserves, fuel costs, and consumption outlook," Hariprasad added.

Emphasising that the Centre is trying to shield people from the adverse impact of the conflict in West Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday called for judicious use of fuel, postponement of gold purchases and foreign travel, among other measures, to strengthen the economy. The PM suggested reducing petrol and diesel consumption, using metro rail services in cities, carpooling, increased use of electric vehicles (EVs), utilising railway services for parcel movement, and working from home to conserve foreign exchange amid the crisis in West Asia. Stressing the need to conserve foreign exchange amid the crisis, Modi called for postponing gold purchases and foreign travel for one year.

Rupee suffers worst single-day fall in months

MUMBAI

THE rupee tanked 82 paise to settle at its record low of 95.31 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday after US President Donald Trump rejected Iran's response to the West Asia peace proposal, following which crude oil prices surged rapidly. Prime Minister Narendra Modi urging citizens to avoid buying gold and embrace austerity measures further

dedented market sentiments.

A strengthening US dollar and steep foreign capital outflows further pressured the local unit, according to forex traders. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 94.97 and traded in the range of 94.87-95.34. It eventually settled at its record low of 95.31 (provisional), down 82 paise from its previous close.

On Friday, the rupee had closed at 94.49 against the

US dollar. Iran, meanwhile, has sent its response to the latest US ceasefire proposal via Pakistani mediators and wants negotiations to focus on permanently ending the war, Iran's state-run media said on Sunday. Trump rejected Iran's proposal to end the months-long war as "totally unacceptable" without sharing details even as a key Republican leader urged him to consider the "military option".

CRUDE OIL PRICES JUMP TO \$105/BBL

NEW YORK: Crude oil prices on the global market jumped to \$105 per barrel (bbl) during the early hours on Monday, after US President Donald Trump rejected Iran's response to the US proposal of a potential peace deal with the West Asia conflict entering its 11th week since the beginning. Latest media reports highlight that while Trump rejected Iran's response, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu said that there is still "work to be done" in relation to the US-Israeli joint offensive against Iran, further intensifying the geopolitical tensions. Global benchmark, Brent crude oil was trading near the \$100 per bbl psychological market after midnight into Monday, post which the energy prices jumped to near \$105 per bbl level as of the morning hours on May 11.

₹9L-CR INVESTOR WEALTH WIPED OUT

MUMBAI: Benchmark stock market indices suffered a heavy blow on Monday as investors reacted to rising geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, sparked by recent military strikes and counterstrikes involving Iran, Israel and the United States. The broad sell-off sent the BSE Sensex plunging sharply, briefly dragging it below the 80,000 mark. By around 1:48 pm, the Sensex was trading near 79,615, down more than 1,670 points, or 2.06%, as risk-off sentiment gripped markets. The broader NSE Nifty50 also weakened, reflecting broad-based selling across sectors. The bloodbath on Dalal Street translated into a massive erosion of investor wealth. Total market capitalisation on the BSE slid by more than Rs 9 lakh crore, dropping from nearly Rs 463 lakh crore on Friday to about Rs 454 lakh crore during intraday trade.

Olectra Greentech goes digital with Dassault for next-gen EV push

Partnership aims to redefine EV design, development, and delivery through digital engineering

HANS BUSINESS HYDERABAD

OLECTRA Greentech Limited, electric bus manufacturer, and Dassault Systèmes announced that Olectra will adopt Dassault Systèmes' 3DEXPERIENCE platform. This marks a significant step toward building a globally benchmarked, digitally integrated product development ecosystem for electric mobility.

Olectra's decision reflects a shared vision to accelerate innovation in the electric vehicle (EV) sector by leveraging advanced digital technologies. By combining Olectra's leadership in electric mobility and Dassault Systèmes' expertise in virtual twin and platform-based engineering, both companies aim to redefine how electric vehicles are designed, developed, and delivered at scale.



The platform connects people, data, design, simulation, and manufacturing within a unified, collaborative environment, enabling a real-time, end-to-end view of the entire product lifecycle. Through this adoption, Olectra will transition toward a model-based, platform-led approach to product development aligned with global OEM standards.

As part of this engagement, Olectra will unlock a fully digital, model-based product development approach, seamless collabor-

ation across engineering, manufacturing, and ecosystem partners, virtual simulation and validation prior to physical prototyping, accelerated innovation cycles and reduced time-to-market, enhanced scalability for future mobility platforms.

This collaboration underscores a broader industry shift from traditional, component-level engineering to system-level digital orchestration, enabling companies to operate with greater agility, precision, and innovation velocity.

Nykaa launches Summer Smart kiosk in Hyderabad

HANS BUSINESS HYDERABAD

NYKAA'S Summer Smart kiosk is now open at Sarath City Capital Mall, Hyderabad from until May 17, a seasonal stop where visitors can discover, try and shop a summer-ready selection of skincare, makeup, haircare and fragrances made for everything summer has in store.

From sunny afternoons and weekend plans to holiday packing and quick touch-ups between plans, beauty looks a little different this time of year. Lighter textures, easy refreshers, travel-friendly formats and everyday staples come together for days that move from morning to evening. The kiosk brings all of it together in one place, making it easy to find beauty picks that fit right into the rhythm of the season. The Summer Smart Treasure Trail adds a fun, playful twist to the pop-up, where visitors follow simple clues as they move through the space.

PM gold cut call may ease forex pressure

Experts urge revival of the Gold Monetisation Scheme to balance import reduction with protection for artisans and jewellers

SURAT

SUPPORTING Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal to avoid non-essential gold purchases in order to save foreign exchange reserves, industry experts on Monday said that gold should not be viewed merely as a consumption item, but also as a key pillar of India's culture, savings tradition, financial security and women's empowerment.

India Bullion and Jewellers Association (IBJA) Gujarat President Nainesh Pachchigar said the Prime Minister's call could help conserve valuable foreign exchange at a time when the country is facing rising import pressures due to global uncertainties.

However, he stressed that the government should also revive the old Gold Monetisation Scheme to bring idle household gold back into the market and increase recycling of the precious metal. "Such a move would help maintain steady work for lakhs of small and medium artisans associated with the jewellery sector while supporting the government's broader goal of reducing foreign exchange outflow," he said.

"The jewellery industry is

- Experts said India's large gold imports increase pressure on forex reserves and the rupee

- India imports around 800 metric tonnes of gold annually and accounts for nearly 25-26% of global demand

- IBJA Gujarat president Nainesh Pachchigar supported the appeal but urged revival of the Gold Monetisation Scheme



deeply linked with the livelihoods of millions of craftsmen across the country and any effort to reduce gold imports should be balanced in a way that does not hurt the sector's economic ecosystem," Pachchigar added.

He added that the association would soon submit a proposal to the government suggesting measures through which foreign exchange can be saved without adversely affecting artisans and jewellery businesses.

Backing the Prime Minister's appeal, JCBL Group Director and Chartered Accountant Renu Arora said India remains heavily dependent on imports for both gold and crude oil, and large-

scale imports put pressure on the rupee and weaken its value against the dollar.

"The country's economy becomes vulnerable whenever international crude oil and gold prices rise sharply," she said adding that reducing unnecessary consumption would help India better withstand global shocks and improve macroeconomic stability.

Meanwhile, Manoj Kumar Jain, Director and Head of Commodity and Currency Research at Prithvi Fintarr, said India accounts for nearly 25-26 per cent of global gold demand and imports around 800 metric tonnes of gold annually, requiring massive spending in dollars.

'Costly crude to derail India's \$5 trn dream'

NEW DELHI: India's economy is projected to grow at 6.6 per cent in 2026-27 fiscal while a comprehensive package is required on the Balance of Payments (BoP) front amid rupee depreciation and higher oil price, an SBI Research report said on Monday.

The report said the rupee, which has weakened much in the recent period "through



clouds on external macros, as also unabated speculative forces" needs structural

changes on BoP front, streamlining the guard rails of import substitution, export competitiveness, integration in global value chain.

The rupee has breached the 95-mark against the US dollar that has strengthened due to rising global uncertainties, triggered by the West Asia conflict.

"There is now a felt need to put in place a compre-

hensive package to address Balance of Payments (BoP)," SBI Research said and made a strong case for diaspora bonds.

With the country's macro fundamental getting distorted as Brent crude prices hovered above USD 100, and transport and insurance costs spiking, there is a need to put in place measures that alleviate BoP position, it said.

NITES urges Centre to promote remote work to cut fuel use

NEW DELHI

THE Nascent Information Technology Employees Senate (NITES) on Monday urged the Centre to advise IT and IT-enabled services companies to implement work from home wherever operationally feasible, saying the move could help conserve fuel and reduce unnecessary travel amid rising global uncertainties.

In a letter addressed to Union Labour and Employment Minister Mansukh

Mandaviya, the employee body said remote working should be encouraged as part of a broader national effort to support fuel conservation and reduce pressure on urban infrastructure.

Referring to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal encouraging citizens and organisations to adopt measures such as work from home, virtual meetings and reduced travel, NITES described the call as a collective national responsibility in view of current geopolitical



developments and concerns around fuel consumption.

The association said the IT and ITES sector had already

demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic that remote working models could function effectively without

impacting productivity or business continuity.

"The Indian IT sector had already successfully implemented large-scale work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic without disruption to productivity or business continuity," Harpreet Singh Saluja, President, NITES said.

"The IT/ITES sector has both the infrastructure and capability to once again support national priorities through remote working," he added.

According to NITES, technology companies, multinational firms, customer support operations and software teams continued to serve global clients and execute projects efficiently while operating remotely for several years during the pandemic.

"Companies invested heavily in remote infrastructure, cybersecurity systems, cloud operations, digital collaboration tools, and virtual management systems," the industry body said.

"Employees adapted suc-

cessfully. Productivity targets were met. International business continued uninterrupted. The sector itself repeatedly acknowledged during that period that operations remained stable under remote working conditions," it added. NITES further argued that requiring lakhs of employees to commute daily despite the availability of digital alternatives puts unnecessary pressure on fuel consumption, traffic congestion, public transport systems and urban infrastructure.

The Statesman

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Breaking Binaries

The assembly elections of 2026 may eventually be remembered less for individual victories than for the collapse of political certainties that had governed West Bengal and Tamil Nadu for decades. Two states long regarded as structurally predictable have suddenly become politically fluid again. Tamil Nadu's transition is historic because it formally ends the post-1967 DMK-AIADMK monopoly over power. But the larger significance lies not in celebrity politics alone. It lies in the visible erosion of inherited political loyalty. For decades, Tamil Nadu functioned through controlled alternation. Voters could punish one Dravidian party by electing the other, yet the larger framework survived untouched. National parties adapted themselves to this arrangement rather than attempting to dismantle it. That system has now been breached.

The reasons extend beyond anti-incumbency. The DMK increasingly came to symbolise dynastic continuity, while the AIADMK struggled to redefine itself after Jayalalithaa's death. Younger voters appear less emotionally invested in the political identities that shaped earlier generations. The result is not the disappearance of Dravidian politics, but the weakening of its closed structure. West Bengal's verdict represents an equally consequential rupture, though of a different kind. Bengal has historically moved through sharp ideological transitions - from Congress dominance to the Left Front, and later from the Left to Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress. The BJP's decisive breakthrough now marks another turning point in a state that long projected itself as resistant to Hindutva politics.

Yet Bengal's own history suggests that overwhelming mandates rarely produce permanent political settlement. Every dominant formation in the state eventually generates resistance through organisational rigidity, accumulated fatigue or political excess. The Left Front's long dominance once appeared immovable until Singur and Nandigram transformed the political mood. The Trinamool Congress itself emerged from that churn. That is why the deeper significance of the 2026 verdicts lies not simply in who won power, but in the weakening of systems once considered electorally self-sustaining. Tamil Nadu's Dravidian enclosure has cracked. Bengal's anti-BJP exceptionalism has weakened. In both states, voters have demonstrated a willingness to abandon political arrangements that once appeared permanent.

The national implications may unfold gradually but could prove far-reaching. Regional parties that dominated coalition politics for decades may face new internal vulnerabilities. The Congress may attempt to renegotiate relationships in states where it had accepted subordinate status. The BJP, despite its electoral advances, could discover that breaking regional strongholds is easier than governing politically fragmented landscapes afterward. Indian politics periodically enters phases where old alignments lose stability simultaneously across multiple states. The 1967 elections produced one such moment, weakening Congress dominance and unleashing decades of regional assertion and coalition politics. The verdicts of 2026 suggest India may be entering another era of political rearrangement - one marked not by stable binaries, but by negotiation, volatility and shifting alliances. The real story, therefore, is larger than Tamil Nadu or West Bengal alone. It is the return of uncertainty to a political system that had begun to look deceptively settled.

Wage Illusion

India's labour debate has long been trapped between two extremes. One side argues that higher wages inevitably kill jobs. The other assumes better pay alone can solve worker distress. Both positions ignore a deeper reality: India's problem is not merely low wages, but an economy that has depended for decades on cheap and insecure labour to sustain growth. That model is now reaching its limits. Even after years of headline GDP expansion, a vast section of India's workforce remains outside stable salaried employment. Millions survive through informal work, casual labour, small-scale self-employment, or seasonal agricultural activity. The contradiction is stark. India aspires to become a manufacturing and services powerhouse, yet nearly half its workforce remains tied to low-productivity agriculture. The result is stagnant earnings, weak domestic demand and rising economic insecurity despite visible national growth.

This is the larger context in which the Code on Wages must be understood. The reform is not simply an administrative consolidation of labour laws. It represents an attempt by the Indian state to redefine what formal employment should look like in a modern economy. For years, companies across sectors have used fragmented salary structures, allowances, and contractual arrangements to keep basic wages artificially low.

This reduced provident fund liabilities, diluted social security contributions, and weakened workers' bargaining power. Such practices helped lower costs in the short term, but they also institutionalised a low-wage equilibrium that discouraged productivity upgrades and skill investment. The new wage framework seeks to reverse some of those incentives by standardising wage definitions and limiting excessive exclusions from base pay calculations. Critics from industry predictably warn that higher wage obligations could discourage hiring. But that argument assumes Indian competitiveness can continue resting indefinitely on suppressed labour costs. China's economic transformation offers a different lesson. Its manufacturing rise was not built only on cheap labour, but eventually on rising productivity, infrastructure, scale, and worker purchasing power. South Korea and Taiwan followed similar paths decades earlier.

Economies that remain permanently dependent on low wages rarely achieve broad middle-class expansion. India now faces a strategic choice. It can continue competing as a vast reservoir of inexpensive labour, or it can gradually transition toward a higher-productivity economy where workers earn enough to sustain consumption and social stability. The second path is slower and politically harder, but likely more durable. None of this can guarantee success. Labour codes alone cannot fix weak manufacturing capacity, judicial delays, poor skilling systems, or uneven state-level implementation. Small businesses already operating under cost pressures may struggle with compliance. Without broader economic reforms, wage regulation can become another layer of bureaucracy. Yet the broader signal still matters. India is beginning to acknowledge that labour cannot remain permanently informal while the country seeks great-power economic status. A nation aspiring to become the world's third-largest economy cannot build that future on insecure workers earning stagnant wages indefinitely.

UAE and OPEC

The UAE's long-term strategy is to diversify away from hydrocarbons, investing in sectors such as finance, tourism, and technology. However, achieving that transition requires significant capital, much of which still comes from oil revenues. In that sense, producing more oil now is not a contradiction but a necessity. OPEC's restrictions, therefore, clash directly with the country's broader economic ambitions

The decision by the United Arab Emirates to step away from OPEC marks more than a routine policy shift; it reflects a deeper fracture in the logic that has governed global oil politics for decades. For much of its history, OPEC represented a rare example of sustained cooperation among resource-rich states, enabling them to collectively influence prices and project geopolitical power. The UAE's departure signals that this model - once seen as indispensable - is increasingly being questioned by its own members, not just for economic reasons but for strategic and political ones as well.

At its core, the move is about control. The UAE has spent years investing heavily in expanding its oil production capacity, positioning itself as a technologically advanced and efficient producer. Yet, under OPEC's quota system, it has been required to hold back output to support global prices. This arrangement may have made sense when collective discipline ensured stable and predictable revenues, but in today's environment it is beginning to look like a constraint. For a country trying to maximize returns from its existing oil wealth while simultaneously preparing for a post-oil future, limiting production is no longer an attractive bargain.

There is an inherent irony here. The UAE's long-term strategy is to diversify away from hydrocarbons, investing in sectors such as finance, tourism, and technology. However, achieving that transition requires significant capital, much of which still comes from oil revenues. In that sense, producing more oil now is not a contradiction but a necessity. OPEC's restrictions, therefore, clash directly with the country's broader economic ambitions. What once functioned as a stabilizing mechanism is now perceived as an obstacle to national development.

But economics alone does not explain the timing or the tone of this decision. The geopolitical context is equally important.



The Gulf region has been under strain, particularly with tensions involving Iran and disruptions around critical maritime routes like the Strait of Hormuz. For the UAE, these developments have underscored the risks of relying on a consensus-driven organization where responses to crises are often slow and diluted by competing interests. In a volatile environment, agility matters more than coordination, and OPEC's structure is not designed for speed.

Frustrations have also been building within the Gulf Cooperation Council. The UAE has increasingly sought a more assertive regional stance, particularly in relation to Iran, and has been dissatisfied with what it sees as a lack of unified action. This divergence in strategic outlook has contributed to a sense that traditional alliances are no longer delivering the desired outcomes. In such a scenario, breaking away from a Saudi Arabia-dominated framework like OPEC becomes not just an economic choice, but a political signal.

For Saudi Arabia, the implications are significant. As OPEC's de facto leader, its influence has always depended on both its own production capacity and the willingness of others to align with its policies. The UAE's exit weakens that alignment. It removes a key partner with substantial spare capacity, making it harder for the group to manage supply effectively. More importantly, it exposes underlying dissatisfaction with Saudi leadership, raising questions about how cohesive the organization really is.

This comes at a particularly challenging time for Saudi Arabia. Its ambitious economic transformation plans require sustained high oil revenues, which in turn depend on carefully managed supply levels. If fewer countries are willing to participate in coordinated cuts, the burden falls disproportionately on Saudi Arabia itself. Cutting production to support prices becomes more costly and less effective when others are free to increase output. The result is a strategic dilemma: maintain discipline and sacrifice market share, or abandon restraint and risk price declines.

The UAE's departure also highlights a

broader issue that has long plagued OPEC - uneven compliance. Several members have frequently exceeded their production quotas, undermining the credibility of the system. For countries that adhere to the rules, this creates resentment and erodes trust. The perception that the system is neither fair nor enforceable weakens the incentive to remain within it. In that sense, the UAE's exit is not an isolated event but part of a larger pattern of dissatisfaction.

Looking ahead, the question is whether this move will trigger a wider unravelling. Other producers with growing capacity or shifting economic priorities may begin to reassess the value of membership. If more countries choose autonomy over coordination, OPEC's ability to function as a cohesive bloc will diminish. Its influence on global oil markets - once formidable - could gradually erode, replaced by a more fragmented and competitive landscape.

In the short term, the impact on oil prices may be limited. Geopolitical disruptions and existing supply constraints continue to shape market dynamics, and a single country's policy shift is unlikely to cause immediate upheaval. Over the longer term, however, the implications are more profound. If the UAE increases production significantly outside the constraints of OPEC, it could contribute to downward pressure on prices. At the same time, the loss of a strong coordinating mechanism increases the likelihood of volatility. Prices may swing more sharply in response to geopolitical events, demand fluctuations, or shifts in production strategies.

For oil-importing countries, this presents a mixed picture. On one hand, increased supply and potential price declines offer clear benefits, easing inflationary pressures and improving trade balances. On the other hand, greater volatility complicates economic

planning and energy security. The absence of a stabilizing force like a cohesive OPEC makes the market less predictable, introducing new risks even as it creates new opportunities.

What is perhaps most striking about the UAE's decision is what it reveals about the changing nature of global energy politics. The traditional model of cartel-based cooperation is being challenged by a combination of technological change, shifting demand patterns, and evolving geopolitical realities. Countries are increasingly prioritizing flexibility and national interest over collective discipline. Energy is no longer just an economic commodity; it is a strategic tool, used to navigate a complex and multipolar world.

This shift does not necessarily mean that OPEC will become irrelevant overnight. The organization has shown resilience in the past, adapting to crises and maintaining a degree of influence even in the face of internal disagreements. It may continue to play a role, particularly if key members remain committed to coordination. However, its authority is no longer unquestioned, and its future will depend on its ability to adapt to a changing environment.

In many ways, the UAE's exit is less about leaving OPEC and more about redefining what participation in the global energy system looks like. It reflects a willingness to break from established norms in pursuit of greater autonomy and strategic flexibility. Whether this approach proves successful will depend on how effectively the UAE can navigate the risks of a more competitive and less predictable market.

What is clear, however, is that the balance between cooperation and competition in the oil market is shifting. The assumptions that once underpinned global energy governance are being re-examined, and the outcomes are far from certain.

The UAE has chosen to prioritize independence over alignment, betting that the benefits of flexibility outweigh the costs of leaving a collective framework. Others may soon face similar choices, and the decisions they make will shape the future of the global energy order in ways that are only beginning to unfold.



ANAND KUMAR

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PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Discouraging SK corruption

While power tends to corrupt, hearing that this applies even to the young and affluent may be reason enough to rethink early exposure to politics through the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK). Or so believes Interior Secretary Jonvic Remulla who has pushed for the abolition of the SK following the suspension of two SK officials from two of Makati's plush villages.

At a press briefing last week, Remulla identified the SK members as Natalia Georgianna Tupaz of Barangay Dasmarinas and Cecilia Louise Yabut of Barangay Magallanes.

"Corruption has reached the SK all the way to the richest barangay," Remulla said, adding that the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) will recommend charges against the two errand officers at the Office of the Ombudsman: direct bribery, graft and corruption, and falsification of public documents for Tupaz, and the latter

charge for Yabut.

A DILG statement said Tupaz was slapped with a six-month suspension for allegedly demanding a 20 percent kickback from a supplier for a Halloween project, a practice she has described as "standardized."

Viber messages and a phone call supported the allegations, investigators said. Yabut was suspended for three months for supposedly submitting documents with falsified signatures, including that of an SK council member who was reportedly abroad at the time. Yabut said the signatories had given her prior consent.

The two are among the seven elected members of the SK or the Youth Council in every barangay who serve a three-year term. The SK, the official representative body for those aged 18-24 in each barangay, is mandated to plan and implement projects that benefit the youth in their

community. It receives 10 percent of the barangay's general fund, which could amount to millions for rich villages. SK officials are also getting from P7900 to P12,700 in monthly honoraria, and members an average of P5,900, depending on the barangay's funds.

These funds are sourced from the National Tax Allotment that, according to the Bureau of the Treasury, totaled P238.1 billion in tax allotments for approximately 41,913 barangays for 2026. Early this week, President Marcos announced a new P200,000 allocation per barangay, totaling P8 billion nationwide specifically for education, social, and economic projects.

The impeachment case will affect Vice President Sara Duterte's bid in the 2028 presidential race, House justice panel chair Gerville Luistro said.

The suspension of the two SK members has prompted Remulla to double down on his call to abolish the barangay youth council: "We see the culture of corruption even among the youth," he said.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Troubling

Sir, Please refer to yesterday's report "Vinesh Phogat issued show-cause notice by WFI". The Wrestling Federation of India has now issued a detailed show-cause notice accusing Vinesh of violating anti-doping return rules, engaging in indiscipline and damaging the reputation of Indian wrestling.

The federation insists that rules under the United World Wrestling framework are non-negotiable and that any athlete returning from retirement must complete a mandatory six-month notice period while remaining available for anti-doping testing. On paper, the argument appears procedural and legitimate. Sporting regulations cannot be selectively enforced depending on an athlete's popularity or public image.

Yet the matter cannot be viewed in isolation from the troubled history between Vinesh and the federation. Indian wrestling spent nearly two years trapped in public



controversy after leading wrestlers accused former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual harassment and institutional intimidation.

Vinesh was among the most visible faces of that protest movement. The agitation divided Indian sport, drew global attention and exposed deep structural weaknesses in athlete protection mechanisms.

Even today, a trust deficit continues to exist between many wrestlers and the federation leadership. In such an atmosphere, every disciplinary step risks

appearing political, even when backed by technical rules.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 11 May.

Values

Sir, This refers to the article "A moral commitment that binds the world" published today. The piece raises something we rarely pause to consider - that humanitarian work is not exceptional behaviour, it is basic human responsibility. Red Cross volunteers operate in conditions most of us cannot imagine, and yet funding, political access, and security remain persistently inadequate.

Governments acknowledge these organisations during crises but seldom invest in their sustained capacity. That gap needs addressing. Locally too, the culture of community support has thinned. Urbanisation and digital isolation have made neighbourly solidarity feel old-fashioned. Schools should reintroduce

civic participation seriously, not as a subject but as practice. Compassion, after all, is a habit before it becomes a value.

Yours, etc., K Sakunthala, Coimbatore, 11 May.

Traffic woes

Sir, Without taking away an iota of credit from Calcutta Traffic Police, I would like to bring to their notice the following aberrations: (a) Random operation of auto rickshaws over four lanes at times even breaking traffic light signals; (b) Random jumping of lanes by two-wheeler drivers, including gig workers; (c) Vehicles not getting into the turning lane as well as crossing the stop line; (d) Parking in no-parking areas like the junction of Purna Das Road and Jatin Bagchi Rd causing traffic congestion all round, and (e) Excessive and continuous honking. Yours, etc.,

Cdr Subimal Dutt, Kolkata, 11 May.

Operations Sindoor and Epic Fury

HARSHA KAKAR

The anniversary of Operation Sindoor was marked last week with social media comments and press conferences by members of the government.

Both India and the US employed standoff weapons during their respective operations - India against Pakistan and the US-Israel combine against Iran, and the adversaries responded similarly.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly been claiming that aircraft were downed in Operation Sindoor; the numbers increasing every time he spoke.

Iran's strategy included targeting infrastructure in neighbouring countries; an option Pakistan does not possess. Thus, it could only hit back against India, for which Indian forces were prepared.

Iran played its narrative based on an unprovoked attack to which it was compelled to retaliate. Its narrative building was partially successful since Trump kept changing US objectives in his social media posts.

Pakistan's narrative of not being responsible for Pahalgam failed; that of downing Indian aircraft, while hiding their losses, was initially successful.

Iran was aware that its survival alone would be a sign of victory over the US-Israel combine. Its ability to engage in talks indicated that two powerful nations could not force a surrender.

forces from its western provinces, where insurgency and freedom struggles were gaining ground. Further, its economy could not sustain a prolonged conflict.

The US's justification for the war was based on the premise that Iran was developing nuclear weapons. The world is aware that it was Israel which pushed the US into conflict.

Indians stood with the government when it launched Operation Sindoor. The public had been demanding a military response, after the attack in Pahalgam.

India was far more successful against Pakistan than the US has been against Iran. India never sought a ceasefire, forcing Pakistan, a nuclear power which regularly threatens nuclear retaliation, to seek peace.



Pakistan.' Simultaneously, while India has declared a pause to Sindoor; the US continues with its deployment.

India refuses to open dialogue with Pakistan while Trump keeps displaying his desperation for talks with Iran.

Both India and the US had their politico-military objectives and end states determined prior to the conflict. The US was forced to amend its end state as war progressed, ultimately reverting to possibly what was achieved in the JCPOA.

Operation Sindoor showcased Indian military products, demands

for which have been rising across the globe. On the contrary, US military products had limited success against Iran's retaliatory strikes.

India subdued a declared nuclear power, while the US with all its military might, fails to bring an emerging nuclear power to heel.

India's strategy was limited escalation, while the US employed overwhelming military power. At the end of the day, limited escalation, with select objectives, was a better approach than excess military power without a clear end state.

Operation Sindoor showcased Indian military products, demands

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 12 May 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

MIAN GUL of Swat, who has for years been fighting the Khan of Dir and various clansmen of Bajaur in his attempts to re-establish on the Malakhand border a state as complete as that which the famous Akhund of Swat controlled, has at last succeeded.

News Items

TWO ATTACKS ON TRAINS ALL-NIGHT RIOT AT GLASGOW

LONDON, MAY THE Berwick-Newcastle train was attacked last night. The driver noticed that the level-crossing gate was foul of the line, and slowed up when all of a sudden a mob of three to four hundred men appeared on both sides of the line and bombarded the train with stones.

IN THE PROVINCES IMPROVEMENT IN RAILWAY SERVICES

THE south-western division is normal, and is well furnished with news-papers. A number of strikers are drifting back at Plymouth. Some transport workers at Bristol, who were called out of the private flour-mills, have applied for work elsewhere, where they are not known.

AN IMPROVEMENT! MILK AND FLOUR SUPPLIES COMING IN

INDICATING an improvement, in the strike situation, the supplies for the Hyde Park milk pool are now coming in so freely by rail that road columns of lorries have been abolished or reduced.

FRENCH SUPPORT DECISION OF PORT & DOCK LABOURERS

IN conformity with the Ostend decisions the National Federation of Mari-time Unions of the Port and Dock Labourers has issued instructions for-bidding the unemployed seamen to serve on British ships urging French seamen to refuse to work on French collieries to England, and ordering dock labourers not to coal or victual British vessels.

Technology must boost clean energy

O. PRASADA RAO

Every year on May 11, India celebrates National Technology Day to commemorate the nation's technological strides. The date was chosen to honour the Pokhran-II nuclear tests of 1998, which demonstrated India's scientific and technical capabilities.

The 2026 theme, "Responsible Innovation for Inclusive Growth", emphasises that technology must not only advance but also uplift society equitably.

This Day is more than a commemoration—it is a call for action. Its importance lies in recognizing scientists and innovators for their achievements in critical sectors like space, biotechnology, and digital infrastructure.

as self-reliance (Atmanirbhar Bharat, Make in India etc.). It positions India globally as a leader in clean energy, semiconductor manufacturing, and artificial intelligence.

Inclusive growth refers to economic progress that is broad-based, equitable, and sustainable. It ensures that the benefits of development reach all sections of society, especially marginalised groups.

Clean energy refers to energy derived from sources that produce little to no greenhouse gas emissions and minimise environmental harm. It includes solar power (photovoltaic and thermal), wind energy (onshore and offshore), hydropower (large dams and micro-hydro), geothermal energy, biomass and biofuels, and green hydrogen (produced via renewable-powered electrolysis of water).

Clean energy differs fundamentally from fossil fuels, which emit carbon dioxide, methane, and other pollutants. It is central to combating climate

change and achieving sustainable development.

Clean Energy reduces greenhouse gas emissions, mitigating climate change; cuts air pollution, lowering respiratory and cardiovascular diseases; diversifies sources, reduces dependence on imported oil and coal, facilitates 'Energy Security' efforts, and creates jobs in manufacturing, installation, and maintenance of renewable systems.

Globally renewables accounted for nearly 30 per cent of electricity generation in 2025, with solar and wind contributing in a major way. China dominates solar manufacturing and deployment, while Europe leads in offshore wind.

The future of clean energy needs to be shaped by innovation and policy. Green Hydrogen is seen as the "fuel of the future." Initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (led by India) are required to foster global collaboration in transition to clean energy.



as we increase use of renewable energy.

Solar and wind depend on weather so power generation from them is intermittent, requiring robust battery storage. Transmission lines, smart grids, and charging networks should not lag behind demand.

National Technology Day 2026, with its theme "Responsible Innovation for Inclusive Growth - Clean Energy",

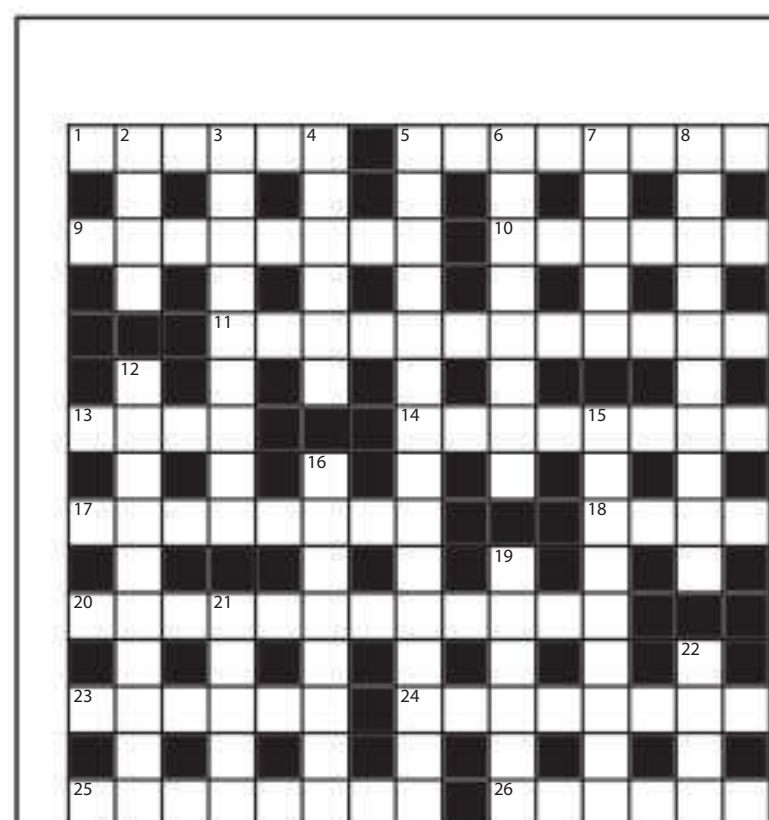
reminds us that technology must be both transformational and sustainable.

Clean energy embodies this dual mandate: it reduces emissions, fosters innovation, and creates jobs, but must be deployed inclusively to avoid deepening inequalities.

India's journey - from Pokhran-II to solar parks and hydrogen missions - illustrates how technology can redefine national destiny. Yet, the global community must confront challenges of intermittency, infrastructure, and equity.

(The writer is a retired Scientist, CSIR.)

Crossword | No. 293459



Yesterday's Solution



ACROSS

- 1 I see mariner's brought round cutter (6)
5 Minor Republican given award for costumes (8)
9 Sea area next to the Spanish lines (8)
10 Stylish cross put back under cover (6)
11 Thoroughly organise cycling in November briefly (12)
13 Copy part of the choreography that's followed by fox trot (4)

DOWN

- 14 Jokes about youth with rare finery (4,4)
17 Medic wears more painful old headgear (8)
18 Second-hand uniform has sleeve mended at last (4)
20 Use it to groom unkempt Ulster cobs and two other horses? (7-5)
23 Riding limited on island - it covers top and bottom only (6)

ACROSS

- 24 Caught avoiding radical indirect cost where 17 is (8)
25 Those drinking slowly devour litres like mules (8)
26 Old British queen ignoring articles, 27 (6)

DOWN

- 2 A short sunhat's peak is here (4)
3 Manipulating BBC logo, I'm making corrupt programme (5,4)
4 Enthusiastic call in support of gunners (6)

ACROSS

- 5 Western pianist and chemist's footwear (10,5)
6 Agitated Croatian drops paint in Ulster maybe? (8)
7 Gas managed to overwhelm cook (5)
8 Wearing 5 perhaps under the counter? (10)
12 She studies small church with icehouse erected on both sides (10)

DOWN

- 15 Hugh's door designed with nails protruding (9)
16 Nice guy in suspect image upset island (8)
19 European belts up A1 (6)
21 Wally primarily talks with idiotic way of speaking (5)
22 Nurse dispenses this around one - it's kept in hospital cupboard (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



هذا المضيق الذي أعبره لن يدوم
طويلاً. ثمة محيط ينتظرني.
(جلال الدين الرومي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

*This narrow passage I traverse is but temporary;
there is an ocean behind it waiting for me.*

Jalal Al-Din Rumi

(13th-century poet, scholar and mystic)

Opinion

France gears up for big G7 summit

ANDREW HAMMOND



Andrew Hammond is an associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

G7 trade ministers met in Paris last week for a key meeting focused on enhancing the West's critical mineral supplies. However, the really big event in this year's French presidency comes next month, with the leadership meeting hosted by President Emmanuel Macron.

It is now about half a century since the grouping of industrialized democracies was founded to facilitate shared macro-economic initiatives in response to the challenges of the 1970s, including the aftermath of the Middle East energy shock and the ensuing international recession. So, today, there is significant historical continuity, with the world again grappling with a crisis in the region.

While there have been periodic tensions within the G7 during the last five decades, this year's summit could be the most challenging ever. A key question will be how much US President Donald Trump buys into the process after recent intense criticisms of allies — including previous political soulmate Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni — on issues ranging from

the future of Greenland to Ukraine.

Macron is already pulling out all the stops to try to bring the US president on board. This includes changing the dates of next month's summit to June 15-17 to accommodate Trump's desire to watch an MMA event in Washington on June 14, his 80th birthday.

However, the potential for problems is still significant. From serving as an annual affirmation that the G7 is largely aligned, as in much of the past, this year's summit may again see splits.

It is also possible, perhaps even probable, that Trump may again call for the return of Russia to the club. However, all other G7 members are strongly opposed to this and there is no clear sign that Moscow, which joined the then-G8 summits from 1997 to 2014, will ever be invited back to the organization while President Vladimir Putin remains in office.

This context makes it very difficult for Macron to frame a "Trump-proof" G7 agenda. If the gathering goes badly, it could have wider implications, with the NATO Summit scheduled soon after. Unfortunately, there is an

all-too-significant possibility this could also undermine US support for Ukraine, with the Trump team's resources and attention increasingly diverted to the Middle East.

The agenda is a big one that requires deep global partnerships. This is why Macron is reaching beyond the G7's leaders. Other world leaders playing a role this year have included Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

One of the key economic agenda items is likely to be cushioning the stagflationary shock being felt around much of the world as a result of the Middle East conflict. The G7's finance and energy ministers have already said they will take "all necessary measures" to safeguard the global energy market.

Of course, the International Energy Agency already coordinated the release of 400 million barrels of oil in March to mitigate reductions in cargo. Some G7 leaders, including Takaichi, are already asking the organization for an additional coordinated release of oil stockpiles.

This energy crunch is particularly impacting Asia and Europe. In Europe, some nations, including Poland, Hungary and Croatia, have already introduced fuel price caps or comparable measures. At the EU level, European Commissioner for Energy Dan Jorgensen is pushing for wider actions, including reducing fossil fuel exports and boosting renewable energy production.

G7 ministers have also called on all countries to refrain from imposing unjustified export restrictions on hydrocarbons and related products. There was also a call from some of the finance ministers, including the UK's Rachel Reeves, for no more new trade barriers that could disrupt supply chains and increase costs to be put up during the crisis — a rebuke to the US, which is threatening new trade tariffs in the coming weeks.

Next month's big event therefore has huge potential for more diplomatic fireworks. While some of the G7's disagreements pre-date Trump, his presidency has widened these schisms in a "G6-1" fashion, posing the biggest threat to Western unity in living memory.

While there have been periodic tensions, this year's summit could be the most challenging ever



The 'golden age thinking' mentality encourages pessimism and hopelessness, especially among the young

The past may have been simpler and happier, but it was not better

ARNAB NEIL SENGUPTA



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There is a familiar complaint heard at family gatherings, in television studios and on social media feeds these days: the world is falling apart.

Wars rage in places such as Iran, Gaza, Africa's Sahel region and Ukraine. Immigration has become a source of political anger in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. Faith in mainstream political parties has weakened. Populists thrive on public frustration. White-collar workers fear that artificial intelligence may replace them. Climate disasters seem to strike every season.

Against this backdrop, nostalgia has become fashionable. Many people look back at the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s through rose-tinted glasses and conclude that the past was not only

simpler and happier, but also better.

It was not.

The danger lies in "golden age thinking" — the belief that the best days are permanently behind us. That mentality encourages pessimism and hopelessness, especially among the young.

The past was certainly simpler. Before smartphones and social media, people lived quieter lives. There were fewer distractions and less information overload. The average person did not have to wade through dozens of spam emails, short videos, memes and political arguments on WhatsApp groups before breakfast. Life moved at a slower pace.

And yet, despite this, the past was not a better time.

One reason is simple: medicine. Millions of people alive today would not have survived in earlier decades. Treatments

for cancer, heart disease, diabetes and countless other conditions have improved dramatically. Vaccines (think shingles) prevent or diminish the risks associated with diseases that once terrified entire societies. Surgical procedures are safer, less painful and more sophisticated. Premature babies survive in far greater numbers. Elderly people live longer and remain active for longer.

Knowledge itself has expanded dramatically. Modern computing power and space telescopes have deepened humanity's understanding of the universe. Scientists can now study black holes, distant galaxies and planetary systems with astonishing precision. The application of AI, despite the fears surrounding it, is accelerating medical research, language translation and scientific discovery, to name just three fields.

Nostalgia also tends to overlook

unpleasant realities. The supposedly "golden" decades were not free from fear or instability. The Cold War carried the constant threat of ideological subversion and nuclear annihilation. Terrorism existed long before the present era. Racism, sexism and discrimination were more openly accepted in many societies.

To sum up, the past was indeed simpler and, in some ways, it was happier too. But it was not better. Humanity today is healthier, more informed, more connected and more capable than at any previous point in history. The challenge for younger generations is not to yearn for a world they never lived in, but to build a future that preserves the best elements of the past while overcoming its many limitations.

Nostalgia is a great comfort but, if history is any guide, optimism and knowledge are what move societies forward.

Opinion

What does the age of nationalism mean for UK's unity?

EYAD ABU SHAKRA

Few observers were surprised by the local election results in Britain last week. Opinion polls had already shown that the ruling Labour Party was heading toward a painful defeat under its weak, opportunistic leadership that lacks substance, conviction and charisma.

Its current leader's rise to power in the 2024 general election was more the result of the failures of others than through any merit of his own.

Labour's share of the vote in this seemingly sweeping victory was telling: the party won 411 seats with only about 34 percent of the vote.

That is, Labor increased its vote share by no more than 1.6

percent from the defeat of 2019. Indeed, that 34 percent was the lowest vote of any party with an outright parliamentary majority since the end of the Second World War.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, saw their share collapse, from 44 percent in 2019 to just 20 percent in 2024. The centrist Liberal Democrats raised their share to 12.2 percent, a gain of 0.7 percent. But most of the Conservatives' votes went to the far right — the Reform UK party, which was born from the twins of Brexit and hostility

toward immigration and immigrants.

Indeed, Labour did not win the 2024 election by offering a coherent alternative grounded in a solid set of values. It won because it benefited from the chaos and division at the top of the Conservative hierarchy on the one hand and from the rise of a populist party, Reform, that was more extreme and more hostile to immigrants than even the Conservative right on the other.

Even so, despite the generous and largely undeserved mandate that Labour and its leader received, Prime Minister Keir Starmer chose to settle scores within the party rather than reach out to its various factions and defuse their desire for revenge.

Backed by the Labour right wing that had dominated the party under former Prime Minister Tony Blair and his former ally Peter Mandelson, Starmer launched a ferocious campaign against the remnants of the party's previous left-wing leadership.

After the 2024 elections, the Conservative Party was in shambles. The defeat not only cost the party power but it also opened the floodgates to defections. A number of hard-line Conservatives left to join the extremist Reform UK, among them several senior ministers from



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recent Conservative governments.

As for Britain's "two-party system," which goes back to 1721, it is worth recalling that, between 1721 and 1924, the two rivals were the Whigs, who later evolved into the Liberal Party after absorbing various groupings, and the Tories, the Conservative Party. Since 1924, the Conservatives and Labour have been the two key players.

The most significant political shift seen in last week's results was the rise of nationalist sentiment across the board: both in its proto-independence form in the non-English political entities (Scotland and Wales) and in its isolationist, anti-immigrant form in England itself, though Reform also made inroads in the non-English entities.

These two versions of nationalism are ideological rivals. The racist and economic notions of the far right that underpin Reform's isolationism present a stark contrast to the nationalism of the Scots, Welsh and Irish, which is rooted in notions of liberation from the weight of England's old colonial legacy.

In any event, Reform was the big winner, followed by the Green Party, which many now regard as a credible alternative to Labour on the left.

Reform's rapid and alarming rise runs parallel to the broader ascent of far right, racist and neo-fascist movements from India to the Americas to Europe. What is happening today, however, cannot be understood in isolation from Margaret Thatcher's legacy. Thatcher was the last Western leader to boycott South Africa's apartheid regime. She waged wars of attrition against the welfare state that had been built in Britain after the Second World War. She led the battle against "European identity" before her disciples and the heirs of her policies fulfilled her dream of separating Britain from Europe.

At the time, Thatcher's policies complemented those of Washington under Ronald Reagan. The

European stage today, however, is far more complicated. The "special relationship" between Washington and London was real at the time; that is no longer the case.

Personally, I believe the collapse of the two-party system in the UK will endure for some time. I also fear it may prove costly for both its internal stability and national unity, as it is difficult to imagine the nationalists of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland finding comfort in a government headed by Reform extremists.

Labour did not win the 2024 election by offering a coherent alternative grounded in a solid set of values

The most significant political shift seen in last week's results was the rise of nationalist sentiment across the board

A Hungarian playbook for defeating populists?

JAN-WERNER MUELLER

Peter Magyar's landslide victory in Hungary has triggered a global outpouring of commentary that sometimes reads like a trashy banner ad: "This one secret technique will make your far-right populism problem disappear!" Hungary's experience supposedly demonstrates that one need only focus on the incumbent's corruption or unite the opposition in order to triumph.

Alas, if defeating populist autocrats were so straightforward, the Viktor Orbans of this world would have been ousted long ago. While one can indeed learn from Magyar's multi-pronged campaign, the lessons are more subtle than the recent flurry of hot takes would suggest — and some may not be applicable to larger countries.

As a former Fidesz insider, Magyar understood that the electoral system had two vulnerabilities. Fidesz counted on the opposition always being divided and it assumed that challengers would never gain substantial support in rural areas, where Orbán's cronies controlled the local press (and where poorer citizens were

sometimes bribed and threatened to vote for the government). Magyar exploited both premises.

Magyar spent two years crisscrossing the country, holding multiple rallies per day. And, like Zohran Mamdani in New York, he complemented this traditional retail politics strategy with a savvy social media strategy. Ultimately, it was this constant, credible presence even in small villages — rather than his specific policy positions on

big issues like immigration — that made the difference.

Magyar was also lucky in some ways. Protest movements elsewhere have often shied away from allying with parties that could dilute their own moral purity, which puts a ceiling on their

support. But as Magyar rose in popularity, some older parties stood down entirely and others were effectively wiped out on election day. He could thus signal a clean break not only from what citizens started to call "filthy Fidesz," but from all the establishment politicians who had been around for decades.

Equally instructive was Magyar's focus on corruption, which he presented as



Jan-Werner Mueller, professor of politics at Princeton University, is the author of the forthcoming book "Street, Palace, Square: The Architecture of Democratic Spaces" (Penguin Books, 2026).

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an issue affecting Hungarians' everyday lives. He linked Orbán's "mafia state" directly to the systematic undermining of democracy and the social contract. The country's education and health systems were buckling because critical funding had been channeled to Orbán's cronies and this looting went unchecked because Fidesz had used its iron grip on the political system to subvert the rule of law.

Magyar promised a reckoning and one does not have to be a particularly vindictive person to see the appeal of this message. When people are suffering in their daily lives while their kleptocratic leaders grow rich, the prospect of restoring accountability can generate immense political energy. Partly owing to the EU's decision to freeze funds in response to Orbán's rule of law violations, the Hungarian economy has been essentially stagnant and the cost-of-living crisis has only deepened.

Of course, the remnants of the old regime are likely to resist. But having won more votes than Fidesz ever did, Magyar can credibly claim a mandate to undo Orbán's entire project.

It is comforting to think that Magyar's win has vindicated centrism. But at a time when centrists have been making concessions to the far right, it would be a mistake to conclude that elections are won through such positioning. The winners are those who understand how the political system works and how it is stacked against them; who out-organize the other side and message with purpose (ordering party members to post one

meme per day, as Orbán did, comes across as phony); and who can create powerful symbols that capture a general sense of discontent.

One enduring image from this election will be the crowds of anti-Fidesz voters wearing zebra hats and costumes,

in reference to the sprawling landed estate where Orbán's father kept exotic animals. As saccharine as it sounds, that kind of grassroots negative campaigning, combined with credible promises of a clean break from the status quo and a better future, can enable a victory that destroys the aura of inevitability that so many populists have created for themselves.

The lessons are more subtle than the recent flurry of hot takes would suggest — and some may not be applicable to larger countries

Peter Magyar linked Orbán's 'mafia state' directly to the systematic undermining of democracy and the social contract

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Opinion

Trump used to be the top China hawk. Now he's courting permanent disaster.

The president is working to strengthen a relationship that many Americans fear.

Oren Cass
Contributing Writer

"If you look at my old speeches when I was young, very handsome," President Trump said while announcing his "Liberation Day" tariffs last year, "I'd be on a television show. I'd be talking about how we were being ripped off." For someone who's been known to change his opinion from time to time, he has been remarkably consistent on this point: Other countries are swindling America, and China is the worst offender.

In an earlier era when the political class was infatuated with free trade, Mr. Trump's concerns marked him as an extreme outlier. Since then, the country has largely come around to his way of thinking. The Biden administration doubled down on Mr. Trump's first-term China tariffs, increasing rates even further, and imposed strict export controls on critical technologies. A House select committee issued bipartisan recommendations to drastically limit China's access to the U.S. market.

Anti-China sentiment helped sweep Mr. Trump back into office, and he packed his second administration with prominent China hawks, most notably Vice President JD Vance; Secretary of State Marco Rubio; the Pentagon policy chief, Elbridge Colby; and Jamieson Greer, the U.S. trade representative. The assumption on the part of many Americans was that Mr. Trump would do everything in his power to sever economic ties between the two countries.

Instead, he may be on the verge of tying the United States to China irrevocably: Mr. Trump and President Xi Jinping are reportedly considering a deal to allow China to invest \$1 trillion in the United States, largely to build factories on American soil. It would be an unforced error of world-historic proportions.

As mind-boggling as that prospect might seem, however, it doesn't come out of nowhere. Other than the steep tariffs he imposed (and then lowered), Mr. Trump's approach to China has frequently put him at odds with his own administration. The White House's high-level National Security Strategy seeks merely to "rebalance America's economic relationship with China." When the Pentagon's draft of the more detailed National Defense Strategy described China as the top security threat, the president sent the authors back to the drawing board.

After Mr. Trump reached a "trade truce" with Mr. Xi at their October summit in South Korea, he directed Stephen Miller, a White House deputy chief of staff, to limit any agency actions that might antagonize China. He made the case for granting 600,000 Chinese student visas. And he pushed to allow China access to advanced A.I. chips — even though his administration's own A.I. Action Plan states: "Denying our

foreign adversaries access to this resource" is "a matter of both geostrategic competition and national security." What is going on? The answer is that Mr. Trump sees the problem with China as simply a bad deal. And what's the remedy for a bad deal? Why, a better

deal, of course. End the rip-off and all is forgiven. "I don't blame China," he told business leaders in Beijing in 2017. "After all, who can blame a country for being able to take advantage of another country for the benefit of its citizens? I give China great credit." Campaigning in 2024, he said he would welcome the arrival of Chinese automakers, a position he reiterated this past January in Detroit: "If they want to come in and build the plant and hire you and hire your friends and hire your neighbors, that's great. I love that. Let China come in." Indeed, he may even view such investment as a prize worthy of concessions.

A trillion-dollar infusion of capital would exceed the total direct investment in the United States made by any other country since the Declaration of Independence. Even a fraction of that amount would blow apart what remains of our economic defenses, weakening national security and supply-chain resilience, handing the Chinese Communist Party a powerful tool with which to subvert our market, undermining the basic logic of the president's own trade agenda and kneecapping our efforts at rebuilding domestic industry.

In recent weeks, Mr. Greer and Howard Lutnick, the commerce secretary, have both cast doubt on accepting Chinese investment. With Mr. Trump, though, it's always hard to know what's a firm no and what's a negotiating posture. If he continues on his current course, the president who did more than anyone else to call out the danger of the China relationship could become the one to embed that relationship, and that danger, into the foundation of the nation's economy.

CHINA HAS CHANGED a great deal in recent

decades. It has grown wealthier and become a global leader in technology. It has moved no closer, however, to market democracy.

Whereas American companies pursue their own goals with relatively little political interference or concern for the national interest, Chinese companies operate at the pleasure of the Chinese Communist Party and succeed when the party wants them to. If the party decides to dominate an industry, it can offer virtually unlimited financial support and access to a virtually unlimited labor pool, as it has done for companies engaged in rare-earth processing, at the beginning of the supply chain, as well as iPhone assembly, at the end of it, and

to learn about the company's innovations, then head off to share them with Chinese competitors. That's when China withdrew the subsidies. By 2025, Tesla was getting steamrolled in China as sales plummeted and its market share fell below 5 percent.

The United States cannot run that playbook in reverse. If those Chinese companies come to the United States, they will share no technology that the party does not want shared. To the contrary, there is ample reason to fear that they would use their new perch to steal American technology and gather sensitive data on American citizens, our economy and our infrastructure. Indeed, China's 2017 National Intelligence

expanded supply chains and eventually opened research and development centers as well. Today, those companies pursue profit by creating good jobs across the supply chain for hundreds of thousands of Americans and competing fairly against American carmakers for their share of the market. Honda is a leading sponsor of the U.S. Olympic team.

China is a different story. Thanks in no small measure to the U.S. technology it appropriated, China now has the world's best electric vehicles, and leads in nearly all other advanced industrial technologies as well. Allowed into the United States, Chinese carmakers will flood the market with cars that Ameri-

Republic. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent warned European leaders in April that choosing to team up with China rather than the United States "would be cutting your own throat."

But how does that threat work if Mr. Trump welcomes huge Chinese investment, treating it as an important achievement? If the United States adopts a strategy of just pursuing the best deal it can get with China, there is no chance that our trading partners will hold their own line.

Mr. Xi undoubtedly understands the stakes. His position on the matter is considered so central to Chinese ideology that it has been written into the curriculum of the People's Liberation



EVYLN HOOKSTEIN/REUTERS

many others in between. If a company's success is no longer deemed to be in the interest of the party, support vanishes, investigations start, executives land in jail. No rights stand above the obligation to serve the state.

As Robert O'Brien, the national security adviser in Mr. Trump's first term, put it, the idea that "individuals are merely a means to be used toward the achievement of the ends of the collective nation-state" remains "as fundamental to the Chinese Communist Party as the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are to us as Americans."

Welcoming that model to U.S. shores would be a catastrophe for the country. The U.S. auto industry is Exhibit A.

Consider what happened when China invited some of the crown jewels of American industry, like General Electric, Intel and Tesla, to set up shop across the Pacific. In exchange for that market access, the American companies willingly shared their technology with Chinese businesses, which, having gotten what they needed, began to push the Americans out.

China ran its playbook to perfection on Tesla, using a tariff on cars manufactured in other countries and subsidies for those produced domestically to lure Elon Musk to Shanghai in 2017. Tesla got generous subsidies, a sweetheart deal on premium industrial land and quick approval on all necessary infrastructure and regulatory matters — for just long enough to allow Chinese engineers

Law doesn't just grant China's intelligence services access to all private-sector business data; it affirmatively imposes the obligation that "any organization or citizen shall support, assist and cooperate with the state intelligence work."

In recent years, prominent Chinese businesses and Chinese citizens have been accused in countless incidents, such as stealing software source code from an American supplier, removing equipment from an American lab and even digging up proprietary seeds from a test field in Iowa. Now they'd be doing it with a hall pass from the American government. And American companies striving to maximize profit in a free market would be up against competitors bolstered by almost limitless subsidies from Beijing and with no obligation to turn a profit at all.

The problem isn't foreign investment per se. Mr. Trump has been right to pursue major investment commitments from Japan, South Korea and Taiwan as part of trade negotiations, just as President Ronald Reagan used the threat of an import quota to force Japanese automakers to invest in building their first U.S. factories in the early 1980s. Those countries are market democracies, and their economies run on the same general principles as ours.

So when their companies set up shop here, they operated the way you'd expect an American company to operate: They established assembly plants, then

can competitors cannot make and sell for anywhere near a comparable price.

"The existential risk to the U.S. auto industry isn't Chinese E.V.s alone. It's the combination of sustained government support, vertically integrated supply chains and speed," said Elizabeth Krear, the chief executive of the Center for Automotive Research. And once these companies devastate the U.S. auto industry, Beijing could decide to pull back leading-edge technologies, or move production back to China altogether, leaving the United States with fewer jobs, a weaker industrial base and no choice but to import.

Cars present the most obvious example, but the same logic will apply to any other industry opened to Chinese investment. Vulnerability to China's control over particular inputs like critical minerals has already proved a disaster for American security and resilience. Allowing China to develop vertically integrated control over entire supply chains on both sides of the Pacific would multiply that disaster many times over; it would be as damaging as the choice to welcome China into the World Trade Organization a generation ago.

Mr. Trump's broader reset of the global trading system would collapse, too. Since he took office last January, his negotiators have steadily increased pressure on trading partners to match U.S. tariff rates on China and reject investment controlled by the People's

Army. According to one textbook, "Xi Jinping has emphasized that our state's ideology and social system are fundamentally incompatible with the West. Xi has said, 'This determines that our struggle and contest with Western countries is irreconcilable, so it will inevitably be long, complicated and sometimes even very sharp.'"

The textbook calls for luring adversaries into exactly the lopsided deal that China is now proposing: "We must gain a grip on foreign government leaders and their business elites by encouraging our companies to invest in their local economies."

If Mr. Trump grants Mr. Xi that grip, he will lose his own hold on the era's key strategic conflict, entranced by China's siren song as foolishly as the "globalists" he made his name railing against, this time with consequences more irreversible.

The grand bargain that Mr. Trump wants, establishing a balanced economic relationship between the two nations, is not one that he can get, because the relationship is not one that can exist. The asymmetry of the two economic systems guarantees that any deal with China ends with the United States ripped off. Any accomplished deal maker also knows when to walk away.

OREN CASS is the chief economist at *American Compass*, a conservative economic think tank.

OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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Why the Chinese are so much less scared of A.I.

Jacob Dreyer

SHANGHAI Every evening as our children eat dinner, my phone notifies me that our 3-year-old's teacher has uploaded photos taken during the day at school. An artificial intelligence facial recognition feature puts a red square around his face, letting me know which photos to look at. It's kind of creepy, but kind of helpful, too.

In China, surveillance technology and A.I. surround our everyday life. It's built into the way we order food delivered to us from online apps; almost nobody I know here in Shanghai buys groceries at a grocery store, so we rely on A.I.-powered technologies to keep us fed. It's visible in the infrastructure we use to go to work and school, from trains using facial recognition in lieu of physical tickets to self-driving taxis. China's technological system offers an unparalleled convenience, and A.I. is such a huge part of it.

Many American leaders believe the United States cannot overcome its adversary China unless it beats the country in the A.I. race. Every new chip that President Trump approves for sale to China, every visit by the Nvidia chief executive, Jensen Huang, to Shanghai

The U.S. is chasing superintelligence as China is enriching daily life.

and every Chinese A.I. breakthrough strikes terror into the hearts of America's China hawks. Hardware, rare-earth metals, revamped power grids and human talent could all dictate which side

ends up creating the first superintelligence. The upcoming summit between Mr. Trump and China's leader, Xi Jinping, may lead to a few policy changes, but this belief is more fixed.

The reality is that China and the United States are racing in different directions, because the two countries conceptualize A.I. very differently. Americans want to create the most powerful technology humans have ever known. In the quest for superintelligence, the U.S. government is encouraging private firms to move full speed ahead, regulation be damned. Under the very tightest regulation, by contrast, the Chinese want to make A.I. more practical and embedded in society, more carefully selecting how it is deployed and used by the population. If the Chinese achieve their A.I. goals, they may take a lead in the larger geopolitical contest between the two nations.

Most Chinese policymakers don't believe A.I. superintelligence is arriving any time soon. Instead, the Chinese strategy is about advancing a government-directed strategy referred to as "A.I.+" that treats A.I. as if it were infrastructure. This includes government-coordinated plans, local subsidies and national computing-power programs that diffuse cheap, capable A.I. tools into every public service. Chinese people encounter A.I. as a natural part of their day-to-day lives. Sometimes it's visible and palpable, like the "smile to pay" terminals used in many shops. Sometimes it's invisible, like Hangzhou's City Brain, which uses A.I. to analyze massive amounts of data for urban manage-

ment needs like regulating traffic and environmental protection.

Unlike in the United States, where most people remain wary, A.I. seems to have had less of a backlash in China. The Chinese A.I.+ strategy is practical and comprehensible to the population in a way that the U.S. strategy simply is not, which may explain why the Chinese appear so much more optimistic about A.I. than Americans.

Chinese leaders are trying to maximize the country's resources. The country's chief resource is not oil, soybeans or pork bellies, but Chinese people. As of the 2020 census, nearly 40 percent of Chinese lived in rural areas, including 110 million children. Even more are living without access to quality education and health care. For Chinese leaders, the fact that so many Chinese people are structurally denied access to their best lives is a crisis even bigger than the low birthrate. How many potential geniuses are there among those 110 million rural children? What if the gross domestic product per capita of all of them could be quadrupled?

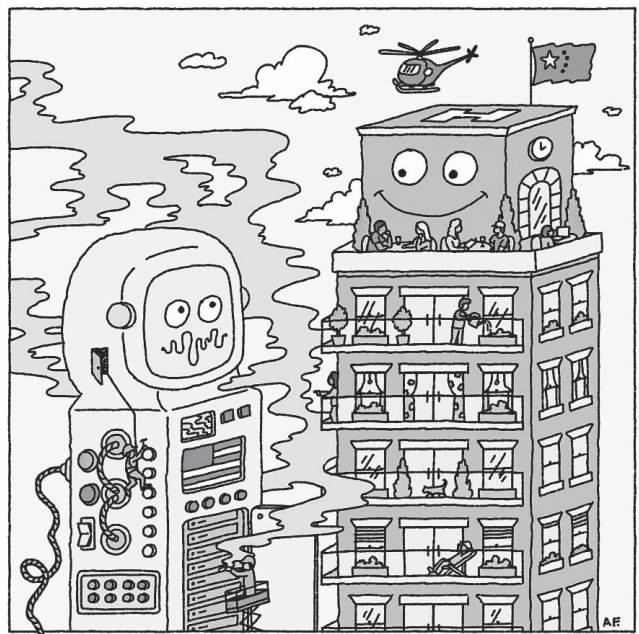
A.I. may be the answer. Are the teachers in rural schools overworked and undertrained? A.I. agents can help teach students with personalized instruction. Are the hospitals lacking in high-quality doctors? A.I. can diagnose diseases by analyzing patients' health data. A.I. could make it easier to hire and train the caregivers needed for China's growing elderly population, with robotic or digital companions supplementing the work of human nurses.

A.I. could also make it easier to predict and prepare for extreme weather events that could set back local economies. It could further optimize the transition to green energy. China has ports in which machines put containers on ships with barely any human supervision. But China's A.I.-as-infrastructure strategy is about more than just improving the country's domestic quality of life. It's also about exporting Chinese influence. Chinese A.I. is already integrated into the supply chains that dominate world trade.

And increasingly, rather than selling individual goods or services, China is selling a whole suite — energy, infrastructure, telecoms, transportation, surveillance — with A.I. systems to manage it all. As emerging markets from Southeast Asia to Latin America to Europe seek solutions to large problems like keeping power grids running, Chinese A.I. solutions may be what they end up buying. These models don't have to be as powerful as American ones; they just have to be powerful enough. In that way, as China exports those A.I. models, it will be exporting Chinese governance as well, with all of the safety, abundance, surveillance and embedded hierarchies that entails.

That's why the difference between these two countries in the A.I. race matters so much. America's spaceship might still be the first to take off. But back on planet Earth, the Chinese will be using A.I. to run their hospitals, schools, roads and more. Brazilians, Russians, Africans and even the Europeans might be doing so soon, too.

JACOB DREYER is a writer and editor who has lived in Shanghai for most of the past 18 years.



ALLISON FILICE

Don't believe the Pentagon's accounting

Justin Wolfers

The Defense Department says the conflict with Iran has cost taxpayers \$25 billion so far. But this tally significantly understates the true cost. By my calculations, the bill for a typical American household most likely runs to thousands — or even tens of thousands — of dollars.

Yes, that's a wide range; blame the economic fog of war. But what's clear is that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is trying to obscure just how expensive this war will be.

The Pentagon's stated number reflects only a narrow accounting of the tab that Operation Epic Fury is running up. It's the price of the more than 2,000 Tomahawk and Patriot missiles already fired, the warplanes already flown and in some cases lost, and the rest of the gear already chewed through. It does not measure the true cost of the war — including the human toll. Russell Vought, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, acknowledged as much when he told the House Budget Committee on April 15, "I don't have a ballpark for you."

I do. Since the start of the war, oil markets have been disrupted, and consumer confidence has cratered. The global economy is groaning, and military budgets are growing. The toll from this upheaval must be counted in lives disrupted, jobs lost, companies shut down (see: Spirit Airlines) and the income and output sacrificed. The less easily quantified costs — death, disability and mental health — could become much more dramatic should President Trump send troops into Iran, which still can't be ruled out.

Start with oil. While the White House is keen to tell you that oil markets will bounce back to normal, futures markets disagree. Futures prices for oil at the end of 2026, 2027 and 2028 are all still sitting well above where they were before the start of the war. Indeed, the November 2026 futures price of West Texas Intermediate hit a new high last week at \$86.12 a barrel. It could be that oil traders are pricing in near-term disruption. Or perhaps they see the current episode as raising the risk of future disruption. Either would be expensive.

The rise in geopolitical risk is costly. Recent research by the Fed economists Dario Caldara and Matteo Iacoviello suggests that heightened geopolitical risk leads to lower investment and employment and dramatically raises the chances of an economic disaster. Their measure of this risk has skyrocketed, and their estimates of the effect of risk on the economy suggest a cost of about \$200 billion, with a million fewer Americans working in a year.

The war has also pushed the Federal Reserve Bank into a corner. Back in February, many economists expected a couple of rate cuts this year; markets now think that's unlikely. If the Fed raises rates, it may succeed at beating back a war-fueled burst of inflation, but only by destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs and edging the economy closer to recession. A reasonable guessimate — informed by the Fed's own models — is that this will cost the economy about \$200 billion.

Wall Street is worried, despite the



BENNY DOLET

market touching new highs. Every time the president takes a more belligerent stance, stocks tank, suggesting that investors think this conflict will undermine the value of leading U.S. companies. My estimate — based on the movement of oil prices, along with the S&P 500 — is that stocks are about 5 percent lower than they otherwise would be, suggesting that the war has wiped about \$3 trillion off the value of these companies. (The overall market strength most likely reflects other macroeconomic forces, such as surging artificial intelligence stocks.)

Here's how much Americans will really have to pay for the Iran war.

Professional forecasters account for the full set of macroeconomic consequences, and economists at Goldman Sachs reckon that U.S. economic growth will be 0.5 percentage points lower as a result of the war. If it takes a couple of years for the economy to return to normal, that slower growth rate would mean around \$400 billion in lost income, and Goldman warns it could be nearly twice as bad.

Beyond the United States, both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have marked down their forecasts for the global economy, highlighting much larger effects in other countries. The world's poor and most vulnerable spend the largest share of their income on food and fuel, so this war will cause millions, perhaps tens of millions, to go hungry. These are not costs borne by the American people, but

perhaps they offend the American conscience.

If Iran succeeds in charging a toll on tankers that pass through the Strait of Hormuz, that will matter, but perhaps not for the obvious reason. A toll of \$1 per barrel isn't a big deal for us — it would raise the price of gas by only a few cents, and domestic oil producers that are spared this expense could increase their profit margins.

But if Iran can extract effectively a 1 or 2 percent tax on the one-fifth of the world's oil that passes through the Strait of Hormuz, that would yield a vital source of revenue that could be used to rebuild the nuclear program that Mr. Trump vowed to destroy.

This war has also revealed that Iran — at least for now — can harness its control over the strait to hold the global economy hostage. How many billions will the United States have to spend to avoid giving other countries this sort of leverage?

And that leads to the biggest bill of all: future military outlays. As Iran spends more on defense, other countries in the Middle East will follow suit, and as America's (former?) allies feel less secure under its security umbrella, they may also spend more. It follows that if the United States wants to maintain its military supremacy, more spending will be required.

How costly could this get? The White House originally signaled that it would need an extra \$200 billion to prosecute the Iran war. More recently, the administration made a defense budget request of \$1.5 trillion for fiscal 2027, a roughly 40 percent raise over this year. That's a huge \$600 billion increase, or roughly

\$4,000 per household.

That's just additional spending for 2027. Defense budgets rarely go down, especially today, with a lobbying army fighting to keep spigots open and Mr. Hegseth more than willing to listen. Put these numbers together, and the bill is staggering but not surprising.

Economists have long known that only a small fraction of the costs of war show up immediately in government spending accounts. What the Pentagon is doing is cash flow accounting — keeping track of the dollars flowing out of the Treasury. The economists Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz argue that we get very different — and much more realistic — estimates with accrual accounting, when you add the cost of each future obligation as you create it.

They estimated that the Iraq war cost the United States around \$3 trillion. A huge share of those expenses came after the conflict, including the expense of lifetime medical care and disability benefits for veterans, and the higher recruitment and retention costs that follow a bloody war — all compounded by a rising interest bill.

The Pentagon's lowball \$25 billion estimate gets a lot of attention, but it's more of a headline than a real number. The best any economist can do right now is get the order of magnitude right, and my math suggests the Iran war will cost hundreds of billions of dollars, and very possibly trillions.

War is hell. And hell comes with a hefty price tag.

JUSTIN WOLFERS is a professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan.

A message to Cuba's president

FERRER, FROM PAGE 1

Surely, you have seen the indicators: estimates that between 40 percent and 89 percent of Cubans live in poverty. A five-pound package of chicken can cost a retiree two or three times her monthly pension. You have electricity, but you know that blackouts are relentless and people go 10, 16, 22 hours, and sometimes days at a time, without it. Hospitals have trouble powering incubators or dialysis machines or even the old fans in their perpetually losing battle against the heat. Your health minister has said that 70 percent of basic medicines are not available. Outside, mounds of garbage run together, like ramparts rising around a crumbling fort.

For you, sir, continuity may be a political slogan. For many ordinary Cubans, it feels like a death sentence.

Yes, I know. The embargo. It makes everything so much harder. You can't trade with the United States, the country that geography suggests should be your natural trading partner. American tourists can't descend on your beaches. Worse than that, U.S. law punishes third countries, foreign companies, even vessels that do business with Cuba.

Your designation by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism makes international financial transactions nearly impossible. Lately, the sanctions have been crueler than ever.

Yet there are so many things the embargo cannot explain. It did not force the government to stall the economic reforms promised in 2011. Neither did it determine the shape of the disastrous currency restructuring that sent inflation into triple digits in January 2021. Nor is it a sufficient answer to the question of why you have sharply increased government investment in tourism, even though most hotel rooms go unused and

so much agricultural land sits idle.

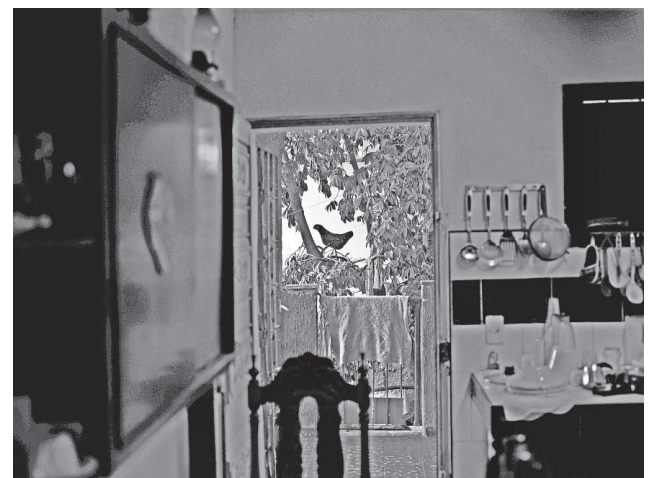
The embargo does not explain the surveillance and harassment to which you subject people like Alina López Hernández, a historian who holds silent vigils once a month at Liberty Park in the provincial capital Matanzas, often carrying a blank sign to symbolize the absence of basic freedoms. It does not explain why artists such as Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel Osorbo languish in prison for their art, their voice, their example.

You condemn the embargo all the time, blaming it for everything that is wrong in Cuba. But complaining cannot stand in for policy. Tell me, or better yet tell the Cuban people, what is your plan to deal with the fact that the embargo exists? What is your plan for trying to negotiate its easing?

Do not take this letter as a defense of U.S. policy toward Cuba, much less a call for military intervention, which I do not support. My father wrote letters to the presidents of the United States, as well as to Fidel. My equivalent would say something simple: Cuba is not yours for the taking.

That, at least, is something on which we can agree. In fact, when I hear President Trump say that he's going to take Cuba, that he can do, frankly, whatever he wants with it, I bristle. He reminds me of James Buchanan, who, as secretary of state under President James K. Polk, wrote in 1849: "Cuba is already ours. I feel it in my fingers' ends."

I can't help but think of José Martí's warnings about the United States, how it was ready to swoop down, take Cuba and then extend its reach into Latin America. My students read the Platt amendment, that humiliating law that gave the United States the right of intervention in Cuba. I tell them about



CRISTINA DE MEDELLA/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Juan Gualberto Gómez, the journalist and politician born to enslaved parents who warned that granting the United States this right was akin to giving it "the keys to our house."

When you say sovereignty is non-negotiable, Mr. President, the historian of Cuba in me understands. But I also know that you and your government have cheapened the word, so much so that many young people hear it only as more of your prattle.

You have brandished the word like a weapon to avoid grappling with more difficult issues. You have acted as if it were your singular achievement, when it has never been. You replaced dependence on the United States with dependence on the Soviet Union and, later, on Venezuela.

Without an external patron, Cuba is now imploding, and sovereignty begins to feel like an abstraction. You cannot eat sovereignty. And to survive, people must eat. To live, they must do more than that.

What will you do to help make that happen? What will you do to make things right by ordinary Cubans?

If you are unwilling to pursue real answers, if you provide nothing more than a ruinous continuity with no future, then as my father would have said, the hour has come.

It is time at the very least for a true national dialogue.

ADA FERRER is a professor of history at Princeton University and the author of "Cuba: An American History."

OPINION

All the Good From Goodwill



INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

Rockville, Md. “People come out of prison with no money, no job, not always into a good community. Our re-entry program has a 5% recidivism rate—astoundingly low,” Steven Preston, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries, told me about how they help former prisoners.

Goodwill Industries? Like me, you probably think of Goodwill as the place you drop off old clothes and furniture. I’ve never stuck around long enough to see our donations in action. I had no idea.

Mr. Preston sums up Goodwill’s original mission: “to help every individual develop to their fullest potential.” It was founded in 1902 after a Methodist minister and his wife were sent on a mission to the poorest part of Boston. “They started knocking on people’s doors to ask for clothing so they could give clothing to the poor,” Mr. Preston says. “And then they had this epiphany: ‘Wait, I could clean this clothing, repair it, sell it, turn it into an enterprise and give these people jobs so that they weren’t taking handouts. I could help them develop job skills.’”

Goodwill now has more than 3,400 stores and nearly 140,000 employees. Mr. Preston, a former housing and urban development secretary,

notes: “A significant percentage of the people that we employ have either a disability or some other kind of challenge.” The organization serves two million people a year. Mr. Preston estimates that “83% of the population is within 10 miles of a Goodwill.”

Since its founding, Mr. Preston says, “we’ve pivoted away from just being hands and feet for people in that place of need, to helping people with self-sufficiency and economic mobility to take care of themselves.”

So the mission hasn’t really changed? “Not for 120 years. But the services have expanded,” Mr. Preston says. “Stores threw off nearly a quarter of a billion dollars of profits to fund job centers”—about 650 of them, which are separate facilities. Another \$830 million comes from corporate support, government programs and philanthropy. One of its prison re-entry programs receives funds from the Labor Department.

Sadly, the postprison recidivism rate can be 40% or more. Goodwill’s 5% is partially due to self-selection, but its success comes from being hands-on. A service coordinator provides support—and accountability. “It’s living with you in the day in and day out,” Mr. Preston says. “You might hear, ‘My career navigator was Jenny, and let me tell you she was in my life,’ and those are absolutely the unsung heroes.”

“A lot of people we serve are coming out of prison, have addiction, maybe even

a history of homelessness.” Roughly 85% in Goodwill’s training programs have a high-school diploma or less. “So you can imagine that getting a credential in digital skills or trade skills, or just learning how to show up for work every day, deal with conflict, how to be an effective person in the workplace, is important.”

The organization is more than a place to donate your old clothes and furniture.

Support is highly localized, which makes it effective. There are 155 local Goodwill organizations across the U.S. and Canada, independent nonprofits. Washington might need child-care centers while Texas needs language skills.

Still, there is value to a national organization. “We’re seeing probably the most rapid transformation of the labor market in human history. How do we build out the capability? We’re rolling out programs to train people for clean tech, trade skills, EV charging station maintenance, solar panel installation and maintenance and heat pump maintenance. We partner with Accenture and companies like General Motors and Lowe’s.” Everyone talks about job training. Goodwill is doing it.

Add healthcare and hospitality. And digital skills. “Go to

Goodwill.org, and you can sign up for the Google AI Essentials class. Or AI Prompting Essentials. You get a certificate and could show that to an employer,” Mr. Preston says.

Goodwill also has a youth program, for career advice and mentorships. “It’s for 16- to 18-year-olds that have mostly had justice involvement or are deemed high-risk. We used to call them at-risk youth. Now we call them opportunity youth.” Almost a preventive version of re-entry.

I asked if Goodwill was capital constrained. Mr. Preston nodded. “If somebody gave me \$100 million tomorrow, I could deploy that in three months. That wouldn’t only give us the resources to serve more people, but to build a much more coherent, consistent system across more geographies.”

When I first met Mr. Preston at a conference, National Football League player Damar Hamlin joined the conversation, saying: “Growing up, Goodwill wasn’t just a place for help, it was a lifeline. My mom would always send me there when things were tough. Thank you.” Mr. Preston started to respond, and Mr. Hamlin interrupted: “Can we just hug it out?” Very emotional.

Mr. Preston sums it up, “The idea of seeing the dignity and potential of every human being, and helping them realize that for a better future, has always been what we do.” So should we all.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By John Steele Gordon

The Power To Prosper

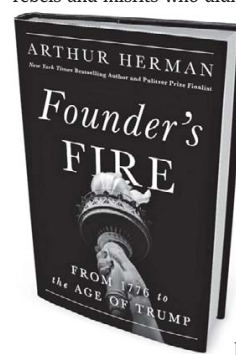
Founder’s Fire

By Arthur Herman

Center Street, 352 pages, \$32

This year is dedicated to the 250th anniversary of the birth of the United States. Most historians are concentrating on the birth itself, when 13 disparate colonies along the east coast of North America declared their intention to separate from Great Britain. That, to be sure, is quite a story, one without previous precedent. So is the story of the Constitutional Convention a few years later, which produced what is now the world’s oldest constitution of a complex sovereign state, amended only 27 times.

In “Founder’s Fire” Arthur Herman—whose books of popular history include “How the Scots Invented the Modern World” (2001)—gives these stories their due. But Mr. Herman sees a bigger picture here. He argues, in this entertaining and enlightening book, that the spirit—the fire—that drove the Founding Fathers to risk everything to establish something very new has animated this country ever since. As he points out, the first English settlers in America “were rebels and misfits who didn’t fit in their own time and place,



and who traveled across an ocean to create their own ‘city upon a hill.’”

This propensity to take risks, Mr. Herman argues, has been passed down from generation to generation. In the early 19th century, this spirit came to be called the Young America movement. “The spirit of Young America,” said Rufus Choate, a senator from Massachusetts from 1841 to 1845, “will not be satisfied with what has been attained, but plumes its young wings for a higher and more glorious flight.”

While Young America emphasized internal improvements and westward expansion, the spirit carried over into the “American system” of manufacturing. Both the Industrial Revolution and the steam engine that powered it were invented in England. But it was the fully realized concept of interchangeable parts and the mechanization of production that made possible the huge increases in industrial production in America during the decades after the Civil War.

By 1900, the American economy was the largest in the world, a position it has held since. That explosion could not have happened without men willing to risk everything to doggedly pursue an idea to ultimate success. Henry Ford’s first two automobile-manufacturing companies founded before the Ford Motor Co. opened in 1903, changing the world with Ford’s dream of an automobile that the average American family could afford. That dream made Ford one of the world’s richest men.

The vast fortunes created by men such as Ford have long disquieted many intellectuals and journalists. As early as 1859 the New York Times associated Cornelius Vanderbilt with the idea of the medieval robber baron, thus tarnishing the image of the country’s biggest shipowner. But, as Mr. Herman points out, Vanderbilt’s success was due to cutting fares, not raising them. And in an age when many steamboats, cheaply built and poorly maintained, did, in the words of one contemporary, “a wholesale business in human slaughter.” Vanderbilt never lost a ship to fire, explosion or shipwreck. Mr. Herman subscribes fully to the words of James J. Hill—whose Great Northern Railway, which did so much to settle and develop the upper Midwest, was built without federal subsidies: “It really seems hard, when we look at what we have done . . . that we should be compelled to fight political adventurers who have never done anything but pose and draw a salary.”

The same animating spirit that drove the Founding Fathers led Cornelius Vanderbilt and Henry Ford to create business empires.

“Founder’s Fire” is no uncritical paean to the greatness of this country. Mr. Herman spends considerable space dealing with two men he calls “refounders”: Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. After the nation tore itself apart over the issue of slavery, Lincoln saved the Union and freed the slaves. And Lincoln recalled to us, in the peerless prose of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, what the Founding Fathers had given us and which still lies at the heart of this nation: freedom. But until King, in the 1950s and ’60s, led the nation to confront the evil legacy of Jim Crow, that freedom was only for some.

Earlier, in “Freedom’s Forge” (2012), Mr. Herman told the story of how, during World War II, the United States drafted the entire American economy to become, in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s words, the arsenal of democracy. The author briefly recounts that history here: Instead of having the government run the U.S. economy, which failed disastrously in World War I, Roosevelt appointed William Knudsen, the president of General Motors, to, in effect, be the chief executive of the American economy. The government would be kept out of economic affairs, other than to provide the needed capital. The results were spectacular. During World War II, the U.S. economy nearly doubled in size as a war economy was built on top of the civilian one.

After the war, however, when the U.S. had about half the world’s gross domestic product, the fire that had driven so many innovators seemed to wane as managers with MBAs took over corporate America. Mr. Herman’s prime example is Robert McNamara, the president of Ford who became the secretary of defense. McNamara’s quantitative cost-benefit-analysis approach to business had righted Ford’s postwar problems but proved disastrous when he tried to apply it to the Vietnam War.

Two new technologies have reignited the “founder’s fire”: the microprocessor and the internet. A new generation of innovators, such as Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Gordon Moore, have already improved the everyday lives of millions while making for themselves fortunes that have put those of the Gilded Age to shame. Meanwhile Elon Musk has cut the cost of space travel by at least an order of magnitude with the reusable rocket.

Mr. Herman knows how to tell a story, and in “Founder’s Fire” he tells this one well, making a strong argument for the ultimate source of American greatness: the freedom to pursue one’s dreams.

Mr. Gordon is the author of “An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power.”

Why Argentina’s Comeback Has Stalled



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Kirchner (2007-15) and members of her family.

It’s a notable decision considering the power once held by Mrs. Kirchner and her late husband, Néstor, who was president from 2003-07. Opponents of *kirchnerismo* are celebrating. But does it mean Argentina is on the way to becoming a normal country? Not quite.

The credibility of Argentina’s institutions has been greatly eroded in the past century. Earning it back could take generations. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the persistent double-digit inflation that is undermining President Javier Milei’s reformist agenda and feeding political uncertainty.

Mrs. Kirchner is serving a six-year sentence under house arrest for fraud in the administration of public-works contracts in the province of Santa Cruz. Though banned from public office, she still heads the largest faction of the Peronist party from inside her Buenos Aires apartment.

The Kirchner asset forfeiture feels like justice finally being served. But she can appeal, and the country’s judi-

ciary is notoriously political. When the Kirchners were popular, their shady dealings went uncontested. Now the public mood has shifted. With evidence piled high in the press of the family’s illicit enrichment and the nation suffering the fallout from her brand of “caviar” socialism, the financial penalty is an easy call.

The court’s ruling says very little about the reliability of a judiciary with a long tradition of allowing the state to abuse its power.

The central bank carries similar baggage. The country’s monetary history weighs heavily on the present, regardless of Mr. Milei’s best intentions. As economist Nicolás Cachanosky noted recently on his Substack, Economic Order, attempts at Argentine stabilization aren’t new. They’ve been tried “under military governments and democratic ones, under heterodox programs and orthodox ones, under economists who believed in markets and politicians who did not. Each episode produced a period of relative calm. Each period eventually ended the same way.”

There’s something to learn here and Mr. Cachanosky starts by asking: “What if the obstacle is not the policy, but the institutional environment in which any policy must operate?” That would explain peso instability. “A country where formal rules are routinely bent to accommodate political necessity cannot manufacture monetary credibility through institutional design alone,” Mr. Cachanosky argues. “The cred-

ibility of any peso-based regime is ultimately only as strong as Argentina’s political institutions, and the country’s reality offers little comfort on that front.”

This isn’t to diminish Mr. Milei’s accomplishments. In December 2023, he inherited a country teetering on crisis. He slashed spending and in 2025

Milei’s best strategy to rescue the cause would be to dump the peso and dollarize.

the economy grew 4.4%. The federal government says it now runs a primary fiscal surplus.

Tax and labor reforms and a deregulation blitz have gone a long way to liberate entrepreneurs. Mr. Milei ended rent control, immediately boosting the supply of housing in Buenos Aires. The country is in the midst of an unprecedented oil and gas and mining boom. Argentina has become a net exporter of petroleum. Last week Fitch Ratings upgraded its foreign and local-currency debt to B-minus from CCC-plus.

Still, inflation is expected to finish the year around 30%. The economy is expected to grow 3.5% this year, mediocre for a developing economy. While agriculture and resource extraction are strong, retail and manufacturing have been sluggish. Those who have been left out are losing patience. Argentina’s country risk

Race and the Virginia Gerrymander

By James Taranto

Friday saw two major skirmishes in the war over congressional redistricting. Gov. Bill Lee signed a law redrawing Tennessee’s map to carve up the state’s only Democratic district and produce an expected 9-0 Republican majority. Hours earlier, the Virginia Supreme Court struck down a map designed to expand the Democrats’ edge from 6-5 to 10-1.

Tennessee’s soon-to-be-former Ninth Congressional District is more than 60% black, although its representative since 2007, Steve Cohen, is a person of pallor. Rep. Dan Goldman (D., N.Y.) tweeted that the new map is vulnerable to legal challenge: “The Supreme Court just ruled that a racial gerrymandering claim must include intentional discrimination. Tennessee Republicans have immediately responded by stopping early voting in order to split apart

the only majority black district in the state. What more do you need to show intentional discrimination? This is Jim Crow 2.0 and cannot stand.”

Early voting in the Tennessee primary doesn’t actually begin until July 17, and Tennessee Republicans have a formidable defense against the discrimination charge: cynical self-interest. As state Sen.

Both parties disperse black voters when it suits their interests.

John Stevens put it, “This bill represents Tennessee’s attempt to maximize our partisan advantage.” The dispersion of black voters is merely incidental to a partisan gerrymander, so it is nonjusticiable under federal law.

The Virginia ruling didn’t directly involve race either. The commonwealth’s high

court held that the referendum by which the Democrat-controlled General Assembly enacted the new map violated procedures established by the Virginia Constitution. State House Speaker Don Scott intends to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the justices will almost certainly brush his petition aside for want of a federal question.

Democratic lawmakers in Virginia, like their Republican counterparts in Tennessee, sought partisan advantage in part by spreading black voters around. “The proposal maintains one distinctly Black-influence district while dispersing Black voters among other districts,” Phillip Thompson, executive director of the National Black Nonpartisan Redistricting Organization, wrote for the Virginia Mercury in March. He defines a “black-influence district” as one that is at least 40% black, and the new map would have brought the Fourth District just below that threshold.

What’s more, “Richmond, Petersburg, Southside, and other predominantly Black communities were not combined into a district specifically designed to increase Black representation or create a viable opportunity for a third congressional seat for a Black candidate,” Mr. Thompson wrote. “Instead, Black voters from these areas were dispersed across multiple districts, . . . which may solidify Democratic support but are not necessarily structured to enhance Black political influence.”

As a crassly partisan matter, Friday was a good day for Republicans, who netted five House seats. But Mr. Goldman can find consolation in the Virginia ruling, which turned back a partisan gerrymander that came at the expense of “black opportunity”—assuming, of course, that his concern for the latter is sincere.

Mr. Taranto is the Journal’s editorial features editor.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Stakes of the Trump-Xi Summit

President Trump visits Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Thursday, and the pre-meeting U.S. spin is a search for “stability.” It’s a nice idea, as long as Mr. Trump doesn’t think personal rapport can overcome Mr. Xi’s anti-American purposes.

The agenda ranges from trade to technology to Iran. On trade, the best outcome may be ratifying the status quo—a truce on tariffs with a promise from Beijing not to hold the world’s rare-earths supply hostage again, as it did after Mr. Trump’s tariff threats last year.

Mr. Xi’s weak economy is an incentive for him to cooperate, and he’ll hope to placate Mr. Trump with promises of buying more farm goods, aircraft, and more. But Mr. Xi has made that promise before, and U.S. farmers have never regained their lost market share in China.

Mr. Xi’s rare-earths ransom offer may be more U.S. advanced chips exports to China. Mr. Xi views artificial intelligence as a decisive theater in Beijing’s competition with the U.S., and he is trailing, though not by much. The Administration wants talks with Beijing about AI guardrails, and by all means keep the phone lines open.

But don’t expect much from AI arms control, and the best deterrent is U.S. dominance on models and computing power. Beijing will be happy to make pronouncements about responsible stewardship—and then pursue its own interests with little regard for norms or laws.

Beijing is engaging in “industrial-scale” theft of America’s AI models, the Trump Administration warned this year. And don’t forget the Justice Department indictment this year of a technology executive and associates allegedly running a sophisticated operation to divert high-end chips to China.

The hullabaloo over the power of the latest U.S. frontier AI models also reinforces the case for withholding AI building blocks from an adversary. Congress is warning Mr. Trump that his political runway is short by moving on bills to tighten advanced chips exports.

The Venus fly trap Mr. Xi is setting for Mr. Trump is on Taiwan. Mr. Xi wants veto power over U.S. arms sales to the island, and he is pressing for the U.S. formally to “oppose” Taiwanese independence, as opposed to the current posture of “not supporting” it. Mr. Xi will argue the tweak is of no great consequence to Americans and stroke Mr. Trump’s ego that he can

bring peace to one more troubled region.

Yet that change would disrupt decades of U.S. policy that, for all its delicate diplomatic wording, has held the peace. Taiwan is not the aggressor in the Taiwan Strait, a Xi fiction that “opposing independence” would indulge.

Mr. Trump may not care about Taiwan’s freedom or its example that a prosperous Chinese democracy is possible. But the President doesn’t want a crisis on his watch, which would be an economic and geopolitical catastrophe. Mr. Xi will be looking to see if Mr. Trump suggests he won’t defend Taiwan in the clutch.

Mr. Trump’s diplomacy is above all personal, and no one can predict what he’ll do in the room. Japan and others in the region are watching with anxiety—a reminder that U.S. support for Taipei is an interest that informs America’s alliances around the world. One mistake would be not stopping in Tokyo in advance of Beijing as a signal of solidarity with Japan.

Mr. Trump has said he’ll bring up the case of political prisoner Jimmy Lai. But Mr. Xi won’t move to release the 78-year-old publisher, who was convicted of bogus charges in Hong Kong, unless he believes Mr. Trump’s request is more than a token gesture.

The U.S. wants China’s help on Iran, and it’d be an improvement if China at least stopped actively helping the enemy. Retired Navy Rear Adm. Mark Montgomery suggested last week that Mr. Trump should ask Mr. Xi directly if he’s helping Iran with intelligence.

* * *

The larger context for this summit is that the Chinese Communist Party continues to be the main financier and industrial base for the world’s bad actors, from Russia to Iran and North Korea. The first Trump Administration understood China as a strategic adversary—military, economic and ideological.

The second Trump Administration is searching for detente, and Mr. Trump is the chief dove. A detente has some merit if America spends the interlude diversifying its rare-earth supply chain and passing a \$1.5 trillion defense budget to rearm.

Mr. Xi has studied the President and thinks he has trump cards on minerals and pharmaceuticals. Behind the talk of goodwill in Beijing, this reality hasn’t changed: Mr. Xi is playing a long game to overthrow the U.S. as the world’s leading power.

Is Ukraine Turning the Russian Tide?

Vladimir Putin held a subdued Victory Day parade on Saturday in Moscow, with fewer missiles and other weapons that are an annual boast about Russia’s military power. If it’s true that Mr. Putin feared a long-range Ukrainian drone strike, it’s one more sign that the tide may be turning against Russia after four long years of defeat.

“Russian forces are performing worse on the battlefield in Spring 2026 than when the Kremlin emphasized its demand for Donetsk Oblast in 2025,” the Institute for the Study of War reported on Friday. ISW, which offers the best independent analysis of the war, says Ukraine appears to have regained more territory from Russia’s occupiers than it lost in April.

Russia has been making grinding progress in Ukraine’s east for months, albeit at great cost in casualties. So it’s significant if Ukrainian forces are reversing the trend. Ukraine’s military says Russia suffered more than 35,000 casualties in April, dead or wounded, which if

even close to true is also a growing toll.

ISW says Ukraine is increasingly able to hit targets deep in Russia with drones and missiles. These include oil production facilities, arms caches and other military assets, as our Jillian Melchior reported Friday. This explains Mr. Putin’s lack of confidence in exposing Russian assets in Red Square.

The killing continues, though Mr. Putin said this weekend the war “is coming to an end.” We’ll believe that when we see him end his terror bombing of Ukraine’s cities and stop demanding that Kyiv give up more territory that Russia hasn’t been able to seize by force.

All of this means this is a moment to increase support for Ukraine so it can keep the pressure on Russia. Only the prospect of greater losses and potential defeat will cause Mr. Putin to abandon his imperial ambitions in Ukraine—and in Western Europe. That’s the best way to end the war on honorable terms that secure peace and freedom for Ukraine.

An Ethanol Extortion Play

House Republicans got their act together last month to pass a five-year farm bill, though the ethanol lobby exacted a high price. Lo, the House is set to hold a stand-alone vote this week on legislation that would benefit the ethanol industry at the expense of consumers and small refiners. Consider it political compensation for the damage caused by President Trump’s tariff blitz.

The \$390 billion farm bill reauthorizes existing farm programs and \$66 billion in subsidies that Republicans stuffed into last year’s tax bill. That payoff was intended to alleviate pain for farmers who have lost access to foreign markets, especially China, as a result of retaliation in response to Mr. Trump’s tariffs. But the ethanol lobby and its friends in Congress weren’t satisfied.

They threatened to hold the farm bill hostage to obtain a long-sought change in law that would also permit the year-round sale of E15 fuel (which consists of 15% ethanol and 85% gasoline) and limit waivers from the Renewable Fuel Standard—aka ethanol mandate—for small refiners.

Most gasoline contains 10% ethanol as an octane booster. But the Renewable Fuel Standard requires ethanol and other so-called advanced biofuels to be blended in increasing quantities into the nation’s fuel supply. The Trump Environmental Protection Agency recently raised these quotas, which it estimated would entail \$20 billion a year in compliance costs. These costs are passed along to drivers at the pump.

One problem is that ethanol blends greater than 10% can increase smog during warm weather, which is why the EPA restricts its sale

during the summer. Higher ethanol blends can also corrode gasoline pumps, storage tanks and other infrastructure unless retailers and distributors make upgrades. Some have, but most haven’t.

Refineries thus perennially run into the so-called “blend wall,” which is the amount of ethanol that can realistically be blended into the fuel supply.

The blend wall has been getting harder to scale as fuel economy improves. Although Americans are buying less gasoline, refiners have to blend more biofuels into products.

To comply with EPA’s increasing quotas, refiners have to buy credits from ethanol producers or large refiners that also blend or manufacture biofuels and have excess credits. Compliance with the mandates is especially burdensome for small refiners, which is why the EPA has often given them waivers.

But such exemptions have infuriated the ethanol lobby and created tensions within the refining industry. That’s because the EPA usually forces large refineries to blend more ethanol to make up for the exemptions. Large refiners are backing legislation that would severely restrict exemptions for small refiners and allow the year-round sale of E15.

There may be a compromise in permitting year-round E15 in areas with low smog, in return for repealing the ethanol mandate. But the ethanol lobby wants to have it every which way, and it’s taking advantage of election-year politics and sympathy in Congress for soybean and corn farmers hurt by tariffs.

Socking small refiners—many of which are in the Midwest and Rust Belt—won’t relieve the tariff pain. It merely redistributes it to other businesses.

The U.S. wants ‘stability’ but China has larger ambitions.

FDA Policies: Rigorous Science or Roadblocks?

Regarding your editorial “Another Marty Makary Mistake” (May 6): We believe the Food and Drug Administration should require rigorous and transparent clinical trials to ensure patients benefit from medicines that are safe and effective. Putting a drug on the market without evidence of efficacy or an understanding of its side effects can divert patients away from beneficial treatment or cause serious harm.

At the same time, we believe the FDA should take a more flexible approach when authorizing treatments for rare diseases, especially when that flexibility is paired with strong post-market evidence collection to confirm a treatment works. If a treatment ultimately turns out to be ineffective, it should be withdrawn from the market.

Contrary to the editorial’s assertion, our focus on evidence is not “code . . . for restricting access to treatments.” It is a commitment to support policies that improve outcomes and lower costs for patients. Unlike many participants in this space, Arnold Ventures has no financial interest in which products succeed or fail.

JOHN ARNOLD
Arnold Ventures
Houston

For rare disease therapies, the FDA’s primary gatekeeping role should be ensuring safety, not efficacy. Safety demands a lower evidentiary bar than

efficacy, particularly in smaller populations. This would allow physicians, in consultation with patients, to weigh uncertain benefits against known risks. Allowing informed patients to try promising therapies under careful monitoring, and reporting outcomes, can also build databases that reveal which treatments work. The greater danger isn’t premature approval of therapies that might not work, but excessive caution that denies patients a chance at life-saving treatments.

FRANCOIS MELESE
Monterey, Calif.

Thank you for mentioning the FDA’s efforts to impede the development of UniQure’s drug for the treatment of Huntington’s disease. The results from UniQure’s trials were so positive they sent shockwaves of joy through the Huntington’s disease community. The FDA’s lack of enthusiasm about this drug indicates that agency officials haven’t heard the cries of families who are desperate for something to combat the disease’s progression. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. says officials are “restoring gold-standard science.” Apparently that’s code for putting up roadblocks to breakthrough therapies that could potentially alleviate suffering and provide hope to those facing heartbreak.

MARC FREEDMAN
Falls Church, Va.

Restore Medical Standards for Abortion Drugs

In “Mifepristone as a Tool of Coercion” (op-ed, May 5), Sierra McClain reports on women allegedly coerced into taking chemical abortion drugs as a result of the Biden administration removing the longstanding requirement that women see a medical professional in person to be prescribed and receive the chemical abortion drug mifepristone.

The safeguard of an in-person appointment protects against coercion. It’s also necessary to rule out ectopic pregnancy (in which chemical abortion could be deadly to the mother) and to determine the age of the unborn child (which is important because chemical abortion too far into pregnancy poses serious risks to the mother).

Our research at the Ethics and Public Policy Center bears this out. We conducted the largest known study of the health effects of mifepristone-induced abortions. Drawing on an all-payer insurance claims database that includes more than 850,000 prescribed abortions from 2017 to 2023, we discovered that, within 45 days following the prescription,

nearly 11% of women experience sepsis, infection, hemorrhaging or another serious adverse event (as classified by a team of doctors following a Food and Drug Administration definition and National Institutes of Health methodology). That real-world rate of serious adverse events is at least 22 times higher than the less than 0.5% in clinical trials reported on the drug label.

We also found that the rate of serious adverse events was significantly higher after the FDA removed the in-person dispensing requirement. The disparity was stark for ectopic pregnancy: The data indicate that the inappropriate provision of mifepristone to a woman with an ectopic pregnancy was between three and six times more likely with remote dispensing.

President Trump can correct the Biden administration’s mistake. Restoring the in-person safeguard would protect women’s health and ensure they aren’t being coerced.

RYAN T. ANDERSON AND JAMIE BRYAN HALL
Ethics and Public Policy Center
Washington

Venezuela Is No Better Off Under Rodríguez

President Trump’s endorsement of Delcy Rodríguez and other associates of the corrupt and brutal regime of Nicolás Maduro may be part of a larger strategic game to bar China’s access to Venezuelan oil, but the resumption of commercial air service to Caracas is hardly worth celebrating (“U.S. Commercial Jet Arrives in Caracas,” World News, May 1). It leaves ordinary Venezuelans—the millions who have fled the deprivations of the dictatorship and those stuck at home—no better off.

Venezuela’s electoral commission, made up of *Chavistas*, hasn’t been replaced. No date has been set for elections, and popular opposition leaders remain in hiding. Over 400 political prisoners remain behind bars, prey to Cuban-style torture. In the words of an exiled friend of mine, *nada ha cambiado* (nothing has changed).

The Upside of Shutting Down

Roland Fryer is right that the wave of college closures is no scandal (“More Colleges Are Closing. It’s About Time,” op-ed, May 7). It’s an opportunity. These failed institutions could be reborn and their assets used to create the educational environments today’s students need.

CHARLES MITCHELL
Lewisburg, Pa.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“You want a cheeseburger, no bun. No cheese, no mayo, no meat. Produce on the side. So you want a small salad?”

OPINION

The U.S. Military Needs Another Revolution

By Rahm Emanuel

The American military's global pre-eminence over the past quarter-century can be traced to two seminal failures—the broken morale and discipline revealed after Vietnam, and the lack of service-level integration evident during the invasion of Grenada.

The first required the Pentagon to acknowledge the military's moribund state and rebuild. The second made clear that the Pentagon's command structure needed an overhaul, as mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986. The wars in Ukraine and Iran show that again we need to revolutionize our approach to armed conflict. And there's no time to waste.

New forms of war have developed since 1986, when Congress enacted the last major reform.

The issue isn't reawakening the "warrior spirit" in our soldiers, as President Trump likes to claim. Nor is it simply that the military needs more resources, though that may be true in many circumstances. Rather, it is whether we are comprehensively prepared for future battlefields. It has been the nation's policy for decades to ensure the military is able to fight two wars simultaneously. But given how the world is evolving technologically and geopolitically, we must be able to fight two types of wars—conventional and unconventional—at the same time and in the same theater. To that end, we need a second Goldwater-Nichols revolution.

Airplanes, ships and tanks will remain important to deter adversaries and win conflicts. But amid

the president's talk of a "golden fleet" of "Trump-class" battleships, we are losing our broader edge. Neither Ukraine nor Iran has a navy—we sank Iran's earlier this year—yet both control vital bodies of water. That tells us something important. The Trump administration still gauges success on the battlefield by conventional methods—for instance, how many Iranian warships are at the bottom of the sea. The Iranians, by contrast, judge progress by determining whether they control international shipping lanes. We went to war in large part to neutralize Iran's nuclear weapons program, and the country's leaders realized they had another nuclear option: the Strait of Hormuz. Their unconventional measure carries significant weight—that's where we need to win.

The Goldwater-Nichols watershed integrated the armed services so they could act in concert, as they did during the Gulf War. Such integration was on display recently in the mission that extracted Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela without a single U.S. fatality. That command structure has elevated some of America's most talented sons and daughters into positions of authority. When I worked with Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George and Adm. Lisa Franchetti as the ambassador to Japan, I saw why so many people around the world believe America's military is diplomatically sophisticated, strategically wise and operationally unmatched.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration is discarding that talent. The president pushed out Gen. George and Adm. Franchetti, among other top officials, preferring to promote loyal officers he believes share his goal of making the military more "warrior" and less "woke." We need to restore merit-based norms—and to develop ways



U.S. troops during joint military drills in the Philippines.

to draw the legions of young men playing videogames in their parents' basements to help guard America against our adversaries.

But this is about much more than personnel. Our procurement process has institutionalized failure as a business model. Pentagon suppliers operate on time frames few institutions would tolerate—almost no major system has been deployed on time or on budget. As ambassador, I was outraged that Raytheon and Lockheed Martin had put nearly \$19 billion into stock buybacks in 2023 as against little more than \$4 billion on capital expenditures. In January 2025, I proposed that the Big Five military contractors be precluded from further share repurchases until they began to deliver weapons on time and on budget. Further, I proposed that 30% to 40% of the federal dollars directed to emergent technologies

and new asymmetrical weapons systems be set aside for bidders other than the Big Five contractors. That's how you stand up new companies and new technologies with speed.

The Pentagon shouldn't have needed to venture outside typical procedures to reverse-engineer an equivalent of Iran's low-cost Shahed drone. But because the incumbent system is so slow—what an unconventional team did in weeks would have taken the Big Five years—that's what U.S. Central Command was compelled to do. Our military is spending millions of dollars each time it is threatened by one of Iran's \$35,000 drones. That is asymmetric warfare—and we need systems that put us ahead of our adversaries in every realm: AI, cyber, space, underwater drones and more.

Unfortunately, the Red Bull-in-

fused bravado that has become Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's calling card is a distraction from this mission. When Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky came to the White House in February 2025, Mr. Trump admonished him: "You don't have the cards right now." Rather than ask Ukraine to share its drone technology, he demanded a mining deal—for minerals that may not even exist. The results are obvious. Ukraine's drones have been crucial to stymieing Moscow's advances, while helping Kyiv attack deep into Russian territory. We should have the best and cheapest drones, and instead we're racing to catch up.

Iran's strangling of the Strait of Hormuz and Ukraine's defense against four years of Russian aggression suggest that despite the president's bluster and Mr. Hegseth's politicization of the brass, the size of your battleship isn't the only thing that matters.

To remain the world's pre-eminent military power and project deterrence in several theaters at the same time, the Pentagon will need integrated command structures, different strategic plans, modernized procurement processes, and training programs for the battlefield of tomorrow. While more money is required to develop the ability to fight two different types of wars simultaneously, we also need leadership and vision. The challenge will require reforms unlike any we've undergone since the Reagan administration. Beyond needing a way out of the messes Mr. Trump has gotten us into, America today needs a second Goldwater-Nichols moment.

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).

The California Democratic Party's Unappetizing Buffet

LIFE SCIENCE
By Allysia Finley

ing as a picked-over buffet of reheated leftovers?

Consider Xavier Becerra, who served as Joe Biden's health and human services secretary and has recently surged in the gubernatorial polls. A California Democratic Party poll last week showed Mr. Becerra tied for the lead with Republican Steve Hilton, each at 18%, in the June 2 jungle primary.

How has this undistinguished career politician become the Democratic front-runner? He checks off most of his party's boxes. Minority. Anti-Trump. Most important, a dutiful party soldier. If elected, he can be counted on to follow orders from labor groups, the climate lobby, trial lawyers and other left-wing interests.

He spent 24 years representing a heavily Democratic Los Angeles

California boasts the country's biggest harvest of up-and-coming Democratic politicians. So what does it say that even Democrats perceive their choices of candidates for governor and Los Angeles mayor as appetizing as a picked-over buffet of reheated leftovers?

House district. In 2017 Gov. Jerry Brown appointed him to replace Kamala Harris as attorney general after her election to the Senate. He filed some 100 lawsuits against the first Trump administration, but few succeeded.

In 2021 he got another unearned promotion. With the Covid pandemic still raging, President Biden tapped Mr. Becerra for HHS despite his lack of healthcare and administrative experience. Why was he selected? Because he checked the party's boxes. The Biden team got the incompetent management it deserved.

The Washington Post in early 2022 reported complaints from frustrated Biden officials that Mr. Becerra was in over his head and, as one put it, "taking too passive a role" in virus management. Politico last week gave fresh air to such criticisms in a story headlined "Becerra's rise baffles his former Biden colleagues."

"He would go to brief the president and was not prepared at all, almost to the point where it was an embarrassment," one unnamed former official said. "Biden would pepper him with questions and he would not be able to answer them." Another speculated that Democrats are coalescing around Mr. Becerra because

"he's better than Steyer, and what other choice is there?"

That's like saying burnt steak is better than overdone meat loaf. Americans may remember Tom Steyer from his short-lived campaign for president in 2020, in which he spent \$4,600 for every vote he received. After making a fortune invest-

How does a state with so many people end up producing politicians with so little talent?

ing in coal, the former hedge-fund manager underwent a conversion of sorts and became a climate zealot.

Mr. Steyer has spent \$132 million of his fortune so far on his campaign, blanketing the airwaves with ads that promise to improve "affordability" by making the rich "pay their fair share." Viewers of recent gubernatorial debates might have observed that money is Mr. Steyer's solution to every state problem, from failing public schools to homelessness.

He's backed a wealth-tax referendum on the November ballot and

called for gutting the state's Proposition 13 to raise taxes on commercial property for schools and Medicaid. Why don't Democratic Party leaders like him? Because he doesn't check the party's identity-politics box. They also view him as a panderer, rather than a true believer.

San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan has been the lonely Democratic voice in the field urging a rethink of progressive policies on public safety, housing, education and homelessness. He has gotten little traction in part because he doesn't check the identity-politics box either. For progressives, his reform message has all the allure of steamed broccoli.

But such reforms are what the state needs, even if they aren't palatable to the Democratic Party's left wing. Last week's state party poll showed California voters by a 2-to-1 margin say the state is headed in the wrong direction. Voters are dissatisfied with the status quo, but they can't seem to bring themselves to elect leaders who would change it for the better.

In Los Angeles, there is broad frustration with Mayor Karen Bass's handling of homelessness, crime and the 2025 wildfires, among other things. Yet most polls show she remains the

front-runner, with about 25% support. Distantly trailing are Republican reality-TV star Spencer Pratt and left-wing City Councilwoman Nithya Raman.

Mr. Pratt has aptly attacked Ms. Bass for mismanagement, especially on the wildfires, which burned down his home. But he has offered few concrete policy reforms. Ms. Raman, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, has promoted policies such as rent control and limits on cleaning up homeless encampments, which are the source of voter disgust.

Why can't a state that should be rich in political talent field better Democratic candidates? Perhaps because the party obsession with identity and Mr. Trump trumps competence. In a one-party state, Democratic politicians face little competition. Many rise and rest on their identity. That's how Mr. Becerra, Ms. Bass and Ms. Harris climbed.

California reflects a broader challenge facing the Democratic Party nationwide, which was on display with Ms. Harris's disastrous presidential run. Democrats elevate lousy candidates with stale ideas because they aren't interested in anyone who offers something different.

The 'Overproduction' Excuse for Trump's Tariffs

By Ed Gresser

Since the Supreme Court struck down Donald Trump's International Emergency Economic Powers Act tariffs in February, administration officials have been working to revive the levies using different trade laws. They implemented a 10% across-the-board tariff, which the Court of International Trade held illegal on Thursday. But the White House is using another strategy, which descends through the fjords of Norway and puddles of Bangladesh cement into economic absurdity.

In mid-March, the administration announced it would investigate 16 economies under Section 301 of the

Trade Act of 1974, which allows Washington to impose tariffs on countries with policies that burden or restrict U.S. commerce.

The targets of this probe, from giants like China and the European Union to little Norway, stand accused of "structural excess capacity." The phrase isn't something economic literature explains, but U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer's office describes it essentially as countries' producing more manufactured goods than they reasonably ought to. The administration uses the concept to claim that two normal features of economies, including America's, are predatory.

First, the administration insists

a country should make only what it needs. "Across numerous sectors, many U.S. trading partners are producing more goods than they can consume domestically," Mr. Greer's office said in a statement. "This overproduction displaces existing U.S. domestic production or prevents investment and expansion in U.S. manufacturing production."

There is nothing excessive or even unusual about a country producing more of a good than its economy needs. In 2025, Boeing delivered roughly two-thirds of its commercial aircraft to customers outside North America, while U.S. almond farmers shipped three-quarters of their crops abroad. These industries aren't abnormal or predatory. They are successfully serving a global market.

Second, the administration says that a country shouldn't have unused factories. According to the administration, nations producing less than 80% of what their factories could potentially make are likely "structural excess capacity" offenders. By that standard, Americans should avoid looking in the mirror. Domestic capacity utilization is 75.2%, lower than the rate for many of the countries on Mr. Trump's list.

The administration singled out individual countries, treating their export successes as signs of malfeasance. It pointed to Norway's record-high seafood exports as evidence that the country produces more fish than it needs. But Nor-

way exports fish because its deep-water fjords are home to large shoals of wild salmon and are perfect for aquaculture. Just as the Norwegian government has no reasonable claim that Americans are burdening Oslo's farms and factories by overproducing almonds and passenger jets, Norway's salmon fillets and smoked nova exports are evidence of nothing more than comparative advantage.

Boeing makes more jets than Americans buy, but that doesn't mean it is acting as a trade predator.

Even more dubious is the administration's complaint that Bangladesh makes too much cement. Americans have bought cement from Bangladesh only twice over the past 30 years—1,445 tons in April 2003 and 2,215 tons in February 2004—and Bangladeshis don't compete with American cement companies in export markets. Even if Dhaka is promoting cement production, it can't possibly be imposing a "burden" on American commerce and thus doesn't fall under the scope of Section 301.

It's true that if a country produces something efficiently and at low prices, American competitors can lose out. That is a reason for

American businesses to improve productivity and for the government to have well-run social safety nets and worker support programs. In cases where countries artificially inflate production, the government can respond with U.S. trade law, World Trade Organization rules and bilateral agreements.

But the Constitution assigns authority over tariffs to Congress. It doesn't empower presidents to set them by decree. The Supreme Court nixed Mr. Trump's emergency tariffs earlier this year, finding that the administration had stretched the law past its breaking point.

Instead of learning its lesson, the administration is gambling that it can run the same play with a different law. Section 301 is a negotiating tool to remove foreign government policies that are "unreasonable or discriminatory," not a device for presidents to nullify Congress's constitutional authority over tariff rates.

The 19th- and early-20th-century presidents who wanted higher tariffs respected the Constitution and asked Congress for legislation. Sometimes they succeeded. If Mr. Trump wants higher tariff rates, he should follow the example of his predecessors.

Mr. Gresser is vice president and director for trade and global markets at the Progressive Policy Institute. He served as assistant U.S. trade representative for trade policy and economics, 2015-21.

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The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Trump's war has given China an economic opening

Beijing could turn Middle East instability into a strategic gain

When the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran in February some of President Donald Trump's most ardent supporters sought, tenuously, to cast the move as part of a grand strategy to squeeze China, which gets the bulk of its oil imports from the Middle East. Over 10 weeks on, as Xi Jinping prepares to host the US president in Beijing on Thursday, that narrative appears even more doubtful. Shipping disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have pushed up costs for Chinese factories and households. But the economy has largely absorbed the shock, helped by ample commodity reserves and price interventions. In fact, the conflict has opened ways for China to increase its global economic influence.

First, high fossil fuel prices and

volatile supplies have underscored the need for nations to hasten their shift to renewable power sources. This is a boon for Beijing. Chinese firms account for at least 70 per cent of global manufacturing capacity for major green technologies. Since the war started, Beijing's exports of solar and battery products have surged, vindicating the government's long-term investment in clean energy supply chains.

Next, Trump's capricious approach to foreign policy has alienated US allies and boosted Beijing's relative international standing. Survey data from intelligence firm Morning Consult shows that China's global net global favourability has been in positive territory and above America's since Trump's "liberation day" tariffs in April 2025. China's government could leverage this to boost economic ties with advanced nations and developing countries. In March, Premier Li Qiang convened global chief executives at the China Development Forum to tout the

country's reliability and supply chains.

Beijing's stockpiles of resources – from fertiliser to refined fuels – mean it can also act as a supplier of last resort for countries facing shortages. And China's expertise in infrastructure projects puts it in prime position to support the rebuilding of ports, energy facilities and plants in the Middle East.

The war has also promoted wider use of the renminbi, a goal Beijing has been pursuing for years. Greater interest in clean energy technology and bonds issued by Beijing – with the economy emerging as a relative haven from soaring energy prices – have helped to raise demand for the currency. Since March there have been reports that Iran was allowing ships through the strait for fees paid in renminbi or cryptocurrency. Other nations have increasingly used Chinese currency or Beijing's payment systems to hedge the risks of a fluctuating dollar and economic sanctions under the current US administration.

These openings, however, do not

The president's capricious approach to foreign policy has alienated allies and boosted the Chinese government's relative international standing

guarantee a stronger China. Continued instability in the Middle East could be a drag on growth by weakening demand at home and abroad. Concerns around national security, particularly in Europe, are also likely to limit the boom in green exports. Indeed, without doing more to boost domestic consumption, antipathy over China's trade surplus could restrict its attempts to improve its international relations.

Beijing's focus on securing its own reserves of raw materials has also constrained its efforts to offer support to countries facing shortages. And though geopolitical instability could be a catalyst for internationalising the renminbi, China will struggle to widen its appeal to investors unless the government loosens capital controls and demonstrates more stability in policymaking at home.

Trump's Maga base may still believe the president is playing smart four-dimensional chess. But in reality his war has only strengthened China's position on the board.

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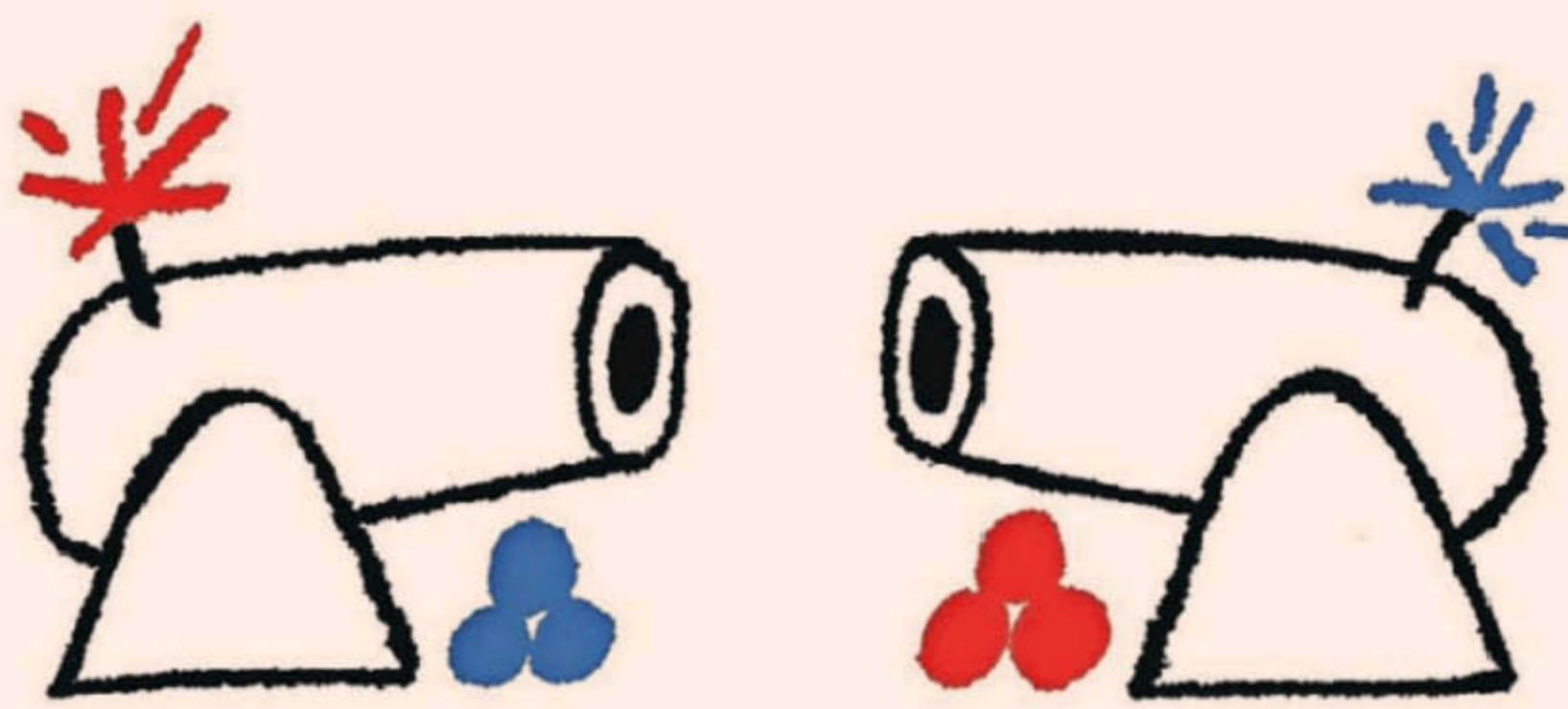
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Opinion Politics

America's right and left have all the same tricks

Ben Hickey



Jemima Kelly

The immediate shock from the latest assassination attempt on Donald Trump, at the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner on April 25, has already faded. But a strange and bad pattern feels like it might be sticking around: a grim culture-war tactical cross-pollination in which left and right increasingly reach for one another's worst, most decried habits in order to discredit or silence the other side.

Most conspicuous has been the overblown response to a fairly innocuous joke made by the comedian and late-night TV talk show host Jimmy Kimmel two days before the dinner: he quipped that Melania Trump had "a glow like an expectant widow". Trump – who in 2020 was making speeches decrying "cancel culture" as a "political weapon" used by the left to

readiness of the supposed holy warriors of free speech to change their tune.

"What are you going to do about it, ABC?" asked Fox News anchor-turned-podcast host Megyn Kelly, who once said that "one of the great things about living in a free society is you can engage in hate speech". "You are not going to be able to ignore both the president and the first lady," she said of ABC. "Do the right thing."

Kelly later seemed to remember her anticensorship credentials, declaring last Thursday that "the president... should not be calling for any private company to fire any employee, especially over free speech". But she wasn't the only First Amendment maximalist who appeared to be feeling conflicted. Conservative commentator Michael Knowles, who in 2019 tweeted that "comedians should not lose their jobs for telling jokes", posted on X that "Kimmel should obviously be fired". The silence from the platform's eternally online owner, Elon Musk, was deafening.

But while the right was busy borrowing the old "woke" tricks of equating words with violence and casting their opponents as morally depraved, a very online part of the progressive left was taking positions more often associated with the right: brushing the assassination attempt off as a conspiracy, despite an absence of credible evidence, because that was politically and psychologically easier than accepting the reality. Within minutes, theorising flooded the internet, with the term "staged" trending on X. Posters used Trump spokesperson Karoline Leavitt's metaphorical comments that "shots [would] be fired" that night as some kind of evidence that the White House knew about the attack in advance.

And it's not the first time such conspiracy theories have swirled on the left: a recent Manhattan Institute poll found 46 per cent of Democrats believed the first assassination attempt on Trump, in Pennsylvania, was "orchestrated by his supporters in order to increase sympathy for him".

Both sides are reaching for the tricks they claim to despise, particularly at the extremes, where ideology requires casting the other as morally illegitimate. The right denounces censorship until there is free speech it dislikes; the left mocks conspiracy theories until one becomes politically useful – and easier to accept than the truth.

Most worrying of all is that Democrats, who once saw political violence as a uniquely rightwing pathology, seem to be showing greater tolerance for that too. America's problem has become a culture-war contagion, in which both sides weaponise and justify the same corrosive tactics they once condemned in the other.

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Letters

Peace may depend on tying Iran into the global economy

Soumaya Keynes gives guarded support to the proposition that trade reduces the chances of war ("Does trade cause peace? Ask an economist", Opinion, May 1).

In his 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, psychologist/neuroscientist Steven Pinker showed by data analysis that the world was becoming less violent.

He found that countries were less likely to go to war if they were democracies, saw international trade as important and were members of international organisations.

These drivers were underpinned by falling religious faith, less ideology, less ethnic nationalism, and greater empathy from reading, travel, rapid news coverage and other ways of fostering understanding of others and hence a general aversion to violence.

The war in the Middle East involves three countries (and their proxies) led by actual or would-be dictators. In all these religion is a hugely important force – it is a tragedy that all claim to believe in the same God. Iran has been excluded from most world trade,

President Donald Trump's tariff-walled mercantilism is not the *doux commerce* that brings benefits, and Israel is subject to boycotts. Trump has withdrawn from international bodies. None of the leaders shows empathy for the other populations involved – or even for those of their fellow citizens who disagree with them.

It is too much to hope that religion and nationalism will fall away, empathy rise and checks on executive power come into effect. So trade will have to do the work to bring peace.

Given that Iran has been shown how

easy it is to disrupt the global economy, the US needs to make an offer so that Iran will go back to a deal like that negotiated in 2015.

Apart from the awkward precedent, it would therefore be good if Iran was allowed to levy tolls on ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz (sharing the proceeds with the Arabian littoral states but not with Trump). That would tie it into the world economy and give it an obvious incentive to keep the waterway open.

Michael Romberg
London W1, UK

Don't judge business degrees on earnings

Dismissing the value of business degrees based on average salary data misses the most important factor: the degree of progression from the learner's starting point ("Who profits as degrees in business proliferate?", Report, April 23).

When we compare average earnings, we often ignore the fact that business programmes are a primary choice for students who are the first in their families to go to university. For a student from a lower socio-economic background, a business degree isn't just a qualification, it provides transferable skills and an entry into a professional world that was previously out of reach.

Additionally, data from our organisation, the Chartered Management Institute, shows that graduates from courses accredited with professional standards, meaning they are taught not just the "what" of business practice but the "how" of managing themselves and others, earn around 8 per cent more within 15 months.

The irony of the government's recent decision to defund management degree apprenticeships for young people means that this gold standard of work-based learning, alongside a business degree, has been severed, just when employers are telling us that these are the work-ready graduates they need.

Petra Wilton
Director of Policy, Chartered Management Institute, London WC2, UK

Pensions strategy can't be set by mandate alone

While the pensions bill has emerged in a more measured form, the protracted wrangling over mandating risks reducing long-term pensions policy to a short-term political contest ("UK ministers gain power to force pension funds to invest in British companies", Report, April 29).

The industry does not lack ambition, but it does lack consistency. UK pension schemes are still grappling with the practical realities of investing at scale in private markets, from opaque valuations and liquidity constraints to persistent data and reporting challenges.

Expanding allocations is not something that can be switched on by policy decree. It requires the steady build-out of infrastructure, robust governance frameworks and genuine in-house expertise. These are multiyear endeavours, not quick wins.

Without that clarity and continuity, there is a real danger that political intent runs ahead of operational capability, with consequences borne not by policymakers but by savers.

Keith Viverito
Head of Emea, Clearwater Analytics, London EC2, UK



Wycombe Abbey has been forced to close its boarding school in China

Why 'glue work' matters even more in the age of AI

Sarah O'Connor's op-ed on AI adoption and the rising importance of "glue work" ("Why 'glue work' can finally shine in the age of AI", Opinion, April 14) highlights a significant change in corporate culture, and a fundamental misalignment in the narrative around AI and jobs.

More AI-oriented jobs are appearing on job boards. Notably, they aren't all in IT or research departments but instead combine practical knowledge of AI with "glue work" skills: relationship-building, project management and cross-team co-ordination that keep teams in line and organisations running smoothly. Examples include AI adoption leads, who focus on integrating AI into a business's pre-existing workflows, or AI workforce managers, who are responsible for embedding AI agents into teams and ensuring humans and machines work together effectively.

At their core, these new integrated roles place a central focus on "glue work" skills – such as managing workforces and relationships, spotting misalignments early and making sure AI solves real business problems without creating new ones. Translating between technical and non-technical teams will become an increasingly valuable skill in a human and AI-integrated economy, so a level of technical knowledge is essential. Like DevOps or HR Ops, I see it as akin to "AI Ops" – encompassing everything from systems and processes to tool selection and enablement.

Businesses that recognise the importance of glue work, but do not understate the importance of technical skills, will see the greatest returns by fully embracing the merger of the cultural and the technological.

Ben Barnett
General Manager, Emea, Monday.com, London W1, UK

Dual-class privileges are undermining Grifols

The ongoing situation at Grifols SA, one of the world's largest plasma-derived medicines companies, should serve as a warning about the risks associated with dual-class share structures and opaque family-controlled vehicles such as Scranton Enterprises, linked to the founding family (Alphaville, April 30).

A listed company that turns to public markets for financing must ultimately work for the benefit of all shareholders – not primarily for the preservation of a founding family's privileges and control structures.

For minority shareholders, it is increasingly difficult to understand why millions continue to be paid in royalties linked to the family name while the company trades at a persistent discount to its global peers. One must ask: do other major Ixos companies charge their listed entities simply for using the family surname? Such arrangements appear less like modern corporate governance and more like legacy privileges that public shareholders are expected to tolerate.

As a shareholder, I cannot help but wonder whether any ordinary investor would be permitted to establish a private vehicle and invoice Grifols for "services" linked to their status as a shareholder. Clearly not. That is precisely why markets apply a discount when governance standards appear unequal depending on who controls the company.

When the Spanish regulator (CNMV) remains largely passive and management insists on maintaining structures that blur the line between private and public interests, investor scepticism is no longer irrational – it is a rational response to governance risk.

If Grifols wishes to regain investor trust, it should simplify its governance structure and reinforce genuine board independence. Transparency and equal treatment of shareholders remain the foundation of market credibility.

Francesc Martí
Barcelona, Spain

The globalisation risk facing UK private schools

The FT's report that Wycombe Abbey, one of Britain's most prestigious schools, is being forced to close its Nanjing franchise is a warning to the UK independent schools sector that overseas markets are becoming saturated and higher risk, and occurs at a time when the reputations of these schools, built up over hundreds of years in their home market, are also under strain (Report, May 1).

Overseas franchising is only open to a narrow band of schools where name recognition still holds sway. But an unintended long-term consequence of this franchising trend is that more overseas campuses throttle demand for places at schools in the UK.

The impact is marketwide. The sector has experienced a decline in pupils coming to the UK since 2024, and now under the current Labour government all independent, non-state-funded schools have been hit by the imposition of VAT and business rates.

If Chinese and families in other nations can access what they see as a British education in their own country, why would they go to the expense of applying to the UK?

Neil Roskilly
Former Chief Executive, The Independent Schools Association, Cambridge, UK

China won't reflate without bank recapitalisation

Alicia García-Herrero's analysis (Opinion, April 25) is correct as far as it goes, but what she omits to mention is that the monetary reflation that she is looking for in China will not materialise until its banks are massively recapitalised.

At current property prices, the true value of the property collateral on which the bulk of China's bank loans are extended is less than the nominal value of the loans, implying a reduction in bank capital as and when the loans mature. Banks will not extend new loans, and hence create money in the form of deposits, until they are confident that they have sufficient capital after allowing for the maturity of all existing loans.

In an ideal world, the Chinese government would force all banks to write down their existing loans to a level implied by applying a conservative loan-to-value ratio to the value of the property collateral assessed at current fire-sale prices, while underwriting equity rights issues to bring bank capital ratios up to conservative levels using money created by the Chinese central bank.

In the real world, no governments are ever that proactive and so things are probably going to have to become a lot worse before any action is taken.

Martin Allen
London N1, UK

Lipton's secret for success

One important character trait of Marty Lipton that was not included in Sujet Indap's and Oliver Barnes' otherwise excellent article on Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz (The Big Read, May 4) is his laser-like focus on his clients' interests. Lipton is famous for sending unsolicited clippings to the chairman of a Wachtell client from industry journals and newspapers when he spied an opportunity for the acquisition of a rival or an industry trend. It is his proactive approach to client service coupled with his insatiable curiosity that has differentiated Wachtell from the crowd.

Patrick M Dransfield
Principal, Clearway Communications, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Opinion

We need to protect Britain against the tyranny of the minority

ECONOMICS

Martin Wolf



most important democracy of all.

Before the 2024 presidential election, The Heritage Foundation's "Project 2025", then deceitfully disowned by Donald Trump, laid out a road map for his presidential term. His administration has followed it. What are the results? A recent pamphlet, "Defensive Constitutional Reform: Preventing the UK from going the way of the US", from the 99% Organisation states, rightly, that these include the erosion of checks and balances, weaponising the law against personal enemies, attacks on independent legal institutions, media and universities, and the conversion of ICE into an agency operating above the law. Also apparent is Trump's exploitation of office for personal gain.

The pamphlet also argues that what is happening in the US could happen even more easily in the UK. The US has a written federal constitution, an independent legislature, a famously independent judiciary and a detailed bill of rights. Even so, the survival of US democracy is in question. The UK's could easily prove even more fragile.

First, under the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system a party with just a

third of the vote can win a huge majority. In 2024, Labour won 411 out of 650 seats with just 33.7 per cent of the vote.

Second, Reform UK is a one-man band, perhaps even more so than Trump's Republicans. As Fraser Nelson, former editor of The Spectator, noted in a recent commentary, Nigel Farage is already showing questionable behaviour, including an undeclared personal

A situation in which a party can win tremendous power with a third of the vote is grotesque

gift of £5mn before the 2024 election.

Third, once in power, with a devoted set of supporters both inside and outside parliament and total contempt for the "liberal establishment", prime minister Farage could (and surely would) mount a fierce assault on many of the core institutions of British government, law and education, as well as human rights, in a British version of Project 2025.

Yes, the country needs a great deal of reform. But the record of populists across the world is not one of productive change but of arbitrary rule. Why should anybody think Farage would be different? His biggest contribution to British public life has been Brexit, which three-fifths of the people now regret. That hardly suggests his strong suit will be successful reform.

So, what is to be done to prevent such a government from gaining power?

Possibilities include success by this government in delivering the widely shared prosperity people want. I fear it is too late for that. Other possibilities include taking dark money out of politics, counteracting misinformation and disinformation and addressing foreign interference. Alas, these things are hard to do and might not make a big difference.

Another set of possibilities involves entrenching institutional independence in the civil service, judicial system, police, armed forces, Bank of England, House of Lords, universities, the media and so forth. The report offers some interesting ideas in these areas. But, given the UK's "dictatorial"

constitution these could also fail.

The final set of possibilities focuses on the principal vulnerability of people who are trying to create an autocracy but have not yet succeeded: elections. What just happened to Viktor Orbán shows how important they are. Entrenched independence for the UK's boundary and electoral commissions is vital. More important still is electoral reform. A situation in which a party can win overwhelming power with 30 per cent of the vote is grotesque. As Vernon Bogdanor has argued persuasively, "first past the post" is a source of destabilisation in today's multi-party politics. A system of transferable votes, in which second and further preferences also count, is an essential safeguard.

James Madison rightly feared the tyranny of the majority. Entrenched rights were the answer. In the UK today, the great danger is rather tyranny of the minority, in which a small plurality secures overwhelming power. First-past-the-post has become suicidal. The time to reform the old system is now.

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How the UK can use the markets' kindness of strangers'

Tim Leunig

The UK government is now spending well over £100bn a year in debt interest payments, accounting for about £1 in every £12 spent by the government. This high number is a product of both the high level of our outstanding debt and the relatively high interest rates that are required to persuade investors to buy and hold UK debt.

Recent rises in gilt yields, combined with downgrades in predicted growth, mean that we cannot be confident that this burden will fall – particularly if the uncertainty about Labour's leadership and economic strategy remains significant.

The UK has a lower national debt-to-GDP ratio than both France and Italy. Yet while we pay nearly 5 per cent on 10-year gilts, France pays 3.6 per cent and Italy 3.7 per cent. Our interest bill would fall by almost a quarter if we could match their rates, saving UK taxpayers over £20bn a year. This is a large number, and means we should be willing to consider unconventional approaches.

Mark Carney, the governor of the Bank of England at the time, remarked nine years ago that the UK relies on the "kindness of strangers", with – among other things – foreigners holding more than a quarter of our national debt.

We require these "strangers" to do two things – to lend us money and to take a risk that the pound will fall against their currency. They require compensation for both. The far higher rate on UK gilts than on French or Italian shows that the latter is significant.

The UK government, unlike its opposite numbers in France or Italy,

There is a way to reduce the chance that foreign investors will desert us and push up borrowing costs

American agriculture is broken

BUSINESS

Rana Foroohar

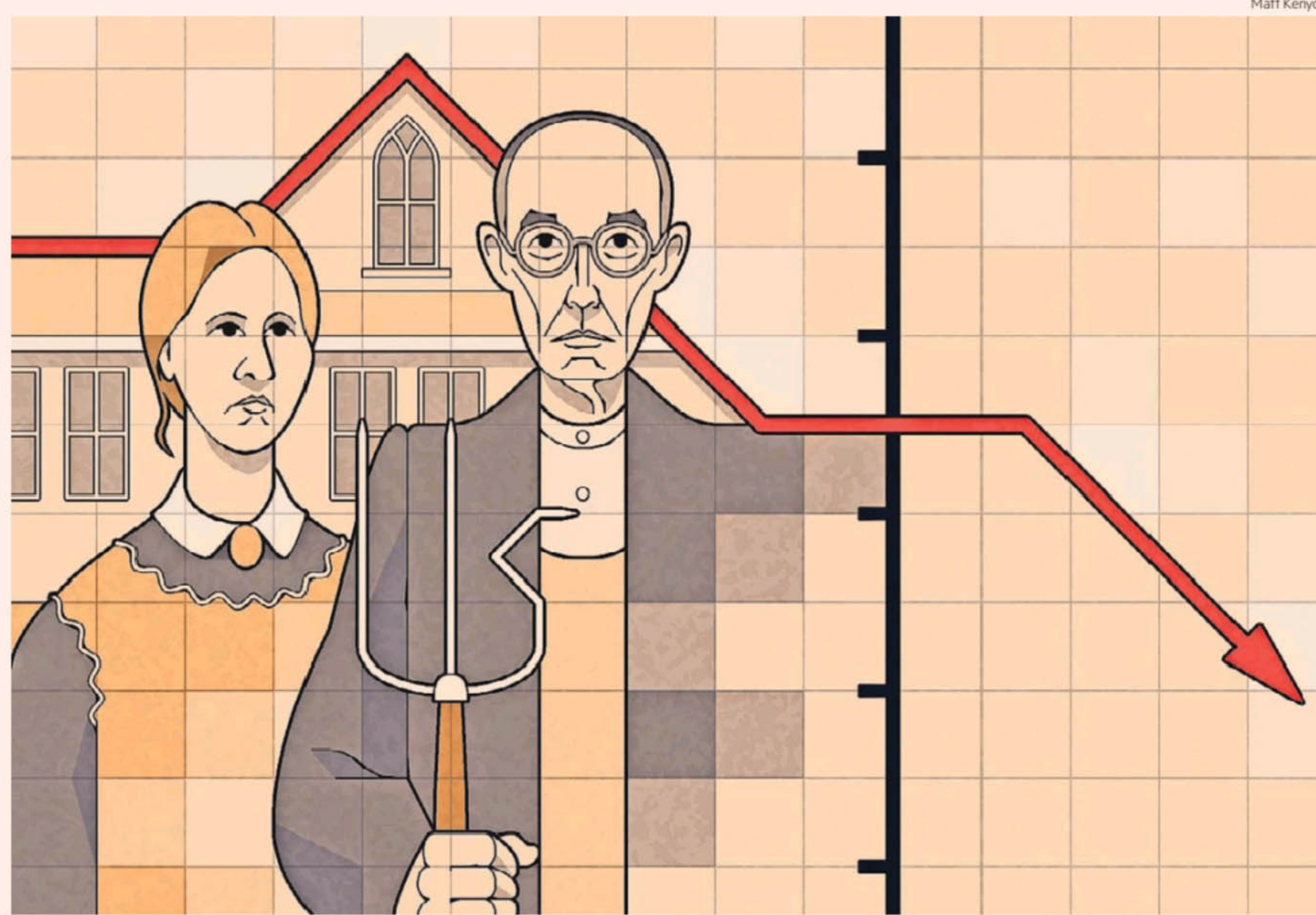


economists would put it) of a system no longer purpose-built for national or even international needs have become too costly to ignore.

"Our metrics for success are off," notes Andy Green, a former senior agricultural adviser for the Biden administration. "To create a more resilient system we need to think about more than just short-term yields."

While American farmers are more productive than ever before (last year's autumn harvest set records), profits are falling sharply thanks to oversupply and rising costs. Farm bankruptcies were up 46 per cent between 2024 and 2025, reaching levels last seen in the "Farm Aid" era of the 1980s. Late last year, the Trump administration announced a \$12bn bailout plan for American farmers (following the \$50bn doled out in the first administration), who've been hurt by trade wars, climate disasters and, most recently, rising fertiliser and other input prices that were already way up following the war in Ukraine and have now risen further thanks to war in Iran.

Some of the pain is down to Trump's own actions. Still, even if we had better White House policy, the system has been building towards crisis for decades, thanks in large part to the "get big or get out" policies articulated by Earl Butz, the US secretary of agriculture under Richard Nixon, who got rid of many of the New Deal policies that balanced exports with support for smaller farmers and crop diversity. His revamp of the USDA encouraged a highly



concentrated system that is all about producing cheap calories and letting the free market do the rest.

But just as we now understand the risks of chokepoints in semiconductors and oil, particularly during an era in which trade is being weaponised, the true costs of a US farm system that prioritises only short-term high yields in a handful of crops are becoming more obvious.

There are, for starters, huge vulnerabilities to input costs like energy and fertiliser when you are harvesting single crops on the same land, year after year. This kind of highly industrial farming wrings nutrients out of soil that then require more and more chemicals to get the same yields (there are also increasing concerns about the toxicity of this

The costs of a farm system that prioritises short-term yields in a handful of crops are becoming obvious

type of farming, as witnessed by the ongoing Monsanto liability suit).

Many farmers I've spoken to around the country over the years would love to raise a more diverse mix of crops. But insurance premium subsidies rise with the amount of acreage insured. The same goes for bailouts, which are given per acre. This, coupled with the high levels of concentration in the retail sector – big grocery chains would rather deal with large processors or growers – disincentivises smaller, more diverse and sustainable types of agriculture.

Cheap cash crop exports also carry economic risk, as witnessed by China's plummeting purchases of US soybeans amid a trade war. The idea that the US should continue to spend billions of dollars bailing out farmers who are still being incentivised to keep producing a crop that their largest buyer no longer wants (China is actively moving towards more food independence) makes zero sense.

Of course, no one piece of legislation can fix a systemic problem. But systems thinking is exactly what is required to

create an agricultural industry that makes sense. Consider, for example, efforts in the proposed federal farm bill to push back on California's "Proposition 12" requirements for higher standards in pork production. California is such an important market that 27 per cent of pork producers (mainly smaller, independent producers) are already compliant according to Farm Action Fund, a non-profit that works on monopoly issues in agriculture.

If the new bill prohibits states from setting their own rules, it will probably favour the very largest producers, like, for example, Smithfield, a Chinese-owned company that is America's single biggest pork producer.

While there's theoretically nothing wrong with that, it does seem an odd move for a country where there is bipartisan support for less dependency on China in crucial areas.

Like so much about the American food system, it is a situation that makes little sense.

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There can be no Labour revival if Starmer remains

POLITICS

Stephen Bush



Manchester and Exeter, had only a third of their seats up for grabs, stopped more Green landslides from taking place. Mission accomplished.

The bad news is that Labour was also smashed in Gateshead, Sandwell and Sunderland. It was soundly rejected, too, in the perennial marginals such as Milton Keynes and Redditch. The Blue Labour clique so influential under Starmer thought they had a genius plan to turn Camden marginal in order to save Barnsley. Well, Camden is marginal and in Barnsley, Labour is marginalised. In Scotland, Labour has continued its streak of continuous retreat at every devolved election since 1999, though the Conservative collapse means it can at least claim to be the main opposition.

Remarkably, there are still some people in Labour who think this validates the party's approach. There is a lively debate among pollsters and political scientists as to whether Labour's problem is that it is losing votes to the centrist Liberal Democrats and leftist Greens, which facilitates Reform UK victories thanks to a split vote, or whether it is

also losing a significant number of votes via defection to Reform. Regardless of why Labour is losing so badly, the government needs to change its approach, and fast. Even if the outflow of votes validates the analysis of Morgan McSweeney, Starmer's ousted but still influential former chief of staff, that Reform is the greater threat to Labour, it does not mean his approach to wooing Reform voters has worked.

This prime minister sounds like an opposition leader, discussing what he will say and not what he is doing

It would also be a disaster if, having spent the past two years contorting itself to chase the priorities of Reform voters in polls and focus groups, Labour spent the next two years contorting itself to chase the priorities of Green voters in polls and focus groups. What so many at the heart of the Starmer project never

seem to understand is that governments are not re-elected because of their words and poses: they are re-elected because of their actions. That Starmer still sounds like an opposition leader, discussing what he will say next rather than what he has done and is doing, shows that there can be no Labour revival while he remains in place.

What of the Conservatives? Kemi Badenoch's biggest achievement this past year is that she has successfully made the Tory party happy about losing. Across England, the party lost 563 seats overall: the worst rout suffered by any opposition party in history, other than the one Badenoch led her party to last year. William Hague gained seats at this point in his party leadership and went on to heavy defeat; Badenoch is not even managing that.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats are tightening their grip on the seats they won in 2024 – places that the Conservatives cannot win a parliamentary majority without. The Tory party should be alarmed that it is on course to become the centre-right version of the

Liberal Democrats, a party retreating to a handful of eccentric seats, held together by either highly unusual demographics, such as Westminster or Broxbourne, or Stakhanovite local organisers, such as Harlow's Conservative council leader Dan Swords.

Who has reason to cheer? Plaid Cymru, Greens and the Liberal Democrats obviously. The SNP, even more so: after a scandal-ridden and fractious parliament, it has been reconfirmed in power. The last good opportunity for rivals to attempt to dislodge it may have now passed. Nigel Farage's lead is, by historic standards, small for an opposition party and he is still highly polarising, both of which are usually morbid symptoms for an opposition party. However, Labour has identified its problem but does not yet seem to have found a solution to it, while the Conservative Party has convinced itself that its defeats are actually a form of victory. That means Farage's march to Downing Street looks unlikely to be halted.

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controls the central bank – at least in the sense that chancellor Rachel Reeves, and her successors, can change the inflation target. Alternatively they can keep the target but give the bank a dual mandate that weakens the inflation mandate by the back door. As another even sneakier alternative, they could keep the mandate but appoint very dovish individuals to the Monetary Policy Committee. The markets know all this, and so they price in the chance that this will happen, with a risk of higher UK inflation in the medium term and a weaker pound.

But there is a way round this. The UK should issue euro-denominated debt – starting with (say) 10 per cent of gilt issuance this year.

This would have three advantages. First, we would in all likelihood pay a substantially lower rate of interest on that debt. There is no reason why our paper – selling in all probability to European investors – should command a higher rate than that issued by the French or the Italians.

Second, issuing 10 per cent less sterling debt means we should expect to pay a little less on the remaining 90 per cent. There are investors who want to hold sterling-denominated government debt for a range of reasons. They are price takers, and if less debt is offered, the price the government has to pay will go down, to the benefit of taxpayers. Supply and demand are reliable in such circumstances.

Third, we reduce the risk of a foreigner-led run on gilts in future. As the Office for Budget Responsibility notes, countries that rely on foreigners to fund their debt face the risk that they will decide the country is not a good bet. There are many reasons for a loss of confidence, but one reason is a fear of the currency's depreciation or even collapse. Issuing debt in euros would sidestep that risk, reducing the chance that foreign investors will desert us, and so reducing the risk of a sharp rise in borrowing costs.

Of course, issuing debt in euros creates a currency risk for the UK government at redemption. This is only likely if UK inflation exceeds Eurozone inflation in the medium term, since this would lead the pound to fall in value. This currency risk therefore increases the incentive for the government to stand firm against inflation. Issuing euro debt would therefore help anchor inflationary expectations more generally.

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EDITORIALS

Indiana's primaries came with warning to dissenters

Don't make no waves, don't back no losers — that famous adage of the Richard J. Daley era seems appropriate for today's Republican moment in Indiana, with a twist. Next door, state legislators who bucked presidential wishes for a mid-decade congressional remap were unceremoniously ousted thanks to a significant outside investment from President Donald Trump and his allies.

So, perhaps the message is just don't make no waves. Fall in line, in other words. Even if you're being asked to join a fight that's not your own.

Trump's Indiana revenge tour took down five state senators from within his own party who last December bucked his push for new political maps, a move that drew Trump's wrath, including a battle of words as the president resorted to threats and name-calling to coerce lawmakers to vote with him.

"That kind of language doesn't help," state Sen. Travis Holdman said at the time. Holdman voted against Trump's Indiana redistricting play. Today, he's one of the state lawmakers who finds himself soon to be out of a job. He and four others lost to a new set of Republicans that proudly wear Trump's endorsement. So far, the sole survivor is Sen. Greg Goode. As of late Friday afternoon, the race between Trump-backed Paula Copenhaver and incumbent Sen. Spencer Deery was still pending.

Remember: These were state lawmakers. Not members of Congress. Public servants who are primarily accountable to Hoosiers. Call us old-fashioned, but we think state legislators should be allowed to exercise independent judgment.

True, it took voters showing up to the polls to secure wins for



People walk into the Indiana Statehouse on Feb. 26 in Indianapolis. **ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

these Trump-backed challengers, and we'll give them that much. We'll even go so far as to acknowledge that political competition is a good thing, and something we call for regularly here in Illinois.

And, of course, politics has never been a gentle business. Presidents pressure allies, and interest groups spend money. Primary challenges are a long-standing feature of American politics, and we are not naive about that reality. But there is a big difference between ordinary political competition and a coordinated national effort to purge state lawmakers for exercising independent judgment on a matter before their own legislature.

Supporters of the remap effort argued the stakes were national and that Republicans

needed every possible House seat ahead of what could be a difficult midterm environment. Fair enough. But that logic effectively reduces state legislatures to instruments of national party strategy, rather than independent governing bodies accountable first to their own voters.

And what happened in Indiana was not homegrown, organic competition. These races certainly would not have drawn this level of money and national attention had these lawmakers not crossed the president. Challengers saw an infusion of millions of dollars in campaign cash for races that aren't typically flush with so much money and interest. For example, the Club for Growth, which usually focuses on congressional races, invested

roughly \$2 million into targeting seven incumbents who refused Trump's call for redistricting. The Club also sent out professional mailers and ads to get out the vote. That's a huge advantage for these newcomers.

Conservatism once championed decentralized government and local accountability. State and local lawmakers were supposed to answer primarily to their own constituents, not national political figures. The traditional conservative notion of federalism reflected skepticism of concentrated power and hinged on the idea that leaders closest to their communities were better positioned to understand local needs and values. States were supposed to function as laboratories of democracy, not regional branches of a national

political movement enforcing ideological conformity from the top down.

Indiana shows that principle is an afterthought for the modern Republican Party, sending a chilling message that state-level independence has become politically risky. A party organized primarily around loyalty to one person becomes untethered from principle. Under such a structure, there's little room for discussion or disagreement. Regular people lose out in the absence of healthy political debate.

We don't want to live in a world where our ugly federal politics bleeds into every aspect of life and governance. We've seen how that works, and how national issues obscure the very important business of running a city, a school district or a state. Increasingly, every level of American government is becoming overly nationalized. School boards become culture-war battlegrounds. Governors act like cable-news pundits. State legislative races revolve around loyalty to national personalities rather than debates over roads, taxes or schools.

Politics that once reflected local priorities increasingly functions as an extension of D.C.-style tribal warfare.

We prefer it when politicians pay attention to doing the job they're meant to do. To that end, the Indiana state lawmakers who made up their own minds on political maps should've been allowed to vote their own way without being bullied by folks concerned with D.C. politics.

Those who lost on Tuesday can at least walk away knowing they didn't cave to immense pressure on an important vote. We hope those left standing can summon the courage to maintain their independence.

Is Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport a better bet than Chicago O'Hare?

For anyone in the northern suburbs, Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport, or MKE, is a straight, easy shot north on Interstate 94. It's served by all the major domestic airlines. Parking is a breeze, with no Chicago O'Hare-style crowds. There's even a cool indie bookstore in the terminal.

The catch? Far fewer choices for nonstop flights than at the airport to the south, and, in most cases, higher ticket prices, though occasionally lower fares can be found.

A direct flight to Boston this Sunday on JetBlue booked two weeks in advance would have cost \$401 for economy, almost a hundred bucks more than United's comparably timed flight out of O'Hare. Going to New York is an even bigger difference, \$660 on Delta out of MKE, versus \$399 on United at O'Hare, where direct flights to LaGuardia Airport leave practically every half hour during prime time.

Milwaukee's airport can't outdo its mega-rival 70 miles away, but it sure is trying, and everyone who depends on O'Hare should be rooting for it. Travelers could be in for a rough summer at the world's busi-

est airport, with higher prices in the offing amid steep fuel costs — especially with rock-bottom Spirit Airlines now out of business.

A measure of relief could be coming from the underutilized runways to the north.

This fall, MKE is scheduled to open an \$80 million air-cargo hub, including a new 333,000-square-foot building, part of a public-private partnership that has been in the making for years.

The hub is expected to draw some cargo operations to Milwaukee from O'Hare, which dominates the region's airborne supply chain today. Construction-related delays are an issue at O'Hare and those disruptions fall especially hard on cargo flights, which typically generate less revenue than passenger operations and therefore get a lower priority.

As ORD expands, Milwaukee can help to take the pressure off. Critically, its long runways can handle the wide-body jets typically used for transporting cargo. It also has complementary infrastructure around it, including warehouse and logistics buildings lining I-94. And MKE has open land that O'Hare lacks, inviting

further development. Landing fees and rents could help defray some passenger airfare costs in the future.

Along with the cargo hub, MKE is building a new international terminal, expected to open next year, making it a viable alternative for at least some flights currently run out of O'Hare.

MKE's existing international terminal is a forlorn, low-slung bunker that holds too few passengers, and its single gate can't accommodate bigger jets. The new international terminal will have two state-of-the-art gates, with room for hundreds of passengers. Construction crews were swarming over it earlier this month and it's possible the project could welcome its first plane ahead of schedule in 2027.

So, if the century-old MKE is so great, why hasn't business taken off by now? Competition, and not just from O'Hare.

Chicago Midway Airport provides a closer, easier-to-navigate alternative to O'Hare. Chicago Rockford International Airport is already a big freight hub. Indiana's South Bend International Airport attracts

some business from the Chicago area. The Gary airport has no commercial passenger flights but competes for cargo (and, for the record, could compete for private jets going to Chicago Bears games in Hammond).

The numbers tell the story: O'Hare served 84.86 million passengers in 2025, Midway 19.38 million and MKE just 5.87 million, far less than the Chicago airports though still much more than South Bend or Rockford. MKE peaked at nearly 10 million passengers in 2010, when the now-defunct AirTran Airways and Midwest Airlines were going strong.

In its airport magazine, MKE touts "the hidden cost of flying Chicago," including everything from the not-so-hidden higher parking fees and longer wait times to the "painful" drives home. Striking a defensive tone, the magazine says, "Sure, you might find some flights at lower prices in Chicago, but that doesn't include the significant extra costs of an O'Hare or Midway airport trip in both money and time."

An MKE spokesperson elaborates: "We are doing everything

we can to provide a stress-free travel experience at MKE, and we hope that makes for a compelling case vs. O'Hare." Regarding cargo, the spokesperson said, "Even if we can redirect a small portion of what comes into O'Hare, that would be a big win for us."

These days, the best ally in marketing this distant-third airport is the Federal Aviation Administration, which has moved to limit O'Hare flights to 2,708 a day this summer, down from the planned 3,000-plus. As this page has chronicled, everything from airline turf wars and safety concerns to a sorry on-time performance went into that determination.

And as this page also has noted, if fuel prices stay high, the FAA plan for capping O'Hare flights this summer could be mostly moot. The airlines' ability to raise fares is limited, and schedules are already being revised accordingly.

MKE has a long-awaited opening to compete aggressively. On behalf of a traveling public that stands to benefit from more options, let's hope this often-overlooked airport grabs the opportunity.

ON THIS DAY 36 YEARS AGO GETTING TOGETHER ON FLOOD CONTROL

Of all the problems besetting this region, none is more disrespectful of political boundaries than flooding. Water seeks its own level, and when there is enough of it, it is likely to be in someone's basement just about anywhere it flows in the metropolitan area.

That is why a new proposal to get more regional coordination to meet the threat of flooding ought to be welcomed with enthusiasm.

Three major suburban organizations — the Northwest Municipal Conference, the West Central Municipal Conference and the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association — are considering a joint resolution supporting the creation of stormwater management committees in seven important watersheds in the area.

But only two counties — Du Page and Lake — have active committees working on specific flood control proposals ... while Cook County is served by the gargantuan projects of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.

It's simple logic. There is a lot of work necessary to avert flooding: building reservoirs, cleaning and dredging streams, protecting wetlands and floodplains and requiring stormwater retention within new developments. What each community and county does — or fails to do — has a direct impact downstream.

By getting each community in a watershed involved ... there is a better chance to both control local problems and avoid sending the residue of those problems downstream. ... There also is a proposal for creation of a regional council to coordinate the work of the individual committees.

It will take some unity among the suburbs and suburban organizations to put this idea to work. ... It also will take an act of the Illinois General Assembly. ... But these shouldn't be hard decisions to make, and it shouldn't take another torrent to help make them.

**Tribune editorial board,
May 11, 1990**

EDITORIAL CARTOON



MICHAEL RAMIREZ/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

OPINION



A shopkeeper packs eggs for a customer at his shop in northern Tehran on May 1. VAHID SALEMI/AP

Why the Iranian regime's 'fortress' is failing

By Bradley Martin and Liram Koblenz-Stenzler
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

In Tehran today, a single fried egg costs a million rials. This staggering price tag is not just an economic anomaly; it is the sound of a regime's foundation cracking. While the world's attention remains fixed on the military hardware of Iran's regional proxies, the Islamic Republic's greatest threat to survival has proved to be not the United States, but its own disillusioned and starving people. Following a war that began Feb. 28 and a ceasefire that started April 8, it has become clear: Tehran is no longer just fighting for regional dominance. It is fighting a losing battle for domestic legitimacy.

The Iranian economy is currently facing an unprecedented crisis. According to the Persian-language news organization Iran International, the exchange rate for the U.S. dollar

has surged to 1.8 million rials. In Tehran, where the minimum wage sits just above 200 million rials a month, the daily struggle for basic sustenance has become a catalyst for revolt. Calls for government accountability have become routine on Iranian social media and are even surfacing within the state-controlled press.

Niccolò Machiavelli, in his 16th century political treatise "The Prince," writes in Chapter 20 about how it is a custom of leaders to hold their states securely by building fortresses as a refuge from foreign attacks. Today, the Iranian regime's "fortress" is both physical and human. It consists of sprawling subterranean "tunnel cities" in Lebanon and a ring of aggressive proxies — stretching from Hezbollah to the Houthis in Yemen. These proxies serve as the regime's external walls, designed to outsource instability and keep the threat far from Tehran. However, Machiavelli offers a sobering warning: The best possi-

ble fortress is "not to be hated by the people."

The "Prince" in Tehran is profoundly hated, and his walls are cracking. While the Israel Defense Forces continue to dismantle the physical fortress — recently demolishing the largest Hezbollah tunnel network in southern Lebanon — the Iranian people are dismantling the regime's internal legitimacy. Reports of emergency meetings of Iran's Supreme National Security Council reveal a leadership in panic, terrified of a populace that has reached its limit. Yet, at this critical juncture, European leaders such as German Chancellor Friedrich Merz are floating the idea of sanctions relief. Offering a diplomatic lifeline now is a strategic blunder; it provides the very resources needed to repair the "Prince's" crumbling walls and suppress the domestic uprising that Machiavelli predicted would be his ultimate undoing.

The failure of past diplomacy,

most notably during the 2016 transfer of \$1.7 billion in cash under President Barack Obama, was not merely an inability to win hearts and minds. It was a structural failure to recognize that resources provided to the regime are never intended for the people. Instead of addressing the domestic crisis, these funds were immediately diverted to cement the regime's regional fortress — funding the Houthis, Hezbollah and the construction of the tunnel cities. Any economic relief provided to the regime is a direct investment in its proxies, not a relief for its subjects.

The West faces a definitive choice: to stand with the Iranian people or to throw a lifeline to the "unloved Prince" they seek to overthrow.

Any pivot toward diplomacy that includes sanctions relief — whether proposed in Washington or Berlin — ignores the fundamental Machiavellian truth that a regime hated by its own people

cannot be saved by its external fortresses, but it can be artificially sustained by foreign gold. History will judge today's leaders not by the temporary stability of a flawed ceasefire, but by whether they chose to empower a crumbling tyranny or the courageous populace ready to replace it.

As the physical tunnels of the regime are unearthed and destroyed, the West must refuse to build new diplomatic ones. It is time to stop repairing the ayatollahs' walls and start supporting the people who are ready to bring them down.

Bradley Martin is executive director of the Near East Center for Strategic Studies. Dr. Liram Koblenz-Stenzler is the head of the Global Extremism and Antisemitism Desk at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at Reichman University in Herzliya, Israel, and a visiting scholar at Brandeis University.

Public safety relies on accountability. That applies to feds

By Edwin C. Yohnka
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

President Donald Trump does not like Chicago. That is obvious. He regularly belittles elected officials — calling Chicago's mayor a "low IQ" person — and gleefully trumpets gun violence in our city. A feature of Trump's obsession with public safety in Chicago has been the repeated claim that he can fix the city's public safety issues. First, he claims Chicago will be safer if he is allowed to send a phalanx of federal forces into our city. But he also believes that these federal officers should be able to act without any accountability when patrolling our neighborhoods, especially our Black, brown and immigrant communities.

The inanity of Trump's approach to public safety was laid bare by events of recent months. Under the guise of enforcing civil immigration law, Trump ordered hundreds of masked, heavily armed federal agents into cities. But the flood of forces in places such as Los Angeles; New Orleans; Memphis, Tennessee; Minneapolis; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Chicago undermined rather than enhanced public safety.

Of course, we all witnessed through videos federal agents fatally shoot Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis. In Chicagoland, we witnessed the shooting death of Silverio Villegas González in Franklin Park and the serious wounding of Marimar Martinez in the Brighton Park neighborhood. We saw federal officers aggressively raid an apartment building, point deadly weapons at people and routinely use projectiles and chemical agents on protesters and bystanders. Federal officers also used excessive force to detain people, including choke-



Attendees gather for a Day of the Dead altar building event for Silverio Villegas González on Nov. 1, 2025, near where he was shot in Franklin Park. Villegas González was shot and killed by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement on Sept. 12, 2025. DOMINIC DI PALERMO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

holds and restraints that are not permissible under Illinois or federal law.

Chicago's experience underscores the crucial importance of federal agent accountability. While evidence quickly emerged that raised questions about the Department of Homeland Security's account of Villegas González's shooting, no independent investigation has been launched into that tragedy. The officer who rammed Martinez's car and shot her multiple times — and bragged about it in his text messages — was allowed to leave the state and repair the car involved in the incident.

As we have seen, the Trump administration eschewed any

independent investigation of the Good and Pretti killings, pushing state and local experts out and quickly moving to smear both Good and Pretti. In response to events like these, senior administration officials have repeated the claim that federal officers have "total immunity" and can act in any fashion they please — even at the cost of our neighbors' lives.

Faced with an administration that has no interest in holding agents accountable, many state and local leaders are working on ways to bring federal officers to justice for violating the law during the surges into cities around the country. The Hennepin County, Minnesota, prosecutor recently announced charges against

an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer who allegedly pulled a gun on unarmed motorists in Minneapolis. But these are difficult pathways, raising legal and constitutional questions that may delay or derail the search for accountability and justice.

There is a sure way to ensure that accountability applies to everyone — including federal officers. A string of recent Supreme Court decisions has severely limited individuals' ability to sue federal officers for constitutional violations. This included the visceration of so-called Bivens actions, named after a Supreme Court case that authorized damages lawsuits against

federal officers when they violate the Constitution. The Bivens Act, now pending before the United States House of Representatives, restores the people's right to get meaningful relief in court when federal agents violate peoples' constitutional rights. It reaffirms the fundamental principle that no one — including officers sent into our streets by Trump — is above the law. The American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois will join others on Capitol Hill during Community Safety Week in May to advocate for the Bivens Act.

In Chicago, we know that public safety is a complex issue that cannot be solved by fantastical quick fixes or by reckless late-night social media posts from officials more interested in burnishing their "tough on crime" bona fides than finding actual solutions. The hard work of improving public safety is a mixture of working in our communities and neighborhoods, investing in public programs that offer hope to residents and holding everyone — including law enforcement — accountable for their actions. This accountability is critical to establish trust between law enforcement and the public they serve, a trust that further enhances public safety.

Trump does not understand that force for trust. He believes that need and power are the solutions to every problem. Congress should act to restore the American people's confidence that federal law enforcement officials will face consequences for their illegal actions — before Trump's recklessness further breaks the public's trust.

Edwin C. Yohnka is director of communications and public policy at the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois.

OPINION

What Jews can learn from the pope

By Kenneth Seeskin
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

From the moment he took office, Pope Leo XIV became a distinguished proponent of peace, human dignity and concern for disadvantaged people wherever they might be.

He was critical of U.S. immigration policy, pointing out that people who had been living decent lives were being rounded up in a way that was “extremely disrespectful” and called for attention to people’s basic dignity.

Recently, he criticized the bellicose rhetoric coming from government officials in stark terms: “But woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own military, economic and political gain, dragging that which is sacred into darkness and filth.”

I have no doubt that the pope realizes the Catholic Church did not always live up to these ideals. I take his message to be that while the history of the church is not perfect, its true teaching is that of peace and respect for human life.

Jews should take note. Although there is no one in Judaism who speaks with the authority of a pope, as people of God, Jews also face the question of how to make sense of an ancient and not always consistent tradition.

There are passages in the Hebrew Bible that glorify or seem to condone mass killing, destruction of whole cities, male domination of women, even slavery. Some people believe that because these passages occur in a sacred text, they should be accepted at face value.

For example, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is often cited to show that the Bible recommends harsh or dehumanizing treatment of criminals. The conquest of Canaan is cited to show that God approves of wiping out whole nations.

This is deplorable. Like any quotation lifted out of a work of literature or legal code, these passages require explanation.



Pope Leo XIV waves as he departs after a Holy Mass at the Malabo Stadium in Equatorial Guinea on April 23. MISPER APAWU/AP

“An eye for an eye” was never intended to justify dismemberment. Rather, it was meant to ensure that justice is proportional and thus to prevent excessive punishment. Although the conquest of Canaan as described in the Bible probably never happened, there is general agreement that because it talks about nations that have long since perished, it is not applicable in our day. It is also noteworthy that despite his military exploits, David is prevented from building the Temple because there is too much blood on his hands.

Both the Catholic Church and Jewish tradition allow for war in certain circumstances, chiefly self-defense. Without going into detail, both treat war as the option of last resort, both

try to limit reckless destruction of life and property and both try to minimize injury to noncombatants. The question is what to do with biblical passages that seem to run counter to this spirit.

The answer is that when you read such passages or hear someone quoting them, you need to stop and ask yourself: Could a just and merciful God really approve of this kind of behavior? Or more specifically: Is this the kind of behavior my religion is trying to promote?

I give Pope Leo credit for speaking out against the facile use of God’s name by people whose primary interest is power. Would a just and merciful God approve of daily bombing raids and threats to destroy civilian infrastructure, let alone a threat to destroy

an entire civilization? To answer “yes” is indeed to drag that which is sacred into darkness.

At present, the Jewish community is deeply divided over Israel’s actions in Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank. My point is that Jews must ask the same questions of their religion. Would a just and merciful God approve of what is happening? Are these the kinds of actions Judaism is supposed to encourage?

I find it hard to answer yes.

In a passage from the Torah read on the holiest day of the year, God reveals to Moses the part of the divine persona that humans are supposed to emulate. Rather than things such as limitless power or notoriety, God lists qualities that even the humblest person can embody: mercy,

graciousness, slowness to anger, and willingness to forgive sin.

Normally I favor keeping religion out of politics. But I would love to see a candidate run on a platform based on these qualities. I would love even more if government officials stopped making threats, toned down their rhetoric and put regard for human dignity at the top of their agenda.

Although I’m not placing bets that this will happen anytime soon, neither am I giving up my conviction that unless we move in this direction, it is futile to claim that God is on our side.

Kenneth Seeskin is an emeritus professor of philosophy and the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick professor of Jewish civilization at Northwestern University.

Voice of the People

More care into serving riders

After reading James McGowan’s letter about CTA management following the Yellow Line derailment (“CTA management failed riders,” May 2), I felt compelled to write. As a long-time rider I, too, am perplexed by regular displays of poor customer service by CTA employees.

The situation that finally made me throw up my hands in disgust? On May 1, I arrived at the Belmont station on the northbound Red Line at approximately 7:50 p.m. Sitting at the station was a Kimball-bound Brown Line train that, instead of waiting for the Red Line train to let its passengers off, proceeded to head north. What was the rush? According to the monitors at the station, the next Brown Line train wasn’t due for 11 minutes!

Was it too much to expect the Brown Line train to wait 10 to 15 additional seconds to allow Red Line passengers the chance to make a connection? This isn’t the only time this has happened to me (and I suspect other riders).

Here’s an idea to improve customer service that would, as far as I can tell, cost the CTA nothing: If another train pulls into the station, wait so that riders have the opportunity to transfer and get to their destination sooner. I bet it would mean the world to customers like me after a long day at work.

Now, just to show I’m not someone who only gripes about the CTA, let me accentuate the positive. I don’t know who she is or where she was moved to, but the CTA once had a station agent at the Harrison Red Line weekday mornings who displayed the most wonderful customer service skills. Not only did I routinely see her outside her booth helping individuals navigate the system, but also, I went to her with numerous concerns, all of which she would address. She even let me know the outcome the next day.

Shame on me for never getting her name, considering we exchanged “hellos” every morning and she even inquired how I was doing after seeing me walking with a cane following an injury.

C’mon, CTA. It’s clear you and your employees have the capability to perform better than you did the evening of May 1. Start by going after the low-hanging fruit that will improve the transit experience for your customers at no additional cost.

I don’t think this is too much to ask from an agency that impacts



CTA trains make their way through Chicago’s South Loop on March 11. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

the day-to-day lives of so many residents.

— Craig Juszak, Chicago

Obsessed with abortion

Once again, the Tribune has a large article about Gov. JB Pritzker and his obsession with abortion (“Amendment for abortion rights still not a reality,” May 3). The article is centered around the idea of adding an amendment to the state constitution that would make abortion access a constitutional right. It also notes women from surrounding states coming here for abortions.

From from 2020 to 2024, there was a yearly average of about 63,000 abortions in Illinois.

I have some questions. Has the Catholic Church left Illinois? Cardinal Blase Cupich led the invocation at the Democratic National Convention. Did he mention anything about abortion? Can the Tribune publish articles explaining how to prevent unwanted pregnancies? Does the state of Illinois have any programs or funds set aside for preventive education to avoid pregnancy? Do we as citizens of Illinois really want to be known as the abortion capital of the United States?

We need to get out the vote to get the governor and his majority out of office. We need to return Illinois to a commonsense state.

— Larry Geraghty, Tinley Park

Traffic management blunders

Andrew Chrismer’s op-ed (“What the traffic mess near the site of Chicago’s future casino says about the city’s process,” May 3) on lack of planning leading to traffic snarls near the new casino development struck a chord.

It brought to mind a question I’d asked my wife when we were stuck in horrendous traffic heading downtown on the Kennedy Expressway on a recent Saturday afternoon. As always on Saturday afternoons, the express lanes going into the city were closed just as we and thousands of other suburbanites were heading downtown to take advantage of the city’s restaurants and theater.

Who are the people making decisions that affect traffic flow, and have they ever tried driving into the city from the North Shore on a Saturday afternoon and asked why the express lanes aren’t open for inbound traffic?

Perhaps there’s a reason, or perhaps, as Chrismer concluded, no one is putting their heads together to see how things really could work better.

— Daniel Rosenberg, Highland Park

The voice of Chicago Flips Red

Chicago Flips Red is a pro-Donald Trump group led by African American women whose members show up, stand in line

and speak during the allotted time at public meetings. Because of that, Democrats — not used to any counter voices in Chicago — don’t like the group.

Even the Chicago Teachers Union has complained that the group is too loud and intimidating.

How rich is that? The CTU complaining that a group is too loud and aggressive is like a pit bull complaining about other dogs’ behavior.

I applaud Chicago Flips for providing an actual counter voice in Chicago.

— Malcolm Montgomery, Hammond, Indiana

Clouding up room with noise

I once attended a Metropolitan Water Reclamation District board meeting, which was also attended by members of the Chicago Flips Red group. After hearing some of them speak, I was extremely disappointed in the fact that through their gruff tactics, obnoxious rhetoric and false narratives, no one in the room even remotely gave them more than a rolling of the eyes and a remorseful head shake.

These reactions come from those who actually wish to hold

their elected officials accountable by speaking to them in person and letting them know that behind each vote is a taxpaying citizen.

Having to fight and co-exist with those hell-bent on spewing lies and attention-grabbing hyperbole only clouds up the room, ruins the mood and takes away minutes from those who have been tackling real problems that truly need their government’s help.

And while there are many in this city, county and state who are tired of living under the heavy tax burden and corruption of Democratic-majority rule, few will trade the safety and security of decency and commonsense governing that needs reform, for the chaos, lies and dysfunction currently engulfing the Republican Party and our federal government.

— Ephraim Lee, Police District councilor, Chicago

Vallas’ AI op-ed a terrible take

Paul Vallas’ opinion piece on the value of artificial intelligence in education is a terrible take in a sea of terrible takes from him (“How AI can bring the DNA of success to every classroom,” May 7) How out of touch can you be? He has clearly not been near a classroom in decades, and I’m willing to bet that he is on boards that push for-profit education and education tech.

AI is pushing groups of students and adults into being noncritical thinkers and the wholesale buying of anything tech provides. Writing, thinking and creativity are suffering under the weight of AI incorporation, and buying more AI education tech as well as paying for more administration is killing education.

I cannot fathom why the Tribune opinion team keeps giving him a platform over and over again.

— Lara Taylor, LaGrange

Note to readers

In honor of our “Chicago 2050” op-ed series, we’d like to hear from you about your hopes for what Chicago will be like in 25 years. (Sincere thoughts only.) Send a letter of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and your city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.