

# Govt lost sight of the ball



**ACROSS THE AISLE**  
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

IT'S JUST all accumulating together. We have frayed relations with the US over tariffs, we are on the wrong side of the AI mania, we are a big energy importer during an Iran conflict, and we have El Niño to deal with. The government needs to think as passionately about getting foreign capital back — perhaps through tax cuts — as they do about elections. Private investment is stagnant because the ground-level business environment remains difficult due to regulation and investigative agencies. India consistently disappoints both the optimist and the pessimist. We still have the second or third most expensive stock market in the world, which is a note of caution." (The Indian Express, May 12, 2026).

I did not say those words, so the trolls may relax. It was a statement by Mr Ruchir Sharma (author of *The Rise and Fall of Nations, What Went Wrong with Capitalism, etc.*). It is a virtual indictment of the BJP government's management of the economy. But I admit to expressing views on the same lines — especially about the frayed relations with the US, getting foreign capital back, the unfriendly regulatory environment, the role of

investigative agencies, and so on. These issues were hidden from the public's information and were cleverly side-tracked during parliamentary and public debates.

## In the corner

Pushed into a corner, a week after the results of the four state elections, the Hon'ble prime minister, Mr Narendra Modi, made a remarkable confession. For the government's sins of omission and commission, Mr Modi asked the people to make sacrifices.

The stark facts are:

- US/Israel vs Iran war will complete 3 months on May 31, and the end is not in sight;
- All West Asian countries are involved in the war one way or other;
- the price of Brent crude is hovering around USD 107 per barrel;
- the rupee is at its lowest level at Rs 95.70 to a US dollar;
- the official number of CPI inflation is 3.5% and food inflation is 4.3%; domestic LPG cylinder costs Rs 913 and commercial cylinder Rs 3071-3237; WPI inflation is 8.3%.
- net foreign investment in April-December 2025: FDI — a modest USD 3 billion, FII/FPI — negative USD 4.3 billion;
- private capital investment intentions in 2025-26 totaled Rs 6.6 to 6.8 lakh crore;
- the value of gold imports in 2025-26 was USD 72 billion; and
- after abolition of MGNREGS that gave work on average 50 days a year, there is no wage employment programme for the poor.

## PM absolutely correct

The prime minister has asked the

	2012-13	2013-14
Revenue Deficit	3.6%	3.2%
Fiscal Deficit	4.9	4.5
Current Account Deficit	4.8	1.7
GDP growth rate	5.5	6.4
Forex Reserves (USD)	292 bn	304 bn (after low of \$ 275 bn)
Year-end Re/USD rate	Rs 54.39	Rs 60.10 (after low of Rs 68.85)

Source: GOI, MOSPI, RBI & CGA

**The PM's plate is full. He must re-visit the regulatory regime; roll back the present regime which is as oppressive as the pre-liberalisation regime; sternly rein in the investigative agencies; stabilise the exchange rate; reduce the tax rates**

people to do several things. Since the prime minister did not notice that his ministers were sleeping on their jobs, he had no choice but to make an appeal directly to the people. Gold imports must be curbed; austerity must be observed; self-restraint must be exercised in fuel consumption, cooking oil and fertilisers; unnecessary imports must be avoided; and so on. But what the prime minister needed to do was a critical analysis of his government's performance.

The prime minister is the most profligate in fuel consumption: he flies out of Delhi practically every day (and returns to Delhi) for inaugurations and even swearing-in of governments. His convoy was the longest, he has now curtailed it. His minister of finance has *not once* spoken about the *fragile* financial situation today (while she rejoices that under UPA *one* investment bank clubbed India with four countries and described India as a fragile economy). She does not acknowledge that the 'taper tantrum' triggered a world-wide financial crisis in 2013-14 or that the UPA took hard measures (which the BJP

mocked), and the situation was retrieved. The proof of the pudding are the following results, particularly the GDP growth rate (see box): The minister of commerce has been on a FTA-signing spree. By last count, he has concluded 9 Free Trade Agreements in the last 5 years. But then came the warning from the Chief Economic Adviser (CEA): there is a substantial gap between what the trade deals promise and what the regulatory frameworks actually allow.

## To do list

It is obvious that the prime minister wants to compress the CAD, augment the foreign exchange reserves and stabilise the exchange rate. He is absolutely correct.

So, back to Mr Ruchir Sharma. The prime minister's plate is full. He must re-visit the regulatory regime (RBI, SEBI, CDDT, CBIT, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Corporate Affairs, among others); roll back the present regime which is as oppressive and control-oriented as the pre-liberalisation regime; and sternly rein in the investigative agencies and do not use them for oblique or political purposes; stabilise the exchange rate; and reduce the tax rates. Once these things are done, foreign capital will come back to India. He cannot do these with the present ministers (mostly, market sceptics). He must take the help of well-meaning and wise persons.

I suggest the prime minister appoint a market-friendly expert as the leader and allow the leader to choose the other team members, and advise on the urgent measures within 15 days.

NEXT COLUMN: MAY 31, 2026

# Real change needed, not tokenism



**FIFTH COLUMN**  
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IF THERE is one thing that makes me instantly suspicious, it is when political leaders make appeals to us citizens in the name of patriotism. What always comes to mind is that old warning from the British political thinker Samuel Johnson. As long ago as the eighteenth century he noticed that 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel'. This is why it disturbed me a little when the Prime Minister while making his appeal for 'austerity' urged us citizens of India to start tightening our belts in the name of patriotism. Or '*desh bhakti*' as we like to call it since it evokes love of our beloved Bharat Mata instead of mere patriotism.

We all know that these are hard times not just for India but for the world. And that it is not the fault of our own dear leader that his dream for making our country fully 'developed' by 2047 could now be seriously endangered. It was in any case an ambitious goal considering that nearly half of our citizens survive on subsidised grain from the government. And our women are so very poor that they are inclined these days to vote for any political party that offers them pocket money of as little as Rs 1,500 a month.

In the Maharashtra election, I witnessed with my own eyes how this turned the tide in favour of the incumbent BJP/Shiv Sena government. So effective are these election time handouts that there is not a political party now who does not use this method to win elections. I feel the need to point out here to our revered political leaders that this kind of cynical trickery is certainly the opposite of patriotism. The money for this election time bribery comes out of funds that it would be far more patriotic to use on: building real assets like roads, schools, hospitals and improving the appalling state of urban slums.

The Prime Minister's appeal for 'patriotic' austerity does not affect me too much. I work from home and rarely buy gold. I will be personally affected by restrictions on foreign travel as it will make it much harder for me to see my exiled son even once a year. The Prime Minister's appeal to farmers to use less fertiliser worried me because I am old enough to remember when foodgrain was shipped to India under something called PL 480 which was an American charity exercise called 'Food for Peace'. More recently, we saw what happened in Sri Lanka because President Gotabaya Rajapaksa tried to save foreign exchange by restricting the import of fertiliser. Sri Lanka ran out of food and Rajapaksa lost his job when people took to the streets in protest.

What depressed me about the Prime Minister's austerity appeal is that it brought back memories of those dismal and bleak 'socialist' secular decades when everything was in short supply. Foreign travel was impossible because India did not have enough foreign exchange to allow its citizens to waste it on having fun in foreign countries. I remember that the first time I travelled abroad I was allowed barely enough foreign exchange to pay for a taxi from the airport into the city of London. Modi's appeal sounds like he is warning us all that his promise of '*ache din*' is now in temporary abeyance.

The other thing that worries me is that his appeal is inevitably going to lead to tokenism on the part of our duplicitous political leaders. After the Prime Minister cut the size of his own cavalcade, there were silly attempts by some to travel pillion on mopeds and to try to fool us into believing that for 'patriotic' reasons they were going to sacrifice their lavish and luxurious lifestyle for something humbler. We all know how soon they will go back to their old ways. We also know that those political leaders and bureaucrats whose children study in foreign universities, and there are far too many, will surely travel to spend summer holidays with their privileged progeny.

So here is a suggestion, dear Prime Minister. Instead of appealing to us 'patriotic' Indians to tighten our belts by forgoing our tiny comforts, would it not save much, much more money for you and all BJP chief ministers to cut government spending on itself? The man who writes the column next door to this one told me once, when he was Finance Minister, that at least a quarter of the items on the agenda of the Government of India could be cut without anyone noticing. At least half of our government departments could also be cut and the officials who man them can be employed more productively.

There are other things that government can and must do in these austere times. The Defence and Railway ministries have on their hands vast tracts of land that is just sitting idle and this often gets occupied by squatters and slumlords. Why can this not be used for commercial purposes and for building the affordable rental housing that our cities so desperately need? This time of war and tribulation can be turned into a time of real change for the way in which India is governed. Instead of cutting down on small things, could it not be time for us to start cutting down on the big things? It will help hugely to make us '*viksit*' on target.



**INSIDE TRACK** | BY COOM KAPOOR

## DIPLOMATIC DRESSING DOWN

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi expressed his unhappiness at a meeting with heads of Indian missions in Delhi last month. The PM felt that our ambassadors have not been sufficiently proactive in projecting the country's positive image in the foreign media. They were also not always on the ball in alerting New Delhi of major changes in our neighbourhood. Dinesh Trivedi, the new political appointee ambassador in Bangladesh, was present when the PM pointedly remarked that *anubhavi* (experienced and knowledgeable) people should be selected for ambassadorial assignments.

Modi perhaps had in mind US Ambassador to India Sergei Gora as a role model. Gora has certainly made his presence felt in New Delhi. Last week, Gora attended the swearing-in ceremony of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in Guwahati and is leading the preparations at Bharat Mandapam, the government's trade centre building, for a party for US Secretary of State Marco Rubio to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the US Republic. Rubio is slated to visit India later this month. Gora has even hired 250 Delhi auto rickshaws to put up American flags and stickers to mark the US anniversary celebrations.

## SWITCHING COLOURS IN BENGAL

The most extraordinary political turnaround after Mamata Banerjee's defeat was of a Bengali daily owned by a businessman-lawyer known to be extremely close to Banerjee's nephew, Abhishek Banerjee. The newspaper's editor, in a signed piece, painted his periodical as a victim of Mamata's tyranny and claimed that because it carried a photograph of the candlelight vigil of doctors during the R G Kar Hospital murder and rape case in 2024, all government advertisements were withdrawn. The overnight political switch in a section of the Bengali media following the BJP's landslide victory in West Bengal is unabashed. During the Trinamool Congress's long reign, Mamata was generous with government advertisements to the media, provided they toed her line. In fact, a national TV channel conveniently adopted contrary editorial positions in Kolkata and Delhi. Indicative of changing times is the fact that last week, at least five Kolkata newspapers carried prominently an article by Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat on Gujarat's Somnath temple. In earlier times, the article would have most likely been buried. In deference to the new reality, the Kolkata municipality which had for years painted traffic dividers blue and white, the colours of the Trinamool party, has now begun repainting them yellow and white. Even the CM's secretariat which was illuminated blue and white at night has switched to saffron.

## REEL LIFE BESTED BY REALITY

Actor politician Joseph Vijay's victory at the polls is dramatic, magical and as full of twists and turns as any of his blockbuster movies. The novice politician was described dismissively as a "weekend politician" with a party "built on a cardboard foundation". The actor addressed a minimal number of election rallies, sometimes bailing out on programmes at the last minute, while his rivals campaigned from morning to night. He was handicapped by three major scandals: his wife of 27 years sued for divorce; his partner, actress Trisha Krishnan, accompanied him in public; and he was held responsible by his rivals for a stampede at a political rally in Karur in which 41 people died. But nothing could lessen the voter's ardour. Even the six-day wait before Governor Rajendra Arlekar agreed to swear in Vijay was as suspenseful as any movie climax. Vijay was a tantalising two votes short of the finishing line before he finally managed to persuade the VCK party to support him. But then the VCK leader had second thoughts, reportedly lured by the temptation that he could become king himself instead of Vijay. Udhayanidhi Stalin is said to have worked behind the scenes, using every trick in the trade to block Vijay from being sworn in as CM. He even proposed the unthinkable to the AIADMK, that its decades-long rival, the DMK, could offer it outside support. Udhayanidhi and Vijay started out as good friends and the DMK scion was the producer of Vijay's *Kuruvai* in 2008. The story goes that Udhayanidhi initially encouraged Vijay's political ambitions in the belief that he would eat into the AIADMK's anti-incumbency vote, but by 2025, he realised his script had backfired. Some other melodramatic lines in this real-life script: Vijay's mother, singer Shobha Chandrasekhar, in 2005 sang a ballad in a movie claiming prophetically, "If the poor decide, you become chief minister tomorrow." (The song has been re-released with a re-mix.) Vijay's much talked about movie, *Jana Nayagan*, yet to be cleared by the censors, has a scene showing the hero driving a car with the number plate TN CM 2026!

# How 1970s marked a violent turn for Bengal's electoral politics



**HISTORY HEADLINE**  
BY SHYAMLAL YADAV

THE FIRST three general elections in Independent India (1952, 1957 and 1962) were largely peaceful, including in West Bengal. However, by the 1967 elections, with the politics of the country in churn, things began to change. Political tensions rose, organised violence became more frequent, and within a few years, large parts of West Bengal had descended into what the Election Commission later described as a "reign of terror".

The period between 1967 and 1972 marked a turning point in West Bengal's politics. Violence entered electoral politics in a sustained way and continued for decades after.

Several political shifts took place before the 1967 elections. The Congress split in West Bengal and the Bangla Congress was formed. The Communist Party, too, split in 1964 into the CPI and the CPI(M). In the 1967 Assembly elections, the Congress won 127 seats, the Bangla Congress 34, the CPI(M) 43 and the CPI 16.

Ajoy Mukherjee of Bangla Congress became chief minister. After his government fell, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, an independent MLA, took over as CM. Frequent defections and unstable coalitions — a trend visible in other states too — led to repeated mid-term elections in West Bengal in 1969, 1971 and 1972. The year 1967 also saw the birth of the Naxalite movement in Naxalbari. Together, political instability and radical violence changed the nature of elections in the state.

Yet, the first signs were not dramatic. The 1967 and 1969 Assembly elections were largely peaceful. The Election Commission's 1967 report noted: "It was indeed gratifying that a large State like West Bengal, where during the pre-election period tension was evidently acute in many places, should have been able to manage a



(left) Hemanta Kumar Basu, president of the All India Forward Bloc, was among those killed in 1971; in the 1972 elections that followed, Congress's S S Ray became CM. FILE

smooth and peaceful poll on a single day."

The situation changed sharply by 1971. Newspapers at the time carried daily reports of murders and attacks. That year, West Bengal went to mid-term Assembly polls alongside the Lok Sabha elections. The Election Commission fixed the polling date for the state for March 10, 1971, a few days after voting in the rest of the country, so that security forces could be concentrated there.

Then, as now, Opposition parties alleged that the one-day-poll was intentionally fixed by the Election Commission to make the "operation of chemicalised ballot papers" a success. The EC stuck to its position, recording that the state was passing through an "abnormal" phase marked by violence and killings by groups that did not believe in elections or the ballot box, including Naxalites. The poll panel later wrote that the state was in "consternation and extreme panic". The Army had to be deployed in Kolkata and other parts of the state. Armed police forces were brought in from Assam, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and even Punjab.

The situation became so serious that many polling and presiding officers approached the Calcutta High Court, saying they could not be forced to perform election duty under such conditions.

The Election Commission eventually held the polls in West Bengal on March 10, 1971.

But polling had to be countermanded in three Assembly constituencies — Dum Dum, Ukhra (SC) and Shampukur — after

the murders of candidates.

Hemanta Kumar Basu, president of the All India Forward Bloc and candidate from Shampukur, was murdered on February 20, 1971. He was among the state's most respected leaders. The election there was cancelled and a fresh poll ordered with Ajoy Kumar Biswas nominated as the Forward Bloc's candidate. The election was fixed for June 6. But days ahead of the election, on May 28, 1971, Biswas, too, was murdered, forcing the poll to be countermanded a second time.

Then, in Ukhra, Bangla Congress candidate Debdatta Mondal was murdered on February 17, 1971. And in Dum Dum, Congress (O) candidate Pijush Chandra Ghosh was murdered on March 5, 1971.

In all, four contesting candidates were killed during the election period in 1971 — something unprecedented in independent India at the time.

Even then, violence continued. The Election Commission warned in its report that "the application of physical force to influence the pattern and trend of voting" had become one of the most dangerous features of the election.

Fresh elections could not be completed after the second Shampukur murder because the West Bengal Assembly itself was dissolved on June 25, 1971. The state went to fresh elections again in 1972.

The 1972 elections showed that the violence had not ended. The Election Commission recorded disturbances in several polling stations, especially in areas around Kolkata. It also noted "tension and strained feelings among the various political parties and their workers and supporters".

Large-scale rigging was later alleged by opposition parties in many constituencies, though the Election Commission recorded only a few formal complaints from voters who said they had been prevented from voting.

After the 1972 elections, Siddhartha Shankar Ray became chief minister. His tenure lasted until 1977, when the Left Front led by Jyoti Basu came to power. Ray remains the last Congress chief minister of West Bengal.

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# Small sacrifices for tough times



**ON THE LOOSE**  
BY LEHER KALA

merely abandoned Bharat for these places. Only to discover, to one's amazement, that the second one steps out of India, systems work with reliable predictability. Needless to say, tax-paying citizens have every right to spend precious time off and hard-earned cash any way they want, on pristine locales and exploring new cultures. And indeed, the attempt to shift responsibility to the 1% actually hosting marriages abroad ignores the economics of the wedding industry — holding events in Sri Lanka, Bangkok and Istanbul are cheaper, and arguably more memorable than Delhi, Udaipur and Jaipur.

All things being equal, the make/holiday/wed in India thrust is a reasonable ask at a difficult time — but is it our moral responsibility to pledge allegiance to the decrepit and crumbling Lonavalas' and Manalis' when it's so evident that our money is better utilised elsewhere? The PM's sermon, directed at the tiny smattering of well-to-do Indians, suggested we are duty bound to meet the current moment by redirecting self-

interest toward the greater good. A harkback to JFK's unforgettable line, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country. However, our experiences profoundly shape our civic and moral ambitions. For example, after the agonising bloodshed of the last three years, teenagers in Israel are challenging forced conscription, saying they don't want to be complicit in a genocide. Can that be called unpatriotic?

Human beings develop ideas about justice by the application of abstract principles absorbed over decades, combined with the rules we follow in our daily lives. A sense of duty makes us stop at red lights, or cast votes, for that matter. Ethics, broadly, are about how we choose to live but also, how we treat one another. In that vein, there's an expectation that society's rulers will act in ways to provide the best outcome for everyone. The Indian government was mysteriously silent about the impending chaos when they were consumed by winning elections, addressing the fallout of the Iran

war only after their selfish objectives were met. But do the wily manoeuvrings of the political class absolve ordinary citizens from their patriotic duty, of cutting back on frills during wartime, to produce more benefit than harm? If one subscribes to the postmodern perspective that there can never be any one fully correct answer to any moral dilemma, it's slightly easier to distinguish between alleged rights or wrongs.

Should someone who's booked non-refundable tickets to London and paid in advance for accommodation cancel their trip and philosophically absorb the loss? I think not. But if one was at a planning stage for an exotic vacation, a postponement may be considered. As individuals reacting to world events, it's easy to think our decisions have no intrinsic value. To pare down the issue to its most basic, an act is correct if it will produce a greater balance of positivity over negativity than the available alternatives.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

NO CURB ON ITS IMPORT FOR PROCESSING, VALUE-ADDED EXPORTS AS JEWELLERY

## After duty hike, govt curbs silver imports to aid rupee

ENS Economic Bureau  
New Delhi, May 16

THE GOVERNMENT on Saturday put silver imports for domestic consumption under the restricted category, requiring prior government approval.

This follows a series of steps taken over the last few days to discourage precious metal imports, which strain the current account and increase forex outflow due to high global prices.

On Wednesday, the government raised the customs duty on imports of gold and silver to 15% from 6%, and on platinum to 15.4% from 6.4% to moderate these non-essential imports amidst the West Asia crisis.

A day later, it put a quantitative limit of 100 kg on the import of the yellow metal under a key export scheme to curb misuse of the duty-free import facility for value-added exports.

As per a Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) notification, imports of bars containing silver up to 99% would now be in the restricted category if it is meant for domestic consumption.

However, silver imported for processing and value-added exports as jewellery would continue to be unrestricted.

Imports by 100% export-oriented units and units located in Special Economic



Silver imports increased by 157% to \$411 million in April. REUTERS

Zones (SEZs) shall also not be subject to any restrictions provided the imported goods are not sold in the domestic tariff area. Rising imports of gold and silver amidst their rising prices in the past one year have been a cause of concern. With the onset of war in West Asia from February 28, the government has taken steps over the past week to curb imports and conserve foreign exchange in an uncertain global atmosphere.

In 2025-26, silver imports increased by 150% to \$12.05 billion. In volume terms, however, the increase was only 42%, reaching 7,334 tonnes. International prices of the metal rose

74% in the year.

Similarly, gold imports increased 24% to \$71.98 billion in the last financial year. This occurred despite a 4.7% drop in gold import volume to 721 tonnes, as international gold prices increased by 30% during the year.

The demand for these metals remained robust even in April with gold imports increasing 81.7% on year to \$5.6 billion while silver imports increased 157% to \$411 million.

As a large importer of crude oil, India remains vulnerable to elevated energy prices and supply-side disruptions, which can increase the import bill,

exert pressure on inflation, and the current account deficit, officials said at the time of the duty hike on gold and silver last week. "In such circumstances, prudent management of the country's external sector becomes essential," an official had said. Officials said precious metals, while culturally and financially significant, are "predominantly consumption and investment driven" in nature and that such imports involve "substantial outflow of foreign exchange".

A depreciating rupee is adding to the country's import bill burden. India's foreign exchange resources, therefore, must be prioritised towards essential imports such as crude oil, fertilisers, industrial raw materials, defence requirements, critical technologies, and capital goods, the official had said. Over the last few years, India has seen significant foreign exchange outflows on account of higher imports of precious metals and spending on overseas travel under the Liberalised Remittance Scheme (LRS).

The pressure on India's external sector has been felt amid the ongoing West Asia war, with forex reserves plummeting by \$32 billion in 10 weeks since the onset of the conflict, and crude oil prices continuing to hover above \$100 a barrel. WITH FE

Intra-BRICS trade accounts for just 5% of global trade: Comm secy

New Delhi: The intra-BRICS trade has increased multiple times over the last few years but it accounts for only around 5% of the global trade, reflecting huge untapped potential for deeper integration and stronger value-chain linkages, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal has said.

BRICS is a grouping of 11 developing countries — Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates.

It acts as a platform for consultation and cooperation on contemporary issues having global as well as regional significance, and issues of global political and economic governance. India has assumed the BRICS Chairship for the fourth time, after 2012, 2016 and 2021. Addressing the 2nd Meeting of the BRICS Contact Group on Trade and Economic Issues, held in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, on May 14-15, Agrawal said intra-BRICS merchandise trade has risen 13-fold, from \$84 billion in 2003 to \$1.17 trillion in 2024. However, he said, this "trade still accounts for only around 5% of global trade, indicating significant untapped potential for deeper trade integration, stronger value-chain linkages". Issues such as promoting more balanced trade, and opening new opportunities in the services sector were also discussed. PTI

WEST ASIA WAR

## Singapore pips UAE as India's second largest export destination

Exports to Singapore surged by 180% in April to \$3.2 billion

Ravi Dutta Mishra  
New Delhi, May 16

INDIA'S TRADE flows have begun shifting amid the prolonged closure of the Strait of Hormuz since March, as traders have begun finding alternate routes to export goods amid disruption in trade with countries in the West Asia region, an analysis of data shared by the Commerce and Industry Ministry showed.

The most notable shift in trade routes was seen in the two transshipment hubs that India has free trade agreements (FTA) with - UAE and Singapore. Replacing UAE, Singapore became India's second largest export market in April, registering a five-fold jump compared to February.

The Strait of Hormuz was closed on March 2. While exports to Singapore surged by 180% in April to \$3.2 billion compared to \$1.14 billion a year ago, exports to UAE slipped by 36% to \$2.18 billion last month compared to \$3.43 billion a year ago. Exports from Singapore have been rising month-on-month too since February amid the disruption in trade with UAE.

On the import side too, the West Asia war has led to new import partners. Energy exporters such as Oman, Peru and Nigeria broke into India's top 20 import sources. Shipment from Oman alone more than tripled to \$1.48 billion in April compared to \$429.58 million.

These changes come as traditional sources of energy are facing restrictions. Imports from Qatar in March slipped by



On the import side too, the war has led to new import partners. Energy exporters such as Oman, Peru and Nigeria broke into India's top 20 import sources. REUTERS

47% to \$537.34 million compared to \$1.03 billion during March last year. However, imports from Saudi Arabia recovered sharply in April to \$3.85 billion compared to \$2.06 billion in March.

The war in West Asia has led to a sharp jump in global energy prices, with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and damage to Gulf nations' energy infrastructure adversely impacting supplies. For India, in addition to a widening of the import bill and a cloudy outlook for exports, the conflict has directly impacted the rupee, which has fallen to multiple record lows against the US dollar on its way to tumbling 5.2% since the end of February.

To ward off further pressure on the currency, the government has been taking austerity measures to ease the strain on the use of foreign currency and reduce fuel consumption. In addition to a hike in the import duty on precious metals, oil marketing companies on Friday increased the pump price

of petrol and diesel for the first time in four years.

The Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway between Iran and Oman, is a critical maritime choke point that accounted for about a fifth of global oil flows before the West Asia war began on February 28. Since then, vessel movements through the strait have been effectively halted, leading to an unprecedented global energy supply crisis.

According to the latest assessment by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), West Asian oil producers Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain collectively shut in 10.5 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil production in April, up from 8.9 million bpd in March.

The EIA has also revised upwards — by 19% — the estimated West Asia oil production shut-in for March from its earlier estimate of 7.5 million bpd. The estimated shut-in in April is a little over 10% of the global liquid fuels consumption.

## Sovereign Gold Bonds missed amid PM's austerity appeal, import duty hike

Siddharth Upasani  
New Delhi, May 16

THE RAPID fall of the rupee has forced policymakers to come up with some quick solutions, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling for a certain type of austerity that reduces the need to expend foreign currency for imports.

Then, the import duty on gold, silver, and platinum was hiked — economists don't expect this to move to meaningfully bring down the gold import bill.

"Historically, the effectiveness of gold import duty hikes in controlling imports has been mixed," Nomura economists Sonal Varma and Aurodeep Nandi said.

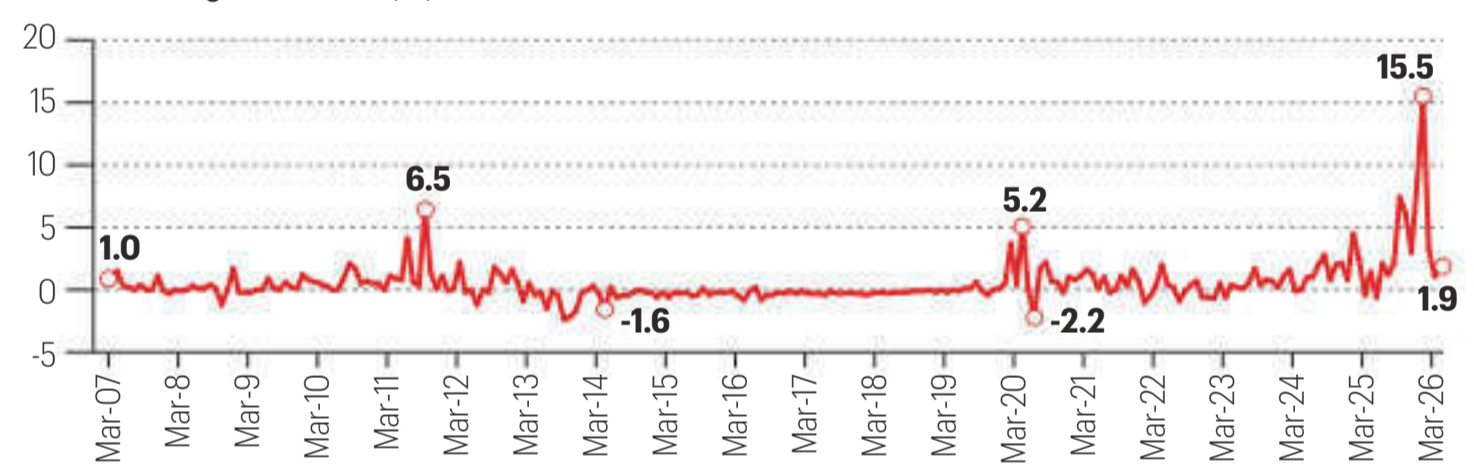
"When India raised duties to 10% in 2013, gold imports did decline initially, but gold smuggling increased to meet suppressed demand. More recently, the reduction of the duty to 6% was intended to curb smuggling and formalise the market."

One possible solution the government may not implement is something it has previously deployed: Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs).

Launched in late 2015, the scheme was discontinued in early 2024 despite being an amazing investment opportunity for the public, who bought bonds equivalent to 147 tonnes of gold and worth Rs 72,275 crore. These bonds are now giving eye-watering returns to their holders of more than

### Gold investment mania fuels Indian ETFs

Indian ETFs gold demand (tn)



SOURCE: WORLD GOLD COUNCIL

200% of their life of eight years, and that is without taking into account the 2.5% interest and zero long-term capital gains tax on redemption.

So why was the scheme discontinued despite the obvious benefits for the public? Because the government felt it was having to pay too much.

### Cost of saving forex

The logic of SGBs was sound: meet the investment demand for gold without importing the metal. All the government had to do was set aside money for interest payments and the market value of the bonds maturing in a year. However, the rationale for discontinuing the scheme had a different consideration: the cost of borrowing.

Any bond the government issues to an investor — be it banks, foreign investors, or individuals — is considered a borrowing. "The recent global geopolitical unrest has impacted

gold prices significantly, increasing the cost of borrowing through SGBs," the finance ministry told the Parliament in a written response to a question in July 2025.

"The government's endeavour is to minimise the cost of borrowings and hence it is imperative for a prudent debt management strategy to carefully consider the above factor while deciding on offering new tranches of Sovereign Gold Bonds." But the SGBs were never intended to be a way to finance the government's fiscal deficit.

Demand in SGBs only picked up pace after Covid struck, with roughly Rs 63,000 crore of these bonds being purchased from FY21 to FY24.

Over these four years, the central government borrowed Rs 40 lakh crore on a net basis to help meet its annual fiscal deficits. Yes, the scheme was expensive — the total annual interest outgo and redemption

liability of SGBs issued from 2015 to 2024-25 was nearly Rs 18,000 crore. But it was hardly a make-or-buy one for a government which is going to spend Rs 14 lakh crore in FY27 as interest on past debt.

If stopping the scheme was not enough, the FY27 Union Budget went one step further and said only those SGBs bought by someone and held till they matured eight years later were exempt from capital gains tax. This meant any gold bonds purchased in the secondary market — they are also traded on exchanges — will face capital gains tax at the time of maturity.

### Rising investment demand

What the SGBs did was ease the strain on the import bill and reduce spending of foreign currency reserves of the country.

Indians' demand for gold is a structural weakness of the economy. While our inherent

affection for it offers an easy diversification of savings, the lack of domestic supply means almost the entire demand has to be met via imports, which adversely hits the trade balance.

And we import a lot of gold. It was \$72 billion in FY26, up 24% from FY25, or more than 700 tonnes. More than 9% of all our imports in FY26 was gold, with another 1.6% being silver.

In the absence of SGBs, Indians have gone the Exchange Trade Fund (ETF) route over the last year in a manner never seen before.

But gold ETFs — essentially mutual funds that invest in gold — require investments to be backed by gold holdings. In January 2026, for the first time ever, Indians invested more in gold ETFs than equity mutual funds: Rs 24,040 crore versus Rs 24,029 crore.

This required these funds to import a record 15.52 tn of gold. ETFs purchases that month accounted for 22% of all gold imports (Rs 1.1 lakh crore) in January. For silver ETFs, the figure was even larger: 52%. According to the World Gold Council, there has been a "structural shift" in India's gold demand, with investment demand making up nearly 70% of the total demand in January-March 2026, while the share of jewellery fell to around 30% — the lowest in at least 25 years.

Unless this investment demand for gold is met, imports — through ETFs and other routes — will continue and the rupee will keep weakening.

## Samsung Elec & labour union to resume pay talks on Monday

Seoul: Samsung Electronics and its South Korean labour union will resume pay talks on Monday with a government mediator, the union said, in a move that could ease concerns over a potentially disruptive strike at the tech giant.

The union said in a statement on Saturday that Samsung Electronics had replaced the company's representative for the negotiations, while the two sides would have a separate meeting later on Saturday. The union did not elaborate on Saturday's agenda. Samsung Electronics declined to comment on either meeting when contacted.

The announcement came shortly after Samsung Electronics Chairman Jay Y. Lee apologised to customers and the public over the labour dispute in his first public comments on the issue. REUTERS

### BRIEFLY

#### Tata, ASML join hands for chip manufacturing in India

New Delhi: Electronics manufacturing company Tata Electronics and Dutch semiconductor equipment major ASML have joined hands to enable chip manufacturing in India, a joint statement said on Saturday. The pact was announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Netherlands. ASML is known for having monopoly in a category of lithography equipment which is critical for production of advance small size semiconductors. Through this partnership, ASML will enable the establishment and successful ramp of Tata Electronics' upcoming 300 mm (12 inch) semiconductor Fab in Dholera, Gujarat. PTI

#### Vodafone Idea posts surprise Q4 profit

New Delhi: Indian telecoms operator Vodafone Idea reported an unexpected fourth-quarter net profit on Saturday after receiving a 430 crore rupees (\$500 million) investment from Aditya Birla Group. The company posted consolidated profit after tax of 519.76 billion rupees (\$5.42 billion) in the three months to March 31. Analysts had expected a loss. Earlier this year, the Indian government capped Vodafone Idea's adjusted gross revenue dues at \$13.79 million annually for the next six years, easing near-term cash flow pressure for the firm. Vodafone Idea has invested heavily in its 4G and 5G networks in recent years to improve service quality and curb a steady decline in its subscriber base. REUTERS

OPENAI BELIEVES IT DID NOT RECEIVE THE COMMERCIAL & STRATEGIC BENEFITS IT HAD EXPECTED FROM THE DEAL

## Why OpenAI plans to sue Apple over strained ties on ChatGPT integration

Soumyarendra Barik  
New Delhi, May 16

OPENAI IS preparing legal action against Apple over what it sees as a breakdown in their two-year-old artificial intelligence (AI) partnership, Bloomberg reported. The Microsoft-backed AI firm reportedly believes it did not receive the commercial and strategic benefits it had expected from the deal that brought ChatGPT integration to Apple devices.

The partnership, unveiled in 2024 as part of the company's "Apple Intelligence" push, allowed Siri to route some user queries to ChatGPT and enabled iPhone users to sign up for ChatGPT subscriptions directly through Apple's ecosystem.

OpenAI had expected the arrangement to significantly boost subscriptions, visibility and deeper integration of its AI models across Apple's apps and services. However, Bloomberg and Reuters reported that OpenAI now feels Apple has not expanded the collaboration meaningfully enough.

OpenAI's lawyers are already working with an external law firm to examine possible legal options, including issuing Apple a formal breach-of-contract notice, according to reports. The company is still seeking a negotiated solution and may not immediately file a full lawsuit. The tensions have also been aggravated by Apple's broader AI strategy. Earlier this year, the company announced a multiyear AI



The deal allowed Siri to route some user queries to ChatGPT and enabled iPhone users to sign up for ChatGPT subscriptions directly through Apple's ecosystem. REUTERS

partnership with Google, which would see Gemini technology power the next generation of Siri on devices like the iPhone.

The dispute comes at a sen-

sitive moment for both firms. Apple has faced criticism and even legal scrutiny over delays to its AI-powered Siri features, while OpenAI is rapidly expan-

ding its consumer and enterprise footprint amid intensifying competition in the generative AI market.

### The deal between Apple and Google

The partnership will see Apple pay about \$1 billion a year for a 1.2-trillion parameter artificial intelligence model developed by Alphabet Inc.'s Google to run its overhauled Siri voice assistant. The collaboration extends beyond just Siri.

According to a joint statement, the next generation of Apple foundation models will be based on Google's Gemini models and cloud technology. Apple confirmed it chose Google's technology after careful evaluation, determining it pro-

vides the most capable foundation for its AI ambitions.

While the two companies have not made specifics of the agreement public, it is anticipated that Google will license the base technology of Gemini to Apple, with the iPhone maker making tweaks to it to work across its ecosystem.

AI models like Gemini have two stages, one is called a pre-trained model, where it is trained to generate a string of words together, and then comes the post training phase, where the model is offered a distinct personality. Google would most likely offer the pre-trained version of Gemini to Apple.

To address any privacy concerns arising out of the deal, the companies have also said that

Apple Intelligence (the company's branding for its AI offerings) will continue to run on Apple devices and Private Cloud Compute (PCC), while maintaining Apple's privacy standards. The company says its personal cloud ensures that personal user data sent to the PCC isn't accessible to anyone other than the user.

The next-generation Siri is expected to arrive with iOS 26.4, likely releasing to the public in March or April 2026. Google's stock briefly touched above a \$4 trillion market valuation following the announcement.

### Why Apple needs Google's help

Apple has largely stood on the sidelines of the AI revolution

that swept Wall Street following ChatGPT's launch in late 2022. While competitors like Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft invested billions in AI infrastructure and products, Apple struggled to deliver on its AI promises.

The company had announced a significant Siri upgrade during its WWDC 2024 keynote but was forced to delay the features. Apple acknowledged it would take longer than anticipated to deliver these capabilities, pushing the rollout from 2025 to 2026. Google's 1.2 trillion parameter model is larger and more powerful than Apple's own AI model, meaning the revamped Siri should be far more capable than what Apple could have developed independently in the same timeframe.

## IIT-M, IISc team makes carbon-free version of ferrocene sandwich

Vasudevan Mukunth

A compound called ferrocene has been a landmark of chemistry for over seven decades. It consists of an iron atom sandwiched between two flat carbon rings. Its discovery launched the field of organometallic chemistry, with numerous applications in materials science and medicine. Since then, chemists have been trying to create a version of this sandwich that contains no carbon atoms.

In a new study in *Science*, researchers from IIT-Madras and the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, announced they had finally achieved this goal: a stable, carbon-free analogue of ferrocene using boron rings and osmium. “Just as ferrocene started a new era in organometallics, these results will start a new era in inorganic-ferrocene-like materials and will be a part of textbooks of inorganic chemistry,” study co-author and IIT-Madras pro-

fessor Sundargopal Ghosh said. “Our efforts are on to study the reactions of these new compounds.”

Boron is next to carbon on the periodic table and can form similar ring structures. While scientists had created sandwiches containing both carbon and boron, a purely inorganic version has been elusive.

The team turned to computer modelling to predict which metal would best stabilise a boron sandwich, and zeroed in on os-

mium. To create the complex, the team reacted a polymeric osmium-bromine precursor compound with an excess of a borane-dimethyl sulphide reagent. Then they heated the mixture to 100 °C for eight hours and isolated the product as a colourless solid. Finally, they used X-ray diffraction and nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy to check the atoms’ arrangement.

The X-ray analysis revealed a perfect sandwich,

with a single osmium atom between two parallel, five-membered boron rings. But unlike the flat carbon rings in ferrocene, the boron rings used bridging hydrogen atoms between the boron atoms.

These bridges redirected the ring’s electron orbitals towards the metal, creating a bond even stronger than the one in ferrocene. This could pave the way for new catalysts that are stable at much higher temperatures.

According to the paper, the discovery establishes that the sandwich architecture is not exclusive to carbon-based organic chemistry.

“With the renaissance in the 2D chemistry of boron during the last decade, the possibility of metal sandwiched/intercalated bilayers and multilayers will be a reality soon,” Eluvathingal D. Jemmis, IISc chemistry professor and one of the corresponding authors, said.

## SNAPSHOTS



### Older dawn of horse-riding could have changed Eurasia

Scientists have challenged the claim that horse riding began after 2100 BC. They have reported archaeological evidence showing humans rode horses at least 1,000 years prior after analysing three early horse populations in Eurasia. Those at the Botai site indicated horse use by 3500 BC; skeletons of Yamnaya individuals in 3200-2600 BC revealed physical changes due to habitual riding. Early riding allowed these people to manage large herds and migrate vast distances, reshaping Eurasia’s genetic map.



### More selective breeding can help pugs breathe easier

Researchers examined data from over 4,000 bulldogs, French bulldogs, and pugs to analyse brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome, a disorder afflicting flat-faced dogs. They found a genetic link between nostril shape and overall breathing quality and that respiratory function is moderately heritable, meaning careful, selective breeding can improve dogs’ health. The authors also recommended breeders use the Respiratory Function Grading Scheme to identify healthier parents and to pick traits over appearance.



### Humans’ mercury footprint was evident millennia ago

A Greenland ice core has revealed a 12,000-year record of mercury deposits. Scientists found human impact began earlier than believed. The core showed levels started rising in the Bronze Age due to mining in Eurasia. Accumulation further intensified in the 13th century and exploded in the industrial era. The findings suggest humans have disrupted the mercury cycle for two millennia and that current models are wrong to focus on the last five centuries.

# Constant mechanical force may be why heart cancer is so rare

With every contraction, heart muscles generate compressive forces that cells must withstand; for cancer cells, this creates a hostile environment that limits their ability to multiply, new research has found

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

The human heart beats more than 1 lakh times a day, pushing blood through the body. Every second, it encounters circulating cells, including cancer cells that travel through the bloodstream. Yet tumours of the heart are strikingly rare.

For decades, explanations based on genetics, immune surveillance, and the biology of heart cells have not cracked this puzzle. New research in *Science* has now suggested that the force of each heartbeat may itself limit the growth of cancer cells in the organ.

“Patients on heart-assist devices showed signs that their heart cells could start dividing again,” Giulio Ciucci, a postdoctoral researcher at the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, Trieste, Italy, and co-author of the study, said about the study’s origin.

The researchers introduced cancer-causing mutations across multiple organs in mice, expecting tumours throughout the body. Tumours formed in several tissues but not in the heart. Then, the team surgically implanted a second heart into another part of the body and connected it to blood vessels so it remained alive and beating, but no longer pumped blood through its left ventricle under normal mechanical load. This allowed it to receive blood without experiencing the forces generated by each heartbeat. In these ‘un-

## Beaten back

Forces generated by a beating organ can alter gene activity in cancer cells

- The human heart is rarely affected by cancer despite being exposed to circulating tumor cells
- New research suggests that the physical force of every heartbeat directly limits the growth of cancer cells
- Experiments on mice showed that cancer cells multiplied rapidly when the heart stopped bearing its normal load
- Mechanical stress also reshapes chromatin structure in the nucleus to activate genes that restrain cancer cell division
- Physical forces reach the nucleus through the internal cytoskeleton to influence how DNA is organised and used
- Researchers hope to identify specific physical signals that lead to new treatments for other cancer types

The human heart beats more than 1 lakh times a day, pushing blood through the body under constant physical strain. ROBINJA WEERMEIJER



loaded’ hearts, cancer cells that had struggled to grow began to expand rapidly, in some cases occupying large portions of the tissue.

They used lab-grown heart tissues made from living cells arranged into small, beating strips. These could be constrained to either contract or remain relaxed. Again, reducing mechanical activity allowed cancer cells to proliferate more easily, reinforcing the pattern.

With every contraction, heart muscles generate compressive forces that cells must withstand. This could create a hostile environment for cancer cells that limits their ability to multiply. That is, the heart’s constant motion of circulating blood incidentally also creates physical conditions unfavourable for cancer to grow.

The effect was striking

because it seemed to extend into the cell’s nucleus. Chromatin is the name for DNA inside the cell, in its ‘packaged’ form. Some parts are tightly packed while others are more open, making the genes in those regions easier to activate. The researchers found that mechanical stress changed which parts of the DNA became easier for the cell to access. In beating heart tissue, regions linked to slowing or restraining cell division became more accessible, while signs of active proliferation declined. These changes suggested that mechanical force shifted cancer cells away from rapid growth.

To understand how, the researchers investigated how mechanical forces might propagate inside the cell. Their experiments pointed to a pathway in-

volving the cytoskeleton – the cell’s internal support structure – and connecting proteins that link the cytoskeleton to the nucleus. The findings suggested stress from the heart could reach the nucleus through these physical connections, influencing how DNA is organised and used.

This idea is now new – but how cells sense and process these forces remains unclear, per Jan Lammerding, professor of biomedical engineering at Cornell University.

“Several previous studies have shown that the mechanical environment can lead to changes in chromatin organisation inside the nucleus, which then influence gene expression and cell fate,” he said. “It’s still uncertain whether the nucleus detects mechanical stress directly, or whether signals

are first picked up elsewhere in the cell and then relayed inward.”

The new study provides evidence that forces generated by a beating organ can indeed alter chromatin organisation and gene activity in cancer cells through physical connections in the cell.

If mechanical forces can influence gene activity in heart tissue, similar effects could be at play in other organs where cells are constantly stretched, compressed or exposed to physical strain, Dr. Ciucci said. Mechanical signals generated by blood flow are already known to guide how heart and blood vessel cells grow and function, C.C. Kartha, ex-professor of eminence at the Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology, Thiruvananthapuram, said. These signals travel through molecular pathways that connect the cell surface to the nucleus.

What the “significant and stimulating” observations from this study show, he said, is that some of these pathways may also act to suppress cancer cell growth in the heart, helping explain why tumours rarely take hold there.

But he cautioned that the picture is not straightforward. In other settings, mechanical cues from the tumour environment can promote cancer progression and metastasis: “It would be important to identify which specific physical signals lead to these different outcomes.” (Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from New Delhi)

## Focused ultrasound offers new ways to treat eye disease



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

A normal human hears sound in the frequency range 20 hertz (Hz) to 20 kilohertz, and the normal loudness, measured in decibels (dB), is between 30 and 70 db. Higher volumes, e.g. 85 dB and above, can lead to hearing damage. Ultrasound is defined as sound frequencies far beyond the audible range, and is expressed in kilohertz (kHz) or megahertz (MHz).

Regardless of its intensity, ultrasound is inaudible to the human ear. Ultrasound’s very short wavelength allows it to travel through biological tissues. It is also propagated as a mechanical wave, where

one molecule pushes against the next, and therefore it travels at a faster speed in stiff and incompressible tissues such as bone, but is slower in tissues such as fat. This property is used to generate ultrasound ‘images’ of human fetuses. (Ultrasound is much safer than X-rays, whose ionising effects can damage DNA.)

At a low intensity, low frequency ultrasound (200-700 kHz) allows the modulation of neural activities in mouse brains. W.J. Tyler et al. of Arizona State University showed this in 2008. Similarly, M. Menz et al. pointed out in 2013 that neural stimulation in the retina of a test amphibian (salamander) occurred when ultrasound of 43 MHz was applied (*Journal of Neuroscience*, 33, 4550). At such a high frequency, constant pressure is applied on the surface of the



Scientists are attempting to restore vision using ultrasound when the optic nerve is impaired. Representative image. UNSPLASH

retinal tissue, which results in the activation of the retinal ganglion cells that send signals to the brain.

This phenomenon recently sparked interest in the potential of ultrasound stimulation and sonogenetics to restore vision (Jie Ji et al.; *Neural Regen. Res.* 20: 350). Sonogenetics makes use of the non-invasive nature of ultrasound to modulate the activity of small groups of neurons in living

organisms. Genetic engineering is first used to deliver a gene that makes a mechanosensitive protein in a neuron’s cell membrane. The neurons can then be activated on demand by ultrasound waves.

The eye, in particular, is easily accessible to ultrasound and the lens, cornea, retina, and the vitreous humour are easily studied using ultrasound.

Of particular interest are attempts to restore vision when the optic nerve is impaired. This happens in degenerative conditions such as glaucoma and the ensuing optic neuropathy, and infectious diseases that affect the brain (e.g. meningitis). In these conditions, ultrasound stimulation of the visual cortex in the brain can lead to some restoration of vision (Chen Gong et al., *Bioengineering* 10:577, 2023).

High-intensity focused ultrasound waves have other therapeutic uses, too. For example, in cancer treatment, precision focusing on a tumour can cause the temperature in these cells to rise rapidly to 65-85 °C, effectively killing these cells while leaving the surrounding tissue unharmed.

All these studies have used animals as models. Has anyone actually used

sound waves to treat retinal disorders in human patients? The answer is yes. In 2025, Wang et al. from Chongqing Medical University in China did so with 16 glaucoma patients, using ultrasound, and with success. Further, an agency called Focused Ultrasound Foundation from Charlottesville, Virginia, in the U.S., has also developed a device called ‘Eye Tech Care’ that the Foundation has claimed can focus ultrasound on the ciliary body, decreasing the intraocular pressure and thus treating glaucoma. This technology, however, needs to be cleared by the U.S. National Health Agency.

(The author thanks Dr. Srinivasu Karri of the Hormel Institute, Minnesota, USA, for access to several references)

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## Question Corner

### Clouds of ash

How do volcanoes affect the earth’s atmosphere?

Volcanoes change the earth’s atmosphere by releasing gases and particles in large quantities. When a volcano erupts, it blasts sulphur dioxide high into the sky. Since aerosols scatter sunlight, a powerful eruption can end up cooling the earth’s surface for many years. Large eruptions also spew clouds of ash and dust that block sunlight around the eruption site, while most of the ash falls back down in a few weeks. Eruptions also release carbon dioxide. While modern human activity produces much more

carbon dioxide than volcanoes, eruptions throughout history have helped drive long-term warming trends. They also emit compounds that can create acid rain or damage the protective ozone layer. Taken together, volcanic eruptions have influenced the earth’s climate. Recently, researchers used satellites to study the 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai eruption. They found the volcano released quantities of methane into the stratosphere, where volcanic ash triggered chemical reactions that turned the methane into formaldehyde.

Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in

## Why has Air India cut international flight operations?

Why has it been so severely impacted?  
Which routes have been affected? How are other international airlines coping?

**Jagriti Chandra**

**The story so far:**

Last week, Air India announced sweeping international schedule cuts between June and August, including a nearly 40% reduction in North America operations and significant cuts across SAARC and Southeast Asia.

**Which international routes have been affected?**

According to airline sources, a total of 145 weekly flights across North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, SAARC, and the Far East have been removed, resulting in an overall 27% reduction in international flight operations.

In North America, Air India's most critical international market, weekly flights will be reduced from 51 to 33, which is a 39% decline. Services on routes such as Delhi-Chicago, Delhi-Newark and Mumbai-New York are being temporarily suspended, although the airline has added four extra Mumbai-Newark flights, taking that route to seven weekly services.

In Europe, schedule changes have been made on routes to Paris, Copenhagen, Milan, Vienna, Zurich, and Rome where altogether 34% of flights have been withdrawn. But services to London, Manchester, and Amsterdam remain unaffected.

The impact of the war in West Asia has extended well beyond westbound routes, with services to Southeast Asia, SAARC, and the Far East seeing the sharpest reductions.

About 57% of flights to places including Kathmandu, Dhaka, Colombo, Bangkok, Shanghai, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Ho Chi Minh City have been withdrawn. Services to Singapore have also been cut considerably, with 21 weekly flights connecting Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai to the country being withdrawn.

Further east, Delhi-Melbourne and Delhi-Sydney flights have reduced from seven to four flights per week.

**What are the reasons for these cuts?**

The reductions in flight capacity are a direct fallout of the West Asia conflict, which has forced airlines operating between Asia and Europe to avoid the conflict-hit airspace for safety reasons. As a result, Air India has been forced to adopt longer flight paths, increasing travel times to North America by nearly five to six hours. The revised routes now include refuelling stops in Vienna and Copenhagen.

For Indian carriers, the disruption has been compounded by Pakistan's ban on the use of its airspace by Indian airlines since Operation Sindoor in April 2025. This puts them at a clear disadvantage compared to European peers such as Lufthansa.

**Have other airlines been affected?**

The sharp reduction in international flights is not limited to Air India alone. IndiGo saw a 21% reduction in its international flights in April, while carriers such as SpiceJet, Akasa Air, and Air India Express recorded cuts of more than 50%, albeit on a much smaller international network base. However, Air India has borne the biggest brunt of the disruption as it remains the only Indian carrier operating flights to North America and dominates Indian operations across several European destinations, where IndiGo is still a relatively new entrant.

By April, jet fuel prices had already risen by 130% amid escalating tensions in the Gulf, creating another major challenge for airlines, where fuel accounts for nearly 40% of operating costs. And while airlines have imposed fuel surcharges and raised fares to offset rising costs, they are increasingly concerned about the point at which higher ticket prices could begin to deter passengers from travelling.

The network rationalisation is therefore an attempt by the Air India Group to stem mounting losses as operational pressures intensify. Air India posted a loss of ₹26,700 crore in FY2025-26 amid multiple headwinds, including the Pakistan airspace ban and travellers avoiding the airline in the aftermath of the crash in Ahmedabad on June 12 last year.

**What are the global trends?**

The regional conflict has hit the Gulf carriers the worst, with the International Air Transport Association reporting a 61% decline in international passenger traffic carried by them in March. Beyond the Gulf, the Lufthansa Group cancelled 20,000 short-haul flights operated by its subsidiary, Lufthansa CityLine, until October to save jet fuel while also moving to consolidate operations and improve the efficiency of its long-haul connections.

Qantas has announced a 5% reduction in domestic capacity and a 2% cut in international flights in response to soaring jet fuel prices. While it has added capacity on select Europe routes, it has also scaled back elsewhere, including withdrawing its Bengaluru-Sydney service.

## Why is the Prime Minister advocating austerity?

What are the seven set of suggestions that Prime Minister Narendra Modi made for the public?  
How has the war in West Asia impacted various sectors in India and how will these cutbacks help?  
What measures is the government taking?

**T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan**

**The story so far:**

Over the past week, a series of nudges, policy changes, and public messages have sought to influence the behaviour of Indian consumers, companies, and farmers. At the heart of this push is an effort to reduce India's imports of oil and petroleum products, gold, and fertilizers, and involves everyone from the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues to industry leaders and associations.

**What was the Prime Minister's message?**

On May 10, during a speech in Secunderabad, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid out a seven-fold set of suggestions for the Indian public to help the economy and the government's finances weather the storm created by the war in West Asia.

The Prime Minister asked Indians to prioritise working from home; reduce petrol and diesel usage by using public transport and electric vehicles; reduce the use of cooking oil; stop buying gold for at least a year; buy Indian-made products rather than foreign ones; pause foreign travel; and adopt natural fertilizers instead of using imported chemical ones.

The Opposition, along with several other commentators, questioned the timing of his appeals, coming as they did right after the conclusion of Assembly elections in some key States. Neither the political leadership nor the bureaucracy mentioned any impending problems in the run-up to the elections. The critics point out that in fact, the Prime Minister and several of his Cabinet colleagues flew across the country to campaign in Tamil Nadu, Kerala,



A display board showing the rates of gold and silver in a jewellery showroom in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu, on May 14. R. VENGADESH

India's Current Account Deficit is set to grow to about 2.5% of the GDP in this financial year, from 1.4% in the quarter ended December 2025

West Bengal, and Assam, where they also organised several road shows. These questions relate more to the timing of the message than to whether remedial action is needed at all.

**Why are these cutbacks needed?**

It is now well established that the war in West Asia has created a global energy crisis. One of the aspects of this crisis is that the prices of oil and gas have shot up. A year ago, the price of Brent Crude – one of the benchmarks for oil – stood at \$65 a barrel; it is now around \$110.

India imports 85-90% of its oil requirement. This means that any time the price of oil goes up internationally, the country's import bill increases. Oil alone makes up about 17% of India's total goods import basket. That is why three out of Mr. Modi's seven suggestions were aimed at reducing fuel usage and oil imports.

The war has also led to an increase in the price of gold as investors flock to it as a 'safe haven' asset in times of uncertainty. Indians have a cultural affinity for the yellow metal that defies any price movement. While the price of gold increased by 45-60% over the last year, the volume of India's gold imports fell only about 5% in the same period. The value of these imports increased 24%. In other words, the higher price only impacted the demand for gold at the margins; the bulk of purchases has continued.

A third major trend is the depreciation of the rupee. The currency breached the ₹96-to-a-dollar mark on May 15 before closing a little higher at ₹95.96. A year ago, the currency was trading at about ₹85 to a dollar. Throughout this period, the Reserve Bank of India has been stepping in to stabilise the fall of the rupee and reduce volatility, mainly by selling the dollars in its reserves and absorbing rupees in the market. As a result, the Reserve Bank of India's foreign exchange reserves fell to \$552.4 billion as of May 8, 2026, from \$581.4 billion a year earlier – a decline of about \$29 billion.

Foreign Institutional Investors have been pulling out large sums from Indian markets. When they do this, they sell in rupees and are repatriated in dollars, creating another significant channel of dollar outflows.

Taken together, all this means that India's Current Account Deficit (CAD) – the amount by which its imports of goods and services exceed exports – is set to grow to about 2.5% of the GDP in this financial year from 1.4% as recently as the quarter ended December 2025.

A sustained high CAD has several serious knock-on effects for the economy and has led to several crises for the Indian government since Independence. It is therefore clear why the government is seeking to act now to prevent

such an outcome.

**Has the government also taken some measures?**

Over the last week, the government has taken several measures to support these efforts. Effective from May 13, it doubled the effective tax to be paid on the import of gold and silver to a total of 18.4% from the previous 9.2%. The Directorate General of Foreign Trade has also tightened the conditions under which gems and jewellery exporters can import gold duty-free. On May 16, the government also restricted the import of silver.

The prices of petrol and diesel were hiked on May 15 by ₹3 a litre each, in an attempt to reduce demand. The price of CNG was increased by ₹2 per kg. A rough calculation by *The Hindu* shows that this would earn oil marketing companies an additional ₹4,400 crore per month. However, this is not much when compared to the loss they are currently bearing, which the government said amounts to about ₹1,000 crore a day on petrol, diesel and LPG. This means further fuel price hikes could be imminent.

Notably, in a rare occurrence, Mr. Modi himself took to social media to deny a news report that the government was considering imposing a temporary cess on foreign travel.

Mr. Modi and several of his Cabinet ministers have also reduced the sizes of their convoys.

**Will these steps work?**

Several of the measures called for by the Prime Minister and implemented by the government might work at the margins, but some might lead to negative consequences as well. For instance, higher fuel prices may deter unnecessary travel, but unless offices implement a 'work from home' policy again, employees will have no option but to travel to work and bear the higher cost. Overall, higher fuel costs are inflationary in nature. Further, the diesel and CNG price hike is likely to make public transport costlier.

History has shown that higher gold prices do not necessarily deter purchases and can, in fact, lead to an increase in smuggling, as happened in 2013 when import duties were raised.

Asking farmers to switch to natural fertilizers and hold off on buying chemical ones is a workable medium-term strategy, but would be disruptive in the short term. Agricultural output, already expected to be under strain due to a below-normal monsoon and stronger El Nino this year, will suffer further.

An analysis by *The Hindu* has also shown that the growth in foreign spending by Indians is not on travel, which is contracting, but on foreign equity, debt, and immovable assets.

Short of draconian measures, there are few short-term measures that will effectively solve the CAD issue. Various governments have struggled to make India more competitive on exports. Unless that changes, and dollar inflows rise substantially, such crises are likely to recur.

## Why has RSS called for dialogue with Pakistan?

What did RSS leader Dattatreya Hosabale say about ties with Pakistan and what reactions did his remarks trigger in India and Pakistan? Can his statement be read as reflecting government policy?  
What has the RSS's stance on talks with Pakistan been?

**Nistula Hebbar**

**The story so far:**

Last week, Dattatreya Hosabale, the second in command in the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the ideological mothership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said in an interview to news agency Press Trust of India (PTI) that India should persist with attempts at a dialogue with Pakistan. His statement triggered reactions from Pakistan, leaders of political parties in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India's former Chief of Army Staff, and from the Opposition.

**Why have Mr. Hosabale's remarks made news?**

There have been a lot of comments on not just the substance of the remarks, but also their timing, coming as they do close on the heels of the first anniversary of Operation Sindoor, which followed the 2025 terror attack in Pahalgam in J&K that left 16 people dead. The Narendra-Modi led National Democratic Alliance government has consistently held that there can be no dialogue as long as Pakistan-backed terror groups continue to carry out attacks in India. In the light of the filial relationship between the RSS and the BJP, Mr. Hosabale's views have therefore raised queries as to whether the Union



RSS leader Dattatreya Hosabale speaking to PTI in New Delhi. PTI

RSS office bearers maintain that the context of Hosabale's remarks had more to do with the organisation's long-held beliefs than with any immediate preoccupation with dialogue and discourse

government was being provided political cover to change its stance on talks with Pakistan.

**What has been the RSS's record with regard to talks with Pakistan?**

RSS office bearers maintain that the context of Mr. Hosabale's remarks had more to do with the organisation's long-held beliefs than with any immediate preoccupation with dialogue and discourse. They point out that Mr. Hosabale's remarks, taken in full, made it clear that while there was no trust in Pakistan's political and military leadership, people-to-people contact remains the most crucial aspect of engagement, in keeping with the RSS's own ideas about civil society engagement. The remarks are therefore not comments on what the government should or should not do, but relate instead to what the RSS has been saying for a while.

**What has the RSS said about relations with Pakistan in the past?**

In April 1964, Deendayal Upadhyaya and Ram Manohar Lohia issued a joint statement on relations with Pakistan. At the time, the latter, while canvassing support from Opposition parties for an anti-Congress front, had reached out to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the political wing of the RSS and the precursor to the BJP.

Both Lohia and Upadhyaya agreed that the division between India and Pakistan was historically proven to be based on artificial grounds (reflected in the RSS's conception of an Akhand Bharat or undivided Indian subcontinent) and the governments of the two countries always indulged in *tooti baatchheet* (piecemeal dialogue) and *toota vichar* (piecemeal thinking) instead of establishing a comprehensive framework for talks. The concept of Akhand Bharat as a loose Hind-Pak Mahasangh also finds mention in the statement.

This may be too far in the past. But even more recently, the RSS, and indeed Mr. Hosabale himself, has advocated for dialogue. In 2015, at the conclusion of an RSS-led Samanvay Baithak or coordination meeting with all its frontal organisations, Mr. Hosabale had, in an answer to a question, said: "India is part of SAARC and has family-like cultural relations with neighbouring

countries, be it Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Bangladesh. It was one body which was divided to form Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is natural that people living there are part of the same family. Sometimes relations [go bad], like it happens between brothers and so we also discussed how we can improve our relations with those who are historically and geographically attached to us."

Similar sentiments were expressed in 2017 as well, after another joint meeting between the BJP and the RSS.

**What were the reactions to Mr. Hosabale's recent comments?**

Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed the remarks, calling them a "positive development" and hoping that "sanity will prevail in India". In J&K, National Conference president Farooq Abdullah said that he is "glad that somebody is now thinking that war is not an option." Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti said "talks are the only headway" to address the issues between the two countries. India's former Chief of Army Staff, General Manoj Naravane (retd.), also welcomed the statement as a positive sign for engagement between the two countries, especially at a delicate time in bilateral relations. The Congress criticised the remarks, with MP Manish Tewari asking: What has "materially changed since the Baisaran [Pahalgam] massacre?"

**Can Mr. Hosabale's statement be extrapolated to reflect government policy?**

The answer is complicated. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a product of the Sangh Parivar and has publicly acknowledged this fact. His government has been one of the most intensely ideological in India's history, fulfilling some of the core issues on the RSS agenda including the reading down of Article 370 and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya.

With regard to the relationship with Pakistan, matters stray into a territory that is more dynamic, and affected by both internal and external events. The RSS's views have been quite consistent for a long time; therefore, governmental intervention, which also depends on immediate circumstances, may not usually follow the same trajectory. What the comments suggest is that whenever or if ever Mr. Modi seeks to initiate dialogue with Pakistan, he will have political cover from the ideological parent of the BJP.

# PROFILES

## The 'Nehruvian' revivalist

**V.D. Satheesan**

A self-described supporter of Nehruvian socialism, the Congress leader who steered the party-led alliance, out of power for a decade, to an emphatic victory over the Left Democratic Front in Kerala is now set to take the reins of the State

**K.S. Sudhi**

A few months before the Assembly polls, V.D. Satheesan, the then Opposition Leader of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, created a political flutter by declaring that he would opt for political exile if he failed to bring the party back to power. The announcement was greeted with usual cynicism.

Many political observers even dismissed it as an astute move of a canny politician to energise the party and its rank and file for the crucial election. A few months after the declaration, Mr. Satheesan is set to assume office as Kerala Chief Minister, after leading the Congress-led alliance to victory over the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and outmanoeuvring two senior colleagues in the race for the top post.

The Congress, after being out of power for a decade, and Mr. Satheesan could ill-afford a defeat in the election as it would have spelt doom for both the organisation and himself, especially at a time when the national leadership of the Congress had reposed much faith in him to revive its fortunes in the State. Five years ago, the party appointed him as the Leader of the Opposition, overlooking the claims of Ramesh Chennithala, his one-time leader.

Mr. Satheesan, who has been consistently representing the Paravur Assembly constituency in Ernakulam district for six terms, began his political career with a defeat in his debut contest in 1996 when he lost to P. Raju of the CPI.

The young lawyer of the Kerala High Court refused to leave the constituency despite losing the election. The next five years saw Mr. Satheesan carefully nurturing his relationship with the voters of the constituency, who presented him with his first electoral victory in 2001. Mr. Satheesan never had to look back.

A post-graduate in Law and Social Work, Mr. Satheesan learned the early lessons of social and political engineering under the tutelage of

former Minister G. Karthikeyan, whom he reveres as his guide and philosopher and fondly called GK. Mr. Satheesan remembers that it was GK who bargained with the party leadership to field him as a candidate in Paravur Assembly Constituency.

Mr. Satheesan was often seen as a loner in the party. However, he never shied away from speaking his mind. His candid approach won him more foes than friends in the organisation, which was then divided into two opposing camps, the 'I' faction led by former Chief Minister K. Karunakaran and the 'A' group, the loyalists of another former Chief Minister and Union Minister A.K. Antony. Though Mr. Satheesan was identified with the 'I' faction during his early years of political career, he quickly moved away from the factions to assert his independent identity.

### Pressure group

While being a junior Opposition legislator in the State Assembly, he joined hands with younger colleagues to form a pressure group, the Green MLAs, who espoused the cause of environmental protection. The youngsters highlighted several environmental concerns of the State, which caught the attention of Kerala, an environmentally sensitive State.

The five years of his political life as the Leader of the Opposition saw the emergence of an aggressive leader, who confronted the CPI(M) on the floor of the House. Reinventing the battle-weary organisation and its disillusioned cadres following two back-to-back electoral defeats was no easy task. A few prominent leaders left the organisation for the BJP after declaring that the days of the party were numbered in the State.

Several social groups, especially the minority communities, that once stood with the Congress had deserted the party. The United Democratic Front (UDF) was in shambles. The Kerala Congress (Mani), one of the founding members of the alliance, had shifted its allegiance to the LDF. Prominent Hindu social and caste organisations, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

Yogam (SNDP) and the Nair Service Society (NSS), had publicly castigated him for his anti-communal stance.

Yet, Mr. Satheesan never gave up.

Losses and defeats never doused his fighting spirit. He was often heard making light of the losses he encountered in his early political life including the president's posts of the Kerala Students Union, the Indian Youth Congress and the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee. He watched from the sidelines the ascent of his juniors to the leadership roles both in the organisation and the government.

Though it was widely expected that Mr. Satheesan, who outsmarted many of his colleagues in the Opposition benches, would join the 2011 Oommen Chandy government, luck didn't favour him.

Inspired by his calls for public resistance against the reported wrong policies of the 2021 LDF government, the Congress workers stormed the streets, women and youth activists defied water cannons and baton charges, threw themselves in front of the cavalcade of the Chief Minister and the State Ministers and staged black flag protests during the last five years

of the LDF government.

Mr. Satheesan made good use of his tenure to bolster the electoral alliance with the tagline, Team UDF. The efforts proved useful at the most needed time, the selection of the Chief Minister, as all the front partners supported his claim. The political leader, who never refrained from publicly admonishing the erring party functionaries, also invested heavily in the young brigade of the party, which eventually saw at least 30 young leaders make their political debut in the 16th Legislative Assembly. The elections witnessed the Congress-led UDF winning 102 seats in the 140-member legislative Assembly and thus ending its political wilderness in the bipolar polity of the State. The party nearly tripled its strength in the house as its 63 candidates got elected.

### Ideological framework

Mr. Satheesan also provided an ideological framework to his fight against the Left parties by claiming that the Congress was the true leftist organisation as the Left reportedly watered down its policies.

"We are the Nehruvian Left," he once asserted. The move came at a time when the CPI(M) was facing increasing instances of organisational schisms. The canny politician in Mr. Satheesan extended his support to the rebels, which saw two CPI(M) rebel leaders from Kannur and a former Minister from Alappuzha district win their seats. Several Congress candidates emerged victorious in constituencies which were once considered the Left citadels.

An avid reader of both fiction and non-fiction, Mr. Satheesan often found time for literary and political conversations. Mr. Satheesan steps into the organisational vacuum created by the deaths of popular Congress leaders such as Karunakaran and Oommen Chandy, and the retreat from active politics of A.K. Antony – leaders who had endeared themselves to the masses with ease. And he carved out a niche for himself in the faction-ridden State unit of the party without identifying himself with any group or creating a fan base for himself.

### THE GIST

A post-graduate in Law and Social Work, V.D. Satheesan learned the early lessons of social and political engineering under the tutelage of former Minister G. Karthikeyan

Though Satheesan was identified with the 'I' faction of the Congress during his early years of political career, he quickly moved away from the factions to assert his independent identity

Satheesan, who has been consistently representing the Paravur Assembly constituency in Ernakulam district for six terms, began his political career with a defeat in his debut contest in 1996

## From loyalist to rebel

**S.P. Velumani**

Once seen as Edappadi Palaniswamy's trusted lieutenant, the AIADMK legislator and former Minister is now leading a revolt within the party following its electoral defeat

**T. Ramakrishnan**

In India's electoral politics, it is not uncommon for trusted lieutenants to turn against their mentors. A case in point is 57-year-old S.P. Velumani, Tamil Nadu's former Local Administration Minister in the AIADMK government, who is now leading colleagues against the party's general secretary and former Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami.

In the formative years of Mr. Velumani's career, the goodwill he reportedly enjoyed from V.K. Sasikala, the confidante of former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, and Ravanam, a relative of Ms. Sasikala who oversaw party affairs in the western region, helped him secure a political breakthrough. When Jayalalithaa returned as Chief Minister in May 2011, he was inducted into the Cabinet.

Mr. Velumani's exit from the Cabinet in January 2012 almost coincided with the arrest of Ravanam by the Coimbatore Rural Police in connection with a criminal case. He was reinducted into Jayalalithaa's Cabinet in May 2014, and entrusted with key portfolios, including Local Administration and Rural Development, positions he held for seven years at a stretch.

The high point of his career came after Mr. Palaniswami became Chief Minister in February 2017. In



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

fact, after the Supreme Court upheld Ms. Sasikala's conviction in a disproportionate assets case involving Jayalalithaa, Mr. Velumani was among those who reportedly persuaded Ms. Sasikala to choose Mr. Palaniswami for the top post. Her original choice, K.A. Sengottaiyan, now a Minister in the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam government, had declined to take up the job.

### Driving force

Once Ms. Sasikala began serving her prison term in Bengaluru, Mr. Velumani quickly emerged as one of the driving forces behind the Palaniswami camp. Their roots in Tamil Nadu's western belt and affiliation to the Kongu Vellala Gounder community complemented the two leaders politically. Soon, Mr. Velumani came to be called the 'Man Friday' of Mr. Palaniswami, who, in turn, allowed greater space to the former to operate politically in the region. Over time, Mr. Velumani earned the sobriquet 'Coimbatore's

Chief Minister'. From 2018 onwards, allegations were made by anti-corruption activists and his political adversaries that his relatives and aides secured high-value contracts awarded by local bodies. After the DMK formed the government in May 2021, the Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption, which conducted searches at 42 properties in Coimbatore district, named him as an accused in an additional affidavit filed before the Madras High Court last year. The case pertains to alleged irregularities in the award of contracts by the Greater Chennai and Coimbatore Corporations.

Mr. Velumani has remained a popular figure in his constituency, owing to the network he built and the way he cultivated support among electors in Thondamuthur. However, this time, he returned to the Assembly with a margin of less than 15,000 votes – a sharp decline from his earlier winning margins of around 40,000 to 60,000 votes.

Talks of a rift between the former Minister and his "benefactor" began circulating immediately after the party's debacle at the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. Mr. Velumani had said his party would have won 35 to 40 seats in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry if it had faced the electorate in an alliance with the BJP.

In the run-up to the Assembly elections, the general expectation was that the AIADMK would not return to power but do well in the western belt. But the party's performance in the region proved disastrous. In Coimbatore district, Mr. Velumani was the only AIADMK candidate to win, in sharp contrast to the previous election when the party and its ally, the BJP, secured all 10 seats. It was in these circumstances that Mr. Velumani, along with party colleagues, including former Law Minister C.Ve. Shanmugam, raised the banner of revolt against Mr. Palaniswami and supported the TVK government.

Apparently, their game plan did not work, as the rebels could muster the support of only 25 legislators out of the AIADMK's 47, falling short of the required 32. Of late, Mr. Velumani has adopted a more conciliatory tone, stating that Mr. Palaniswami is the general secretary. Whether Mr. Velumani can bounce back or fade into oblivion remains to be seen.

## Test in turmoil

**NEET-UG**

Following a question-paper leak, this year's medical entrance exam, taken by over 22 lakh students, has been cancelled and rescheduled

**Bindu Shajan Perappadan**

On May 12, the National Testing Agency (NTA), acting on inputs from central and law-enforcement agencies about a possible paper leak and examination irregularities in the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test - Undergraduate (NEET-UG), 2026, cancelled the entrance exam.

This isn't the first time that the exam or the agency conducting it has come under scrutiny over allegations of malpractice. However, this is the first time the annual, all-India medical entrance examination, conducted for admission to over 10 medical courses, has been cancelled. A re-test has now been scheduled for June 21.

Through this exam, students compete for over 2.8 lakh seats for bachelor courses in dental surgery, veterinary science and animal husbandry, nursing, physiotherapy and audiology and speech-language pathology, among others. MBBS remains the most sought-after course, with around 1.29 lakh seats available. Admission to top government medical colleges typically requires a score of 650-720 marks.

The NEET-UG question paper consists of 180 compulsory questions with +4 marks awarded for every correct answer and -1 mark for every incorrect answer. NEET-UG is con-



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ducted in 13 languages and is an objective-type (multiple-choice) examination where each question has four answer options. The exam contains MCQs from Physics, Chemistry, Botany, and Zoology.

This year, NEET-UG was held on May 3, with about 22.79 lakh candidates registering for the exam, of whom around 22.05 lakh appeared. The exam was conducted at 5,432 centres across 551 cities in India and 14 cities abroad.

Following the paper leak, confirmed by the Central Government, it has been alleged that about 120-140 questions in the leaked question paper matched those in the actual NEET-UG 2026 exam. NTA Director General Abhishek Singh said the exam "cannot be permitted to stand" and that the decision to cancel it was taken to preserve the transparency, fairness, and credibility of the process.

The idea of an all-India common medical entrance exam was first proposed by the Medical Council of In-

dia (MCI) in 2010. A decade later, the MCI was dissolved amid allegations of corruption and lack of transparency, and replaced by the National Medical Commission.

### Legal challenges

NEET, introduced to create a standardised, single admission test for medical institutions across India, was first conducted in 2013. The exam immediately faced legal challenges from several States and private colleges, prompting the Supreme Court to temporarily cancel it.

In 2016, the Supreme Court restored NEET, and since then it has been the mandatory entrance for admission to government, private, deemed, and central medical institutions, including the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS).

Besides the legal battles, NEET also faced allegations of language and syllabus disparities, paper leaks and grace-mark disputes in 2024. The K. Radhakrishnan committee, set up af-

ter the 2024 allegations, identified weak links in the system such as overdependence on outsourced staff and private centres, weak CCTV and surveillance systems, insecure transport and storage of question papers, and the risk of conducting a massive pen-and-paper exam for over 20 lakh students on a single day. It also recommended biometric verification, encrypted digital paper delivery and hybrid/online testing models.

Following the 2026 NEET-UG controversy, proposed changes for next year's exam include a likely shift from the offline Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) format to a Computer-Based Test (CBT) mode. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan announced on May 15 that the government plans major reforms to improve security and transparency.

The K. Radhakrishnan committee has also recommended that the NTA, established in 2017 by the Central Government as an autonomous testing organisation under the Ministry of Education, needs restructuring, along with tighter centre-level security for the exams it conducts. The NTA conducts several exams, including Joint Entrance Examination (Main), Common University Entrance Test, UGC - National Eligibility Test, and several recruitment and fellowship tests.



## REFLECTIONS

{ INCIDENTAL }

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



# Living austerely in this world riven by conflict

Spending, investing, and planning in mega terms for India to develop is one thing; reckless splurging, with scant regard for the natural environment thrown into the process, is another. We must make our choices carefully

When a Prime Minister (PM) urges prudence and self-limitation in the use of commodities and processes that are scarce or under strain, we can be sure there is a problem. So, our PM did precisely what any leader would and should do. The first thing that occurred to me, as must have to millions of others, was this: "The West Asia crisis started weeks ago. Should this caution not have been shared some weeks ago? Was there not a need for it immediately after the Strait of Hormuz went into seizure? Did oil and LPG supplies not turn tight then? Should vehicles not have been asked to cut down on fuel and the work-from-home advisory issued weeks ago?"

But that was also election time, and campaigns could not have been conducted online. Yet, it is undeniable that the advisory was slow in coming. But it is not just the delay that was puzzling. It was the atmosphere around the crisis. If the PM's worries

were building up, though he kept them to himself due to campaign compulsions, the cause for his worries itself was not being shared by the government in the same terms. We were being assured that stocks were sufficient and no anxiety on that score was warranted. And it is true that supplies kept going without startling shocks.

Therefore, when I read about our PM giving seven points on collective self-limitation of consumption and lifestyles as a response to the West Asia crisis, I said, 'Besh!' An exclamation that in Tamil and Bangla approximates to bravo! He may have kept his thoughts to himself for longer than the situation warranted, but he has at least now opened our eyes to reality. This is what frankness is about. This is what a leader being openly and transparently candid is about. He had spoken candidly, carefully, and conscientiously.

Fuel and chemical fertilisers were high on the list of things that were obviously already under strained supply and likely to turn very soon very short in stock. That we must use them without wasting them was sound and essential advice coming from the PM, whose word carries, as it must, the greatest possible weight in the country. PM Modi adding school learning online to working from home were signs that the stocks position was seriously bad. Frugal use would help save fuel. This was logical, if also enormously difficult to implement without a lockdown or something akin. But as the PM himself was advising that, the situation had to be just about dire.

If his advisory were clear, the signals

from his government were not.

The very day after the PM's emphatic advisory, a meeting was held of the Informal Group of Ministers (IGoM) chaired by the defence minister, where we were given what can be called "news". Was it good news, not-so-good news, or bad news? Let the reader decide. Headlines the next day said, "India has sufficient stocks of fuel, commodities: Govt."

Sufficient...? And the IGoM gave details: we have 60 days of crude oil reserves, 60 days of natural gas, and 45 days of LPG rolling stock. Can this be considered, by any stretch of optimism, "sufficient"? In a nation's life, 60 days are like 60 seconds, or one minute. Did the IGoM's message sit on all fours with the PM's advisory?

Just as the world is unclear on whether Washington DC and Tel Aviv are in talks with Iran or not, on whether a ceasefire is being planned or not, or whether, in fact, President Trump wants the war or does not, so are we in a fog on whether supply taps are about to turn dry or not.

Foreign policy has to have a large and flexible vocabulary with ambiguity as its preferred idiom and reversibility as its syntax. This is neither its virtue nor its vice; it is its reality. Discretion and caution are good policies, where indiscretion and haste can, in a lethally armed world, turn crisis into disaster.

So, India not siding with one or the other side in the ongoing ballistics, while working (one hopes) deftly for peace, can be explained in terms of realpolitik. But the fallout of the ballistics is on daily life. It is



Fuel and chemical fertilisers were high on the list of things that were obviously already under strained supply and likely to turn very soon very short in stock. That we must use them without wasting them was sound and essential advice coming from the PM. REUTERS

about speaking real, doing real, and being real, for daily life is about reality.

There ought to be no ambiguity about the essentials of life and living. The PM gives the contours; his government must fill in the details. If buying gold is to be paused should the gold market not be asked to immediately stop all advertising? If going to school and to work has to become virtual in a country of our billionic size, should the nation not be advised about how the change is to be worked out? If fuel lines are to thin out, what is to happen to the wheels of commerce, of life itself, on our roads, in our skies, in our farms and factories? Most importantly, in fact, existentially critically, if fertiliser supplies are to slow down at a time when El Niño threatens and a drought looms ahead, can the nation afford an even bigger blow in the shape of another farmers' protest? Will they not be entitled to ask why so many mega

schemes that are not about lifelines are not asked to scale down?

Let us assume that if the situation worsens, these steps will be taken.

But something more can — and should — be done now.

The seven-point advisory must lead to a relook at the way megaprojects are planned in the country in order to create and maintain reserves in terms of crisis funding and buffer stocks not for 60 days but at least 6 months. Wars are more likely than ever to erupt and engulf us, directly and indirectly. And there is the challenge of the climate crisis. This is just the time when Niti Aayog can look at all projects on the anvil and ongoing that cost more than a cut-off sum, say, ₹1,000 crore, and make a list of those that are indispensable and should be retained at any cost, those that can be scrapped, those that can hibernate, and those that can be

trimmed. It should make its prioritisation public, and advise the government to react to it. And do so soon.

The PM has done what only he can. It is now time for the spirit of his war-caused advisory to be extended to long-term modifications in capital expenditure, the aim being that stocks of essentials and reserves of foreign exchange for long-haul crises are never at risk. Spending, investing, and planning in mega terms for India to develop is one thing; reckless splurging, with scant regard for the natural environment thrown into the process, is another. Vikas needs the *nikas* (exiting) of developmental follies.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a student of modern Indian history and the author of *The Undying Light: A Personal History of Independent India*. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## Nation and its largest religious minority

Are we witnessing the steady marginalisation of Indian Muslims? Is it the case that politically they increasingly don't count and in public life they increasingly don't matter? As Najeeb Jung, the former Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, puts it, are Indian Muslims "knocking on the doors of being second-class citizens by the way they are being treated by the state"? I'm deliberately posing the issue as a set of questions, not as a statement. And I will not share my personal answer to these queries. Instead, I'll give you the facts, as I see them, and leave you to decide for yourselves.

For the first time since Independence the Indian government doesn't have a single Muslim minister. Indeed, the Bharatiya Janata Party doesn't have a single elected Muslim MP in Parliament. These facts may be academic for many, but can you deny they have deep meaning for our Muslim brothers and sisters?

Of Bengal's population, 27% is Muslim; in Assam, it is 34%. Yet, the BJP fought and won a two-thirds majority without fielding a single Muslim candidate in either state. Of course, it's done this earlier in UP, Bihar and Gujarat, but those states have smaller Muslim populations. Now it's done it in two states with the biggest Muslim percentages. This is not an accident. It's deliberate and it has deep meaning.

The only Muslims elected in these two states are opposition legislators. 22 of the 24 opposition winners in Assam are Muslim. Of the 40 Muslims elected in Bengal, 34 were Trinamool candidates. Does this suggest the BJP doesn't want Muslim legislators and is happy to relegate them to the ranks of the opposition?

The big nationwide picture is equally disturbing. Not one of India's 28 states has a Muslim chief minister. Eighteen don't even have a Muslim minister. We have just one Muslim governor, one Muslim

senior central government secretary out of 100 and one Muslim Supreme Court judge out of 32. Yet, there was a time when India had Muslim presidents, vice presidents, home and external affairs ministers and, occasionally, heads of armed forces and intelligence agencies. Does this suggest that Muslims are being squeezed out of the public life of our country?

Yet, Muslims are 15% of the population and probably number 200 million. That's a very sizeable number. How do Muslims view this outcome where their votes don't matter to the ruling party, their participation in public life has sharply shrunk and they're mainly relegated to the ranks of the opposition, which itself is shy of championing Muslim causes for fear of alienating Hindu voters?

Sadly, these are not questions that are asked in our country. If anything, Delhi and Bombay drawing rooms are more likely to discuss how "horrible" Muslims are. And they don't do it *sotto voce*.

It's even possible we've reached a point where the only voices that may speak out against Muslim marginalisation in India are those of the western media. I'm referring to *The BBC*, *The Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and, perhaps, *Al Jazeera*. They may do a valiant job, but they're not heard by us.

Najeeb Jung's description of the Muslim community is probably shared by the vast majority of his co-religionists. He calls Indian Muslims "a minority in the

IF VIKSIT BHARAT IS TO BE ACHIEVED, INDIA CANNOT AFFORD FOR ITS 200 MILLION MUSLIMS TO BECOME THE COUNTRY'S FORGOTTEN MINORITY. REMEMBER, EVEN IF YOU DELIBERATELY TRY TO MAKE THEM UNSEEN AND UNHEARD, THEY'LL ALWAYS BE THERE.

backyard, a minority that is ill-treated, a minority that doesn't find a place in the Indian horizon". He didn't need to add a conclusion but he did. "Today they are in a very very grave situation," he said.

I don't know how you'll answer the questions I've raised but I hope you'll think carefully about these issues and concerns. If Viksit Bharat is to be achieved, India cannot afford for its 200 million Muslims to become the country's forgotten minority. Remember, even if you deliberately try to make them unseen and unheard, they'll always be there. More importantly, they're equal citizens with the same rights and privileges, the same ambitions and aspirations, the same claim to a place in the sun as you and I.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



## Making the Capital's EV policy women-friendly

With the Prime Minister calling for reducing fuel usage to offset the impact of the war in West Asia, this might be an opportune moment to look at alternatives with a focus on women. A look at the draft Delhi EV Policy (2026-30) is instructive. Last year, NITI Aayog issued two circulars directed at state nodal agencies responsible for preparing electric mobility policies. It recommended preparing electric vehicle (EV) policies which would skill, upskill and reskill women in the entire EV value chain. States were to ensure that the location, operation and upkeep of charging stations would create a safe and secure environment for women. Electric bus depots can be designed to be safe, well-lit, and provide resting areas for women along with gender-segregated hygienic toilets and sanitary napkin vending machines and incinerators.

In 2024-25, The Urban Catalysts conducted research that turned the gender lens on electric two-wheelers (E2Ws). The goal was to understand the ownership and use of E2Ws among women and the barriers faced across five entry points: Driving training and licence processes, design of vehicles, charging infrastructure, financing and institutional support. Gender-disaggregated data was not collected during the registration of vehicles in Form-20. However, women constituted 7% of those to whom driving licences were issued in Delhi in 2020, says Sonal Shah, founder of The Urban Catalysts.

As Delhi revises its EV policy, it is crucial that it addresses these concerns to provide mobility and unlock access to employment.

The draft EV policy recommends a phase-out mandate, whereby only E2Ws shall be permitted for new registration in the NCT of Delhi from April 1, 2028. However, this may not ensure gender equal ownership and distribution of assets for the two-year interim period and beyond. Shah recommends that

the EV policy increase women's uptake of E2Ws by including an incremental higher purchase subsidy — on top of the general purchase subsidy — for the first 10,000 women with certain eligibility criteria.

A targeted communication campaign amongst women is required to make an informed choice. These campaigns should communicate the comparative total carbon output of electric versus ICE 2Ws, realistic vehicle utilisation patterns, charging options, and after-sales service networks in formats and languages accessible to women across income groups in Delhi.

Tamil Nadu's department of social welfare and women empowerment implemented the Amma Two-Wheeler Scheme for Working Women in 2018 to support women in purchasing two-wheelers by offering a 50% subsidy, up to ₹25,000. In 2023, the government of Odisha launched the Mission Shakti Scooter Yojna, a year-long scheme under which women accessed loans without a down payment for the total amount of the two-wheelers at a zero-interest rate for a duration of four years.

A women-focused subsidy for learning-to-earn courses can encourage skilling institutes to forge partnerships with OEMs. Gender experts need to be included in the transport, finance sectors and community engagement sectors within the EV cell — to support the transport department in increasing women's uptake of EVs in Delhi, and increase women's employment in EV maintenance, repairs, and as drivers.

The Delhi government must ensure that public investments through the EV policy increase women's uptake of EVs and enable their skilling, employment in EV operations and maintenance. Simultaneously, we need to encourage women-led companies to build Delhi's EV charging infrastructure.

The views expressed are personal

## Some very personal frames of Raghu Rai

For Raghu Rai, the camera was his life, but through it, it was also his way of teaching people the art of living. When he held it in his hands — as he mostly always did — he was holding an exuberance that demanded reverence. The entire world then became the *sanctum sanctorum* of a sacred space, a pictorial temple, whose key was the lens of his camera.

Raghu and I had been friends for over 40 years. He was much older than me, but I connected immediately with his perpetual curiosity about things, his unmatched creativity, and his zest for life. In the early 1990s, we did a lavish illustrated book together. It was called *Raghu Rai's Delhi*, for which he asked me to write the text. Of course, his pictures were the substance; my text was a subordinate accessory. But the experience of working together, watching his unbounded energy and passion, was for me the indelible takeaway.

Sometime after that, Raghu and his wife Gurmeet Sangha Rai (Mita), and Renuka and I, bought a place in Kasauli on the way up from Dharampur. On one of many memorable visits to Kasauli, we sat on our piece of land, pines surrounding us, the sky star spangled, a full moon, a drink in our hands, and the music of Kumar Gandharva embracing the silver

darkness. It was an ethereal experience. Among the evenings spent together in Delhi, one stands out. Mushtari Bai, once a well-known singer of *ghazals* and light classical music in old Delhi, whose salon commanded the rich and powerful, was to perform at my home. She was well past her prime, living in nondescript anonymity in Jangpura. But the idea to hear her again was given to me by Naina Devi, the acclaimed classical music artist.

I managed to trace her, and she accepted my request to perform. It was a private, informal evening, but became iconic because of those who were in the audience. Naina Devi herself was playing the harmonium. As Mushtari — performing after such a long period — overcame her diffidence, Kathak maestro, Uma Sharma, joined her in the bhava, the expression of emotions. Renowned artist, Jatin Das, was furiously sketching. And, above all, there was Raghu Rai, with his ubiquitous lens, focused, concentrated, iconising the moment, but always with that infectious smile lurking just below.

Raghu was possessive about his photographs. He presented some to friends, but that was the exception. Renuka and I have some. One particularly prized possession is a B&W panoramic sweep of the skyline of old Delhi, including the Red Fort and Jama Masjid, with one lady



The entire world then became the *sanctum sanctorum* of a sacred space, a pictorial temple, whose key was the lens of his camera. PTI

in a corner sitting in namaz.

Inscribing it for us, he wrote: "Jigar ke Tukde: Pieces of my heart". He was also, like all great artists, vain about his work. Khushwant Singh once told me that Raghu wanted his name on the cover to be above that of Singh on a book they were doing on the Sikhs.

I was especially aware of Raghu's love for profiling the legends of Indian classical music. I love this music too, but he had the ability to combine his love with the alchemy to document the artist in one rare, split second that made both the artist and the music akin to the divine.

Raghu also loved gardening. By this, I do not mean conventional gardening. What he had was a raw, gravitational pull to the soil, and when he saw virgin land, he found it irresistible. Our farms in Gurugram were not too far from each other. Mita, a very talented architect,

conservationist and restorer, built a lovely home on it, while Raghu, often working with his bare hands, converted the bare land into a lush fairyland. As he told me once, "Yaar, jab mein khali zamene dekhta hun na, mujhe woh ek khub-soorat mohtarma se bhi zyada sundar lagti hai (My friend, when I see virgin land, it attracts me even more than a beautiful woman)".

Mita had no reason to worry. Many years younger than Raghu, she was — and is — a legendary beauty, and remained his beloved muse. Our deepest condolences go to her, her two daughters, Avni and Purvai, and to Nitin and Lagan, Raghu's son and daughter from his journalist former wife, Usha Rai.

Pavan K Varma is an author, diplomat, and former Rajya Sabha MP. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

The value of family

This is with reference to "An age of loneliness, of permanent afternoons" by Abhishek Asthana (May 10). In the race for success and comfort, emotional bonds are weakening. While children remain busy with careers and their families, we should encourage frequent family interaction and normalise assisted living.

Sanjay Chopra

Dual responsibility as parents

This is with reference to "Why balancing work and motherhood is still hard" by Namita Bhandare (May 10). Parenting should be a dual responsibility in our times as women now step out for work. The society should shun patriarchal thinking and support women in becoming self-reliant.

Abhilasha Gupta

Women are expected to excel at formal work, and simultaneously fulfill the responsibility of childcare and household management. This dual burden leaves them completely exhausted and drained, sadly though.

Bal Govind

Write to us at: [letters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:letters@hindustantimes.com)

So I think it's like the night before the exam. Obviously, you stress. But when you have done your job well, then you need to go down, relax and enjoy.  
— Andrea Radrizzani

New Delhi

May 17, 2026



## Not So NEET After All

Another NEET paper leak has shattered the faith of lakhs of students who spent years preparing honestly for India's toughest medical entrance exam. This is not just an exam scandal – it is a brutal betrayal of merit, hard work, and the future of an entire generation already battling extreme pressure and uncertainty

### NEET: Technology, institutions and top brains failed again

Professor Rajeev Kumar is known as a critical policy whistleblower and the man behind the IIT-JEE reforms. Here, he shares his thoughts on the 2026 National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) cancellations and paper leak

The stakes in medical and engineering admissions in India are extraordinarily high. In a society where family prestige is often tied to the institutions where children study, many parents stretch far beyond their means to secure higher ranks for their wards in these fiercely competitive examinations. Over time, coaching institutes and admission-counseling centers have evolved into a multi-trillion-rupee industry. In such an ecosystem, even cancellations and re-examinations become commercial opportunities, generating fresh demand for crash courses and short-term programs that capitalize on students' stress, desperation, and uncertainty.

For nearly two successive decades, India's two most coveted gateways to professional education - NEET for medical admissions and IIT-JEE for engineering during 2006-2015 - exposed a disturbing pattern. Despite technology, powerful institutions, and the involvement of the finest academic and administrative minds, systemic vulnerabilities repeatedly enabled large-scale admission scams and examination irregularities. From organised paper leaks and impersonation rackets to incorrect cut-offs, wrong questions and answer keys, and allegations of preferential treatment benefiting the wards of the powerful, warning signals were often raised not by institutional safeguards but by whistleblowers facing retaliation. Together, these two eras expose recurring institutional failures, technological overconfidence, and the inability to build transparent, accountable, and robust examination systems.

#### A factual playbook of institutional failure

This article presents facts repeatedly reported in mainstream media, disclosures obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, and records placed before the highest offices of the Executive, Judiciary, and other public institutions. With utmost respect for all institutions and stakeholders, the author makes no aspersions against any individual, institution, or beneficiary. Guided by the spirit of "naa kaahu se bair na kahu se dosti" — neither animosity nor closeness toward anyone — the article seeks to present a factual playbook of systemic failures

through two major case studies that together reflect the central theme. At the same time, it carries a strong hope that institutions and those occupying the highest offices of responsibility will move toward genuine accountability instead of merely suppressing issues or blaming small-time operators. Too often, such exercises create the impression that "all is well," while deeper systemic failures, embedded malice, and influential beneficiaries remain buried under the carpet, continuing in their positions without scrutiny or accountability.

#### Scenario one: Examination day - May 3, 2026

May 3, 2026, was a hectic day for the NTA central control room for two reasons. First, NEET 2026 was conducted across 5,500+ centers in 550 Indian cities and 14 cities abroad, with nearly 2.3 million candidates competing for about 60,000 highly prized government medical seats and many more in private colleges. Second, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, along with the top leadership of the Education Ministry and NTA, was present in the central control room, monitoring live AI-enabled CCTV feeds from thousands of examination halls.

Ironically, the AI-enabled CCTV systems, observers, technical experts, and top officials failed to notice one striking anomaly visible across hundreds of centers — the unusually stress-free confidence, jubilation, and sparkle in the eyes of a large number of candidates appearing for one of the country's most competitive examinations. For many, substantial portions of the paper reportedly appeared already familiar through the widely circulated "guided paper" moving across digital networks days or weeks before the examination. Yet neither the AI-driven surveillance systems nor the country's top institutional minds sensed anything abnormal in this unusually relaxed examination atmosphere.



RAJEEV KUMAR

#### Scenario Two: Before D-Day - May 3, 2026

After the NEET 2024 fiasco, NTA repeatedly showcased its advanced technologies and stringent security protocols — from encrypted paper-setting and secure PDF transmission for translations to GPS-tracked movement of question papers from bank strongrooms to regional hubs and examination centers. Intelligence and cyber-security inputs from multiple national agencies were also reportedly available. Yet, despite this vast surveillance ecosystem, no alarm appears to have been triggered, while the so-called "guided paper" circulated for weeks across WhatsApp networks in India, alongside large money transactions and growing confidence among candidates and parents that the very questions being practiced would appear in the actual examination.

#### Scenario Three: After D-Day - May 3, 2026

Immediately after the examination, candidates used to rush to coaching institutes and admission-counseling centers to estimate scores using OMR responses and answer keys, which were widely accessible due to the efforts of a second whistleblower discussed later in this article. Candidates could thus roughly predict their scores, ranks, and chances of securing their colleges of choice. With a significantly large number reportedly answering nearly 135 questions correctly, marks appeared unusually inflated, creating visible jubilation in many circles that the purchase of the "guided paper" had paid off. Yet, despite thousands of observers and an extensive feedback and intelligence network, no unusual pattern appears to have triggered concern within the system.

#### NEET 2026 Whistleblower: When the system failed

Finally, the first serious alert reportedly came not from the institutional surveillance system but from outside it. A Rajasthan-origin MBBS student studying in Kerala

shared a PDF of a "guess paper" with his father in Sikar, who, with help from a coaching institute, realised that it substantially matched the actual NEET 2026 paper. The first trigger came through a whistleblower message on May 7, followed by a formal complaint to the local police and NTA.

The rest is now familiar - cancellation, re-examination, and immense stress, confusion, and heartbreak for lakhs of students, alongside another business surge for the coaching industry through fresh crash courses. As often happens, investigating agencies may eventually arrest a few small operators and declare the mystery resolved, while the deeper truth behind the alleged high-powered paper-leak mafia and its possible institutional linkages may never surface. Such networks move on to the next examination, while many leaks remain localized and go unnoticed. Similarly, the NEET 2024 fiasco was effectively buried in the 165-page report of the K Radhakrishnan Committee, which left key questions unanswered, including the recurring nature of NEET irregularities year after year.

#### Exposing IIT Admission Irregularities

Another major whistleblowing development in this ecosystem emerged with the institution of the Right to Information (RTI) framework in 2005. Before the RTI era, most competitive examinations, including medical and engineering entrance tests, operated in near-complete opacity. Candidates were not given question papers, official answer keys, marksheets, or even the selection criteria. In the absence of transparency, people trusted examination agencies almost unquestioningly, and the outcome was merely a "selected" or "not selected," often without any understanding of why. During the RTI era, intervention by late Arjun Singh led IITs to issue marksheets to candidates.

From the beginning, IIT-JEE followed a balanced evaluation model requiring candidates to secure minimum qualifying marks separately in Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry before aggregate merit was considered. A marked deviation from these subject-wise cut-offs in 2006 triggered whistleblowing by an IIT professor, opening another major chapter in the history of examination irregularities in India.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

### Shut the coaching factories down

The ink was barely dry on the NEET-UG answer sheets when the first whispers began. Then came the screenshots, the WhatsApp forwards, the outraged parents, and finally, the staggering admission: the paper had leaked. Millions of students who had spent years — and their families, lakhs of rupees — preparing for a single exam were told, in effect, that the game had been rigged before it began. The government responded swiftly — ordering a CBI investigation, announcing a re-examination, and fast-tracking systemic reforms. But even as accountability was being demanded in the right places, one culpable party continued to escape scrutiny: the vast, lucrative coaching industry that had built an entire economy around gaming the very exam that had just been gamed.

That is the scandal within the scandal. We are debating the leak. We should be debating the ecosystem that made it not just possible, but inevitable.

#### The coaching industrial complex

India's private coaching industry is worth an estimated ₹58,000 crore and growing. It employs hundreds of thousands of teachers, counsellors, and administrators. It has built entire cities — Kota and Sikar being the few of the most visible — around the singular, grim enterprise of drilling teenagers into rank-producing machines. It promises parents a ladder out of mediocrity and charges them ferociously for the privilege of climbing it. But what it actually sells is access.

Not knowledge. Not skill. Not curiosity or critical thinking. Access — to question banks, to leaked patterns, to insider intelligence about what an exam is likely to test. In a system where a single national test determines the fate of a doctor's career, that access is everything. And it is available, exclusively, to those who can pay for it.

A student from a government school in rural Bihar, however brilliant, is not competing on the same field as a student who has spent two years in a Sikar hostel, taking mock tests every Sunday and being coached by faculty who sometimes have suspiciously accurate foreknowledge of exam trends. This is not a level playing field. It is a field that has been carefully tilted, and then sold back to us as meritocracy.

#### The paper leak is a symptom

When we trace the NEET paper leak, we follow a trail that almost always winds through the coaching ecosystem — through centers that trade in "sure shot" questions, through networks of middlemen who monetize desperation, through a culture that has normalised, even celebrated, the idea that you don't beat the exam, you game it. The leak did not happen despite the coaching industry. It happened



ROHIT KUMAR SINGH  
Former Secretary, Govt of India

because of the culture the coaching industry has normalised: that an exam is a commodity, that a rank can be manufactured, that everything has a price.

There will be those who argue that coaching centers merely respond to demand — that if competitive exams are brutal, someone must prepare students for them. This is the logic of the arms dealer who blames the war. The coaching industry has lobbied, quietly and effectively, against exam reforms that would reduce its relevance. It profits from the very anxiety it stokes. It is not a solution to an unfair system; it is a co-architect of one.

#### The Government acts: It and must go further

To its credit, the government has moved. The decision to re-conduct the tainted NEET examination is the right call — a necessary act of faith towards the lakhs of honest students who deserved an untainted shot. More significantly, the announcement that the exam will shift to an online, computer-based format from next year is a genuine structural reform. Digital delivery, with randomized question sets, timed server-side encryption, and decentralised testing centers, makes the kind of wholesale physical paper leak we witnessed dramatically harder to execute. This is a good step. It deserves acknowledgment.

But it also raises an uncomfortable question: if we are redesigning the exam to defeat the coaching-center cheat network, why are we leaving the coaching centers themselves standing? The online shift will force them to adapt — and adapt they will, pivoting to "digital mock test" packages and AI-assisted rote drilling, charging even more for the upgrade. The problem is not merely the medium of the paper. The problem is the entire philosophy of preparation that the coaching industry represents. And that philosophy — memorize, repeat, regurgitate, rank — is not just unfair. In the world that these students are about to enter, it is catastrophically useless.

#### Rote Factories in the Age of AI

Let us be honest about what coaching centers actually teach. They teach pattern recognition of a very specific, very narrow kind. They teach students to identify which formula to apply to which template problem in the least possible time. They reward memory over understanding, speed over reflection, and imitation over inquiry.

CONTINUED ON >> PII



# The culinary traditions of Rohini Vrat



ANIL  
RAJPUT

Rohini Vrat is a significant Jain religious observance associated with spiritual discipline, self-control, fasting and inner purification. Observed primarily within the Jain community, especially among Svetambara traditions, the vrat is linked to the auspicious Rohini Nakshatra in the lunar calendar and is regarded as a path toward spiritual development and ethical living. Over time, the observance has also shaped a distinctive culinary tradition in which food is prepared with great care, simplicity and adherence to the principles of non-violence and purity. The cuisine associated with Rohini Vrat is, therefore, not centred on festivity or opulence but on mindful nourishment, modest consumption and the belief that the manner in which food is prepared and consumed forms an important part of its spiritual character.

The origins of Rohini Vrat are rooted in the wider tradition of vrat, or sacred observances undertaken to cultivate moral and spiritual conduct and detachment from worldly excess. Jain scriptures and later religious commentaries describe such fasts as a means of refining both thought and action, while strengthening the principles of ahimsa and truthfulness. The association of the vrat with the Rohini Nakshatra reflects the importance traditionally given to cosmic timing and auspicious celestial alignments in Indian metaphysical practices. Its continuing significance lies in the way it connects divinity with ordinary acts of living, transforming food from a matter of consumption into an expression of ethical consciousness and mindful living.

Observed by Jain families across the country, Rohini Vrat is linked with devotion to Vasupujya Bhagwan, the twelfth Tirthankara, who is revered as a symbol of purity, renunciation and victory over worldly attachment. Families across the country may prepare food differently according to regional customs and practices, but the governing ideas remain similar. Ingredients are chosen with care, preparation is kept simple, and food is approached with gratitude. Most households avoid onion, garlic and root vegetables, not only on vrat days but as part of a wider practice shaped by non-violence and sensitivity toward life forms. For strict observers, the timing of food is equally important, with many families avoiding meals after sunset. These practices vary, but the under-

lying spirit remains the same. Food must remain clean, pure and simple. Within this disciplined framework, the savoury foods prepared on the occasion are varied and easy to digest. Sabudana khichdi is one of the most familiar examples from the wider fasting repertoire. Tapioca pearls are washed, soaked until soft and cooked gently with roasted peanuts, a little ghee and mild seasoning. Grated bottle gourd or cucumber is added to preserve softness. Sama rice khichdi and moraiyo pulao offer similar comfort through small millet-like grains that cook quickly and sit lightly on the stomach. They are simmered with cumin, ghee and rock salt and sometimes with bottle gourd or pumpkin. Rajgira roti and singhara atta cheela bring greater substance to the plate without moving away from the fasting idiom. Amaranth flour is patted into soft rotis and cooked on a tawa, while water chestnut flour may be whisked into a batter and prepared as a thin cheela. Farali dhokla, made with vrat-appropriate flours or sama, adds a steamed preparation to the same family of foods. Together, these dishes show how fasting cuisine can be nourishing without becoming heavy.

Vegetable-based preparations give the vrat meal a gentler savoury character, especially when they are cooked without onion, garlic or elaborate masalas. Lauki sabzi is one of the most suitable dishes for such a day. Bottle gourd is peeled, chopped and cooked slowly in its own moisture with ghee, cumin and mild seasoning until it becomes soft and delicate. Pumpkin sabzi brings a natural sweetness that needs little assistance from spice. Its pieces soften over a low flame into a warm, lightly sweet preparation that pairs well with rajgira roti or sama rice. Raw banana curry is also favoured. The bananas, used as a vegetable in the absence of potatoes, are steamed or boiled, peeled and then cooked with cumin, curd, crushed peanuts or coconut. Makhana curry makes for another delectable soft dish where nuts are roasted lightly in ghee and then simmered briefly in a curd-based or milk-based gravy to absorb the flavour. These dishes are not elaborate festive curries but their value lies in the way they offer



satiety without disturbing the reflective mood of the day.

There is also a practical side to fasting food that households uphold. A devotee who has observed the vrat requires nourishment that restores strength but without overwhelming the digestive system. For this reason, preparations such as rajgira thalipeeth, kuttu poori, cucumber peanut koshimbir and simple curd accompaniments may appear in more flexible homes or around parana, the ceremonial breaking of the fast after the completion of the vrat prayers. Rajgira thalipeeth is made by mixing amaranth flour with grated bottle gourd, coriander, cumin and a little curd or water, then patting it on a hot pan until the outside turns lightly crisp. Kuttu poori, prepared from buckwheat flour, is richer and therefore better understood as an occasional post-vrat preparation rather than the central food of the day. Cucumber peanut koshimbir balances such items with freshness. Chopped cucumber is mixed with roasted crushed peanuts, curd and mild seasoning, creating a cooling accompaniment that requires almost no cooking. When these foods are included, their purpose should remain clear.

These dishes are meant to help the body reinvigorate from fasting to nourishment.

The sweet side of the Rohini Vrat food culture is also approached with moderation. Makhana kheer and sabudana kheer are among the most popular preparations for their soothing and nourishing nature. Makhana is roasted lightly before being simmered in milk until tender, while sabudana is soaked and cooked slowly until its pearls beco-

me translucent and the milk thickens around them. Cardamom, a little sugar or jaggery, and a few nuts are added, ensuring that the sweetness is kept gentle. Singhara sheera is made by roasting water chestnut flour in ghee until fragrant, then cooking it with warm water or milk until it gathers into a smooth, comforting form. Rajgira laddoo provides sweetness in a compact way, using puffed amaranth bound with warm jaggery syrup. Coconut laddoo and dry fruit paag offer similar nourishment, though they are richer and are taken in small quantities. These sweets complete the meal with care rather than excess. Fruit-based and curd-based sweets bring another dimension to the menu. Shrikhand, made from strained curd mixed with sugar, cardamom and sometimes saffron, is cooling and smooth, yet usually served in modest portions. Fruit chaat may be the simplest and most natural sweet preparation of all. Seasonal fruits such as banana, apple, papaya, pomegranate, grapes and melon are cut fresh and served plain or with the lightest seasoning according to family custom. In many homes, fruits are not treated as secondary items but as central fasting foods because they require little intervention and keep the meal close to nature. Their presence also reflects a larger principle of the vrat. The less the kitchen manipulates food, the closer the devotee remains to simplicity.

Beverages connected with Rohini Vrat and similar fasting observances are equally important because hydration is essential in the warm season. Boiled water has special significance in many Jain households and may be consumed within permitted hours according to family traditions. Tender coconut water gives natural hydration, while lemon sherbet offers freshness when prepared with simplicity and without an overload of sugar. Chaas, made by diluting curd with water and churning it lightly, supports digestion and cools the body while aam panna is prepared from raw mango, and households adapt it according to their recipes and comfort. Sattu sharbat, where accepted, provides strength in a simple form and warm elaichi milk provides another gentle option, especially after a period of fasting. These drinks serve as supportive accompaniments to the simple meals meant to soothe, nourish and refresh.

For Jain monks and nuns, the observance of Rohini Vrat is approached with an even greater degree of spiritual rigor and discipline. Their participation is centred primarily on prayer, meditation, scriptural study and prolonged fasting, reflecting the monastic ideal of detachment from physical comfort and material dependence. Food, when taken, is governed by strict ethical and religious principles. Jain monks traditionally do not cook for themselves or store food, instead accepting limited alms offered by devotees under carefully prescribed conditions intended to minimise harm to living beings and

avoid attachment or desire. Meals are typically simple, sattvic and consumed in small quantities, without indulgence or elaborate preparation. Many avoid eating after sunset entirely, while certain monks may undertake complete fasts during the observance. In this tradition, food is viewed not as pleasure or personal choice, but as a necessity approached with mindfulness, gratitude and spiritual discipline.

Seen in this way, the cuisine around Rohini Vrat reveals a different understanding of food. It is not built around abundance, spectacle or a compulsory festive platter. It is guided by the ethics of selection, preparation, timing and moderation. What is avoided becomes as meaningful as what is prepared. Food is cooked before sunset and consumed within prescribed hours. Ingredients are reduced to the essentials. The meal may consist of fruit, milk, boiled water, a small bowl of khichdi, a soft roti, a cooling accompaniment or a modest sweet at the end of the fast. Each household may observe different practices, but the moral character remains. Food must remain aligned with non-violence and restraint.

Rohini Vrat thus represents a distinct culinary occasion where food is determined by religious guidelines, sunrise, lunar timings or the completion of rituals. It asks the kitchen not to impress but to purify. It reminds us that Indian cuisine is not only the story of elaborate meals, royal dishes, regional delicacies and celebratory abundance but also the story of discipline, fasting, simplicity and ethical nourishment. Within this tradition, a bowl of sama rice khichdi, a piece of rajgira roti, a small serving of makhana kheer or a glass of boiled water can carry as much cultural meaning as a grand feast, because the value lies not in quantity but in intention.

In conserving such observances, I believe we preserve far more than traditional recipes. We preserve a civilisational understanding of food as conduct, where nourishment is guided by compassion and self-command. Rohini Vrat reminds us that cuisine can do more than satisfy the body. It can encourage reflection, discipline desire and inspire morality. At a time when abundance is often celebrated as achievement, this quiet day teaches us that simplicity, when held with faith, can become one of the highest forms of richness. It is therefore our shared responsibility to honour, document and carry forward such traditions, so that future generations inherit not only the taste of Bharat, but also the values that have long given meaning to his food.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)



# Tushar Mehta crafts brilliantly bizarre legal wit

ANOOP BOSE

**The Bench, the Bar, and the Bizarre:** The Unfamiliar, the Curious, and the Extraordinary in Law penned by Tushar (a magnificent name symbolising fine drops of dew and evocative of a sense of purity, calmness and serene winter beauty!) Mehta, the Solicitor General of India, was formally unfurled on May 8, 2026 before a most impressive gathering graced by the venerable Chief Justice of India Justice Surya Kant and our brave, resolute and visionary Home Minister Amit Anilchandra Shah (who proudly dons the mantle of his lifelong hero and role model Sardar Patel!) and the choicest who's who of political, judicial, and media leaders, whose names read like a veritable roll of honour, within the majestic confines of Bharat Mandapam ensconced deep inside the heart of the Pragati Maidan Complex. The book saw the light of day as a well bound bouquet of amazingly curious, deucedly absurd and helplessly uproarious events from the legal world, aimed at legal professionals and general readers! The chapter on "Judicial Rebels" and "Law beyond the Living" are replete with extraordinary wit and humour. In the chapter on Artificial Intelligence, the author has deviously summed up the varied challenges posed by AI in an easy, free flowing narration and frankly confessed, "I am neither a technoromantic nor a techno-sceptic. But the thought of artificial intelligence entering judicial adjudication — whether through the bench or the Bar is a chilling one. The real danger is not that machines will start thinking like humans, but that humans will stop thinking like humans and begin to imitate machines".

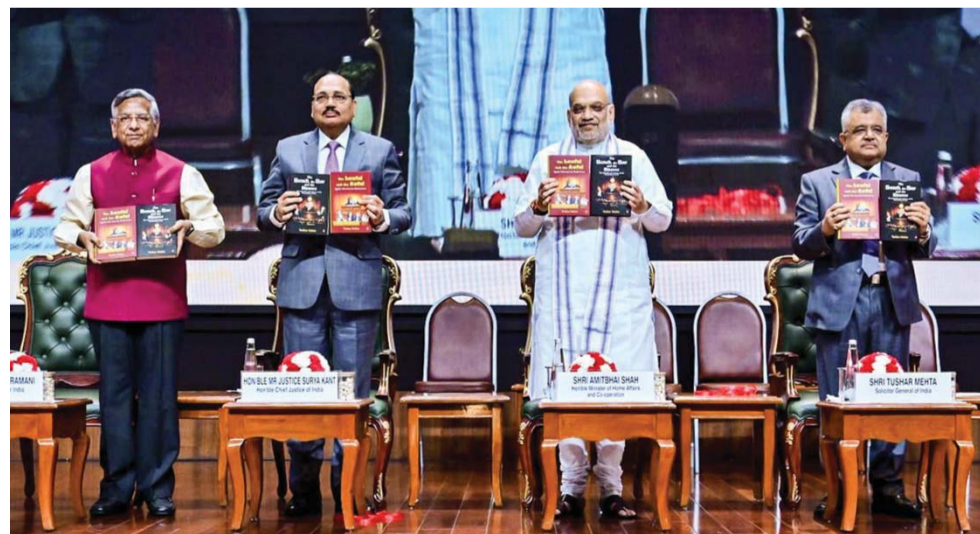
**The Lawful and the Awful:** Quirky Tales from the World of Law features humorous tales and unexpected moments in law. The most interesting chapters are "Weird Tales of Weirder Judges" and "The Anatomy of a Rotten Judge". The author

in a jocular vein says that there are very good judges and very bad, and even horrible judges. The description on the quality and eminence of several British and American judges is brilliantly explained by him, though he has not touched the Indian judges in the same manner to avoid any untoward controversy or otherwise.

The author dedicated the books to his beloved mother Lataben Mehta on the auspicious occasion of Mother's Day. In his words, he said in a voice choked with emotion that everything he was today was built on his mother's sacrifice and on her continued blessings from heaven. In doing so, he virtually reverberated the timeless words of the monumental lawyer and 16th towering American President Abraham Lincoln, unquestionably the Father of Modern Democracy — "I remember my mother's prayers and they have always followed me. They have clung to me all my life" and "The greatest lessons I have ever learned were at my mother's knees... All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother".

Tushar's books demonstrate an unusual combination of scholarship, courtroom precision, and literary ease. Unlike many legal writers who rely excessively on technical vocabulary, Tushar explains constitutional questions with clarity, patience, and intellectual confidence. His prose reflects rigorous academic training, yet it never feels burdened by any distracting complexity. Every single chapter reveals a writer who has mastered astute legal reasoning while still respecting the reader's curiosity and attention.

One of the most impressive aspects of his writing is the depth of research. Tushar approaches legal controversies with balance, careful documentation, and analytical sharpness. He connects constitutional theory with contemporary governance in a truly remarkable manner that feels both scholarly and practical. His arguments are persuasive because they are built patiently, layer by layer, rather than through rhetorical



The event was attended by Chief Justice of India Justice Surya Kant, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Attorney General of India R Venkataramani, Supreme Court and High Court judges, and senior members of the bar, Law Minister of India, Media personalities and the Bhutan delegation.

exaggeration. Readers can sense the discipline of a serious academic mind working behind every observation.

Equally noteworthy is Tushar's refined sense of humour. It is a universally recognized age old proverb that "Laughter is the best medicine" to which I am highly emboldened to add the timeless words of Sir Charles Spencer Chaplin Jr. (popularly known as "Charlie Chaplin"), the legendary British comic actor, filmmaker, singer, film editor and composer, "A day without laughter is a day wasted." Legal literature often becomes starchy and stiff, self-important, and emotionally distant, but Tushar's writing avoids that trap marvellously. He introduces and revels in wit subtly, sometimes through irony, sometimes through understated commentary, and occasionally through

incisively observed anecdotes. These invariably lighten dense discussions without weakening the seriousness of the subject. The humour feels intelligent rather than performative, making difficult themes more engaging and memorable.

Ultimately, Tushar succeeds not only as a legal thinker but also as a communicator of rare effectiveness. His books enrich public discourse because they combine academic brilliance with readability, authority with accessibility, and seriousness with warmth. They deserve appreciation from lawyers, students, policymakers, and general readers alike. In an era lamentably marked by intellectual writing frequently becoming either excessively simplified or unbearably dense, Tushar's work achieves an admirable balance between scholarship, persuasion, and

humane expression.

Tushar has by his well honed literary skills, nay prowess, proved beyond a shadow of doubt for all the world to see that the pen can be infinitely mightier than the black gown (signifying submission to the law) and the twin white bands (signifying the Tablets of Law!) that can be traced back to the 17th Century British tradition that refuses to set eternally at a global level! I need hardly add that no word of praise from a lesser mortal like me can embellish the praise and acclaim he has well justifiably earned from near and far for his twin literary offering. His powerful voice remains thoughtful, disciplined, and surprisingly conversational, qualities that ensure his arguments continue resonating beyond the trappings of academia and courtrooms. The author has deliberated upon and narrated the critical aspects of the judicial system by drawing upon the American and British systems and has scrupulously avoided critical aspects of the Indian judicial system. This may disappoint the Indian reader, but the intelligent reader with insightful information on the Indian judiciary can draw clear references where the author wants to strike. The contents of the books have an international appeal, and surely, Tushar must be having plans to launch his books on American and British soil in the very near future.

In conclusion, I am irresistibly drawn to the words of George Bernard Shaw — "You don't stop laughing when you grow old, you grow old when you stop laughing."

May ever smiling, always hospitable Tushar Mehta continue to tirelessly strive to write, guide and inspire generations of lawyers, judges and erring ones to come! And may God Almighty bless his scholarship, wisdom, erudition, literary skills and legal acumen always!

(The writer is an avid debater, public speaker, writer, broadcaster, telecaster, artist, painter, sculptor, music critic and filmmaker)

## When Everything Appears Meaningless

The world is changing. The Self is unchanging. Only in wisdom can one be enthusiastic amidst uncertainty. Often, uncertain people do not act; they simply sit and wait. Acting in uncertainty makes life a game

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

When everything appears meaningless, only then do you seek meaning. If everything is already meaningful, then the journey stops right there. There is no journey at all, no question of even stopping. When there is no quest, there is no journey at all. The quest that begins with questions like "What is this?" or "Who am I?" is very important in the spiritual realm. In fact, this is the first step in the spiritual realm, where you find everything else meaningless, and you want to find meaning.

Let this sense of emptiness go deep. Sink into it. Don't be in a hurry to find the answers. When a seed sprouts, it grows into a little sapling; don't be in a hurry to cut it, assuming that it has become a tree. Let it grow into a huge tree. Then you can sit under it. Once the tree has grown, even if you prune the leaves or some of its branches, it will benefit you. But don't cut a sapling that has just sprouted. Keep pondering the question, 'Who am I?' Don't be in a hurry to conclude. Stay relaxed and let go. You will start going deeper into meditation if you just stay with this question.

Once you understand that everything else is meaningless, then the next question that comes up is: What is truly meaningful? What is worth knowing? What is the purpose of creation? Why did God create this earth? These questions, in a very significant manner, begin your inward journey.

That is why a real teacher will not give you an answer to this, though he knows it. Know that you are fortunate that this question arose within you. And, you are in the right place where you will find the answer. When you are on the spiritual path, you'll find the answer.

Recently, a Bollywood casting director who was in our ashram for the 45 years of The Art of Living asked me why some successful people still felt empty within. I said, "They are lucky!" When they feel emptiness within, their real search begins. They realise that life isn't only about position, money, and fame. One should welcome and embrace this feeling of emptiness because it leads them towards the main purpose of life.

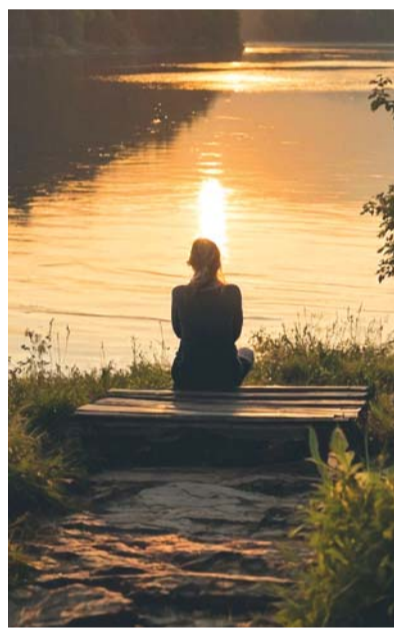
When you look within and find emptiness, instead of running away from it, shake hands with it. You change your jobs, or change your partners — you do everything to fill up that sense of void. All you need to do is wake up and see — your background is emptiness, your foreground is also emptiness. Deep in your heart, there is emptiness. Shake hands with it. Be strong and steady in it. Then, you will see that misery and sorrow will evaporate. You will realise that you yourself are love. You are what you are seeking.

How do you feel when you experience something? You'll find that the completion of an experience leads to void or nothingness. In the progression of life, you will leave behind every experience, saying, "This is nothing." Anything that is completed loses its importance. That is to say, it leads you to void — the feeling of 'this is nothing'. A sign of intelligence is how soon you arrive at this understanding. Examine everything in life and say, 'This is nothing', and what remains after all that is 'Love', and that is everything.

When the realisation of "This is nothing" doesn't come out of knowledge, it comes out of misery. Either through knowledge



"WHEN YOU LOOK WITHIN AND FIND EMPTINESS, INSTEAD OF RUNNING AWAY FROM IT, SHAKE HANDS WITH IT" — GURUDEV



ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND THAT EVERYTHING ELSE IS MEANINGLESS, THEN THE NEXT QUESTION THAT COMES UP IS: WHAT IS TRULY MEANINGFUL? WHAT IS WORTH KNOWING? WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF CREATION? WHY DID GOD CREATE THIS EARTH? THESE QUESTIONS, IN A VERY SIGNIFICANT MANNER, BEGIN YOUR INWARD JOURNEY

or through misery, you come to the point of "This is nothing". The choice of how you come to that point is yours.

I want you to realise one thing. Wake up and see: till this moment, whatever has happened in your life for the last 30 to 50 years, is it not like a dream? Take your mind forward and backward in time. You are sitting here and reading this article. Tomorrow you will wake up, brush your teeth, and get on with your work. The next day will roll on, then June will arrive, and so will August and

September, and before you know it, you will be having a New Year's party. It will all be gone! Is it not like a dream? Couldn't this moment be a dream too? Is this moment real? How do you know it is reality? The future is like a dream, the past is anyway a dream, and this moment that is passing by can also be a dream, can it not? If you can manage to shift your attention and see this reality, you will see something beyond what meets the eye. There is a higher truth beyond this, which is so beautiful. And if you see this, you gain such incredible strength, energy, love, and beauty in your life that nothing whatsoever will be able to snatch your smile away. Immediately, you get connected to the universal power, to the truth that you are made up of.

There is a clear distinction between practical and spiritual life. When you have to work with people, don't use this philosophy, i.e. don't think that everything is nothing. You will not be able to do your business or your work. However, keep this in mind — everything is nothing. This gives you inner strength, intuitive ability, happiness, contentment, love, and compassion. As you grow more in wisdom and see the changing, dream-like nature of events, you will be touched by events less and less. Know that life is a dream and everything will come to an end. With this knowledge, the mind becomes pleasant, and the intellect becomes sharp.

Uncertainty seems frightening only when you rely on what cannot be relied upon, which is the relative world. People often try to hold on to things that are changing, and when those shift, anxiety and fear follow. But when you anchor yourself in that which does not change — the Self — then you can sail through even the most uncertain times. The only way you can be at ease with the uncertainty of the world is when you realise the certainty of consciousness.

The world is changing. The Self is unchanging. Only in wisdom can one be enthusiastic amidst uncertainty. Often, uncertain people do not act; they simply sit and wait. Acting in uncertainty makes life a game. A readiness to face uncertainty, coupled with awareness, takes you to a higher state of consciousness, where no one can take your smile away.

## Home Sweet Home

In an age overwhelmed by digital distractions and widening generational divides, the warmth of many homes is quietly fading into silence, misunderstanding, and emotional distance. To heal this growing crisis, Pramukh Swami Maharaj offered humanity a timeless and transformative gift — *Gharsabha*, 'the sacred family assembly'. More than a ritual, it is a powerful forum for dialogue, reflection, and spiritual bonding that has helped countless families overcome years of tension, conflict, and estrangement. By nurturing understanding between generations, Gharsabha transforms homes into sanctuaries of respect, harmony, and heartfelt connection. In a fractured world searching for unity, this simple yet profound practice may hold the key to restoring the soul of the family



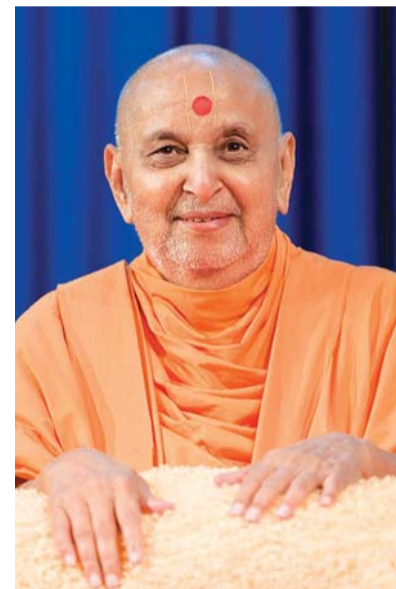
DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

Does the word in the title sound familiar? This word, 'Home Sweet Home', is a phrase we often use, but the real question is: If instead of celebrating delightful Diwali, we are always celebrating Holi of quarrels, and instead of sweet speech, the acid of insults and accusations is poured upon one another, should we still call it a home, or a raging battlefield?

In our society, there is a beautiful tradition of giving names to houses. But how ironic it is! A house named *Satkar* (respect) often resounds with *Dhutkar* (insults). In a home called *Ullas* (joy), people may live in sorrow. A flat called *Leelalahaer* (playful waves) might feel like poison to its residents. Even in a bungalow named *Harsh* (laughter), terror may dwell, and in a row house named *Shanti* (peace), unrest may prevail. Can such houses truly be called homes? Or are they merely lifeless walls? A house is built with bricks and beams, but a home is built with love and dreams. Without affection, forgiveness, and harmony, even a palace feels like a prison; with them, even a hut becomes heaven.

However, today, in every home, you will find tea sets, dinner sets, sofa sets, TV sets, all kinds of "sets." But if the people living inside are constantly "upset," then can we really call it a home? Everyone dreams of building the house of their dreams, a place filled with love, harmony, and warmth. Yet, where there are people, there are bound to be differences, jealousy, ambition, and ego. Despite a deep connection, not every family becomes the ideal home they imagined. This dilemma is not new. But now, how can we make our home sweet?

Pramukh Swami Maharaj had offered the remedy to make our home sweet. He gave the practical concept of *Gharsabha*. *Gharsabha* encourages family members to gather daily to discuss satsang concepts and share updates and happenings from each other's lives. This daily dose of communication gives spouses, parents and children a better understanding of each other's spiritual, physical, and emotional needs. Pramukh Swami Maharaj deeply



BY NURTURING UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN GENERATIONS, GHARSABHA TRANSFORMS HOMES INTO SANCTUARIES OF RESPECT, HARMONY, AND HEARTFELT CONNECTION. IN A FRACTURED WORLD SEARCHING FOR UNITY, THIS SIMPLE YET PROFOUND PRACTICE MAY HOLD THE KEY TO RESTORING THE SOUL OF THE FAMILY

understood the fragile dynamics of family life. He foresaw that when agitation, misunderstanding, and silent resentment begin to enter a home, they slowly erect invisible walls between hearts.

With time, those walls grow stronger, turning affection into distance and conversation into silence. Therefore, he emphasised that the first step toward restoring harmony is to break this wall of silence and misconception. This is precisely how *Gharsabha* works. It gently dissolves the barricades of conflict and reopens the pathways of communication within the family. Through the shared

reading of sacred *shastras*, thoughtful reflection, and heartfelt dialogue, even a few simple words begin to rekindle warmth between family members. Gradually, conversations replace confrontation, understanding overcomes suspicion, and affection begins to flow once again. *Gharsabha* does not merely ignite the spark of love; it carefully nurtures and sustains it, transforming the home into a sanctuary of trust, unity, and spiritual closeness.

This timeless wisdom shows us the essence of happy family life: No matter what attitude someone has towards me, I should always strive to see the good in them.

Shaileshbhai Dhanani of Rajkot relates his experience, "Sometime after my marriage, troubles started between my wife and me. I worked in a factory. Sometimes, due to an overload of work, I used to come home late. As a result, my wife became suspicious of me and this led to heated arguments and increasing conflicts. My parents became fed up with her bickering, hollow suspicions and unfounded accusations. I found my life hellish and our relationship came to the point of breaking up. One day, the conflict climaxed to such a point that my exasperated wife attempted suicide. But she was saved because of Vinubhai, our landlord, who came and calmed her."

Thereafter, Shaileshbhai witnessed the *Gharsabha* carried out at Vinubhai's house next door and the resulting joy and ease in their family. He was inspired and started *Gharsabha* in his home. Shaileshbhai adds, "In the beginning, I used to do *Gharsabha* on my own. My wife ignored it, but gradually, all the members joined me. Slowly, my wife became interested in *satsang*. She started to sit at some distance and gradually came closer. Our differences started to dissolve and our problems were solved. Finally, there was peace and joy between us."

In this way, *Gharsabha* mended a broken family with trust and love.

(The writer Dr Sadhu Gyanananddas is a dedicated follower of the Swaminarayan tradition and has earned a PhD from MS University)

### Weekly Overview

The week begins with the Moon in Taurus, supporting steadiness, comfort and practical thinking. As it moves into Gemini, communication and activity increase. Midweek, the Cancer Moon heightens emotional sensitivity and family concerns. By the weekend, the Moon enters Leo, bringing stronger confidence, visibility and a desire for action.



**Aries (Mesh):** The week begins on a practical note, especially in work or financial matters, where steadiness will help more than speed. As the Moon moves into Gemini, conversations and pending plans gain momentum. Midweek, emotional sensitivity may rise in domestic or close matters, so avoid quick reactions. By the weekend, confidence returns and your natural urge to move ahead becomes stronger. A balanced approach will serve you well.



**Taurus (Vrishabh):** With the Moon beginning the week in your own sign, you may feel more centred and engaged with matters around you. This is a supportive start, though comfort should not turn into stubbornness. Midweek may bring emotional sensitivity in communication, and words spoken in haste could create misunderstandings. By the weekend, confidence improves and practical matters move with greater clarity. A calm and steady approach will work best.



**Gemini (Mithun):** The opening days may feel quieter, with matters moving more in the background. Once the Moon enters Gemini, your pace naturally increases, bringing sharper thinking, movement and useful conversations. Midweek, emotional shifts may make practical decisions less straightforward, especially in family matters. Financial decisions should be handled carefully. By the weekend,

### WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 17-23 MAY

#### Steady Beginnings, Emotional Undercurrents

Dr. Shanker Adawal  
Astrologer, Author & Researcher

This forecast is based on your Moon Sign (Janma Rashi), which often reflects day-to-day emotional and instinctive patterns more closely than general Sun-sign readings.

confidence improves. This is a week of moving from inward observation to outward action.



**Cancer (Karka):** The early part of the week may feel socially active yet mentally scattered, with several matters competing for attention. Once the Moon enters Cancer, emotional awareness becomes stronger, increasing both sensitivity and intuition. The key is not to let mood drive important decisions. Domestic or relationship matters may need patience and softer handling. Toward the weekend, confidence rises and your focus shifts from reflection toward action.



**Leo (Simha):** The week begins with a practical and duty-oriented tone, especially in professional matters where patience will work better than dramatic action. Midweek may bring changing plans or communication demands requiring flexibility. As emotional energy rises, you may feel more reflective than usual. By the weekend, the Moon enters Leo, restoring confidence and visibility. This closing phase supports leadership and initiative, provided ego does not overtake judgment.

**Virgo (Kanya):** The week opens constructively, favouring planning and practical progress. Professional discussions may



prove useful. As the Moon moves into Gemini, responsibilities and communication demands may increase. Midweek brings a softer emotional current, where friendships or expectations may affect your mood more than expected. Avoid overanalysing unclear situations. By the weekend, confidence improves and perspective becomes stronger. Quiet discipline will help more than emotional involvement.



**Libra (Tula):** The early week supports practical assessment, especially around commitments or shared responsibilities. Communication improves as the week progresses, bringing movement in plans or professional matters. However, during the Cancer phase, you may feel more sensitive to others' responses, especially in public or work settings. Avoid reading too much into temporary situations. By the weekend, confidence improves and support from others may feel stronger.



**Scorpio (Vrishchik):** This week begins with focus on partnerships or close interpersonal matters, where patience will be important. As the Moon moves into Gemini, financial or practical concerns may need clearer handling. Midweek brings a more emotionally supportive phase, strengthening intuition and perspective. This can be a useful time for reflection or reconnecting with meaningful priorities. By the weekend, external responsibilities may again demand stronger attention.



**Sagittarius (Dhanu):** The week begins with focus on routine matters, responsibilities and work structure. Progress may feel slow, but useful movement is possible. As the Moon enters

Gemini, relationships and communication become more central. Midweek emotional undercurrents may make exchanges feel heavier than expected, so avoid quick conclusions. By the weekend, confidence and optimism return. This closing phase supports movement, learning and broader thinking.



**Capricorn (Makar):** The opening phase is supportive, with practical matters moving steadily. This can be a useful time for planning or stabilising pending concerns. Midweek, communication and responsibilities may increase. Emotional sensitivity in close relationships may require patience rather than control. By the weekend, confidence returns and practical clarity improves. Overall, this remains a constructive week, provided emotional reactions stay measured.



**Aquarius (Kumbh):** The week begins with attention drawn toward home, family matters or emotional comfort. Midweek brings stronger communication, movement and planning. As emotional sensitivity increases, routine matters may feel heavier, especially if others depend more on your support. Maintain practical boundaries. By the weekend, focus shifts toward relationships and outward engagement. This phase may bring greater visibility, but patience will still be important.



**Pisces (Meen):** The opening days support communication, movement and practical engagement with day-to-day matters. Midweek supports mental activity, though emotional clarity may fluctuate. As the Moon enters Cancer, intuition and emotional expression become stronger. Creative thinking improves, though practical decisions still require care. By the weekend, focus shifts back toward routine responsibilities and structure. This is a week where intuition helps, but discipline remains equally important.

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



# The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

## Xi, Trump and the Thucydides trap

**A summit of low expectations did at least restore some stability**

On the first day of talks in US President Donald Trump's state visit to Beijing, his host Xi Jinping reached back nearly 2,500 years to caution of the risk of America and China stumbling into a calamitous war. They should, the Chinese president said, beware the "Thucydides trap". He was referring to the fifth-century-BC historian who argued that the threat posed by the then rising power of Athens had led all but inevitably to war with the established hegemon, Sparta. Amid the mounting frictions of recent years, the idea has percolated that China, as the contemporary rising power, risks reprising the role of Athens and plunging into war with America.

The good news from this week's summit is that, after a decade of increasingly

fractious exchanges between the world's two great powers, Trump and Xi appear, for now, to have stabilised the relationship. In closing remarks Xi talked of "strategic stability". Trump garlanded his hosts and indeed the US-China relationship with his trademark hyperbolic prose; touring one of the Zhongnanhai gardens in Beijing, he said its roses were "the most beautiful roses anyone has ever seen". More significantly, his remarks focused on improving business ties, a far cry from his hawkish tone of just a year ago.

With the global economy facing mounting uncertainty over the consequences of the Strait of Hormuz closure and America's ill-thought-out war against Iran more broadly, the summit's emollient tone is to be welcomed. Both leaders will be happy with the outcome. Trump likes being feted, will believe he has shown he can handle Xi, and surely knows the last thing the US needs now is an economic showdown with China. Xi, too, could do without a renewed trade

war with America as he grapples with reviving China's economy. The overall impression of the summit also reflects well on China's image as it seeks to present itself as a calm and assured world leader in waiting, in implicit contrast with the turbulent Trump.

But in the sweep of history this summit was a missed opportunity. The big global challenges and the tensions directly affecting the two countries seem to have been skirted. The US, for now, appears to have given up on the idea of tackling or even talking about global imbalances and trying to influence China's economic policies. The challenge posed by China's stranglehold over many rare earth minerals appears to have been parked. There was also no sign that China offered to put pressure on Iran to reach a deal with the US on its nuclear programme.

The summit made clear that the future of Taiwan remains one of the most neuralgic and consequential flash-points on the planet. Early indications

**In the sweep of history this state visit was a missed opportunity. The big global challenges and the tensions affecting the two countries seem to have been skirted**

are that Trump did not make a concession to Xi that Taipei had feared, by changing the language of the American position on the status of the vibrant democracy. But on his flight home he suggested he had not made up his mind whether to go ahead with a planned \$14bn arms sale to Taiwan. The remark will alarm Taipei and other US allies and partners in the region.

The summit had low expectations and those low expectations were met. Beyond the hype, and notwithstanding Trump's top-tier corporate entourage, the US appears to have secured few if any significant business deals. Xi himself pointedly warned that the "Taiwan question" could lead to "conflict" if badly managed. Trump is so mercurial that the China hawks in his circle could regain the ascendancy. Fears over the "Thucydides trap" will surely stay near the top of the global agenda in the years ahead. But for today copies of the great Athenian historian can be put back on the bookshelves.

## Opinion Geopolitics

### Our dog-eat-dog world order needs a rethink

FT Montage/Getty Images



Raghuram Rajan



the whims of the US. This is an appropriate task for a coalition of the willing, including middle-income countries and richer emerging markets.

But coalitions of the willing are only stopgap arrangements. In the medium term, the world needs a new order, more sensitive to what happens within nations but also more open to the rise of the rest. It must have a few clear norms that do not intrude on national sovereignty or countries' economic systems other than to limit actions that involve negative spillovers. Inevitably, though, ambiguity about how specific norms and behaviour should be interpreted will necessitate arbiters.

In an increasingly multi-polar world, it makes little sense to entrust arbitration and leadership to an insecure hegemon, or to a group of strong powers wielding vetoes. Nor should the entire comity of nations vote on every action, a guarantee of chaos. Indeed, the influence of national interests in the operations of multilateral institutions, the natural arbiters, has become increasingly detrimental today.

We need to reinvent the governance of multilateral institutions to make them fair arbiters. Here is a proposal: they should have capable leaders who take their mandate from internationally negotiated norms, but are operationally independent, and certainly not responsible to any single country or hobbled by vetoes. Leaders should recuse themselves from matters involving their country.

Following an open search by a governing board, institutional leadership should be appointed for fixed non-renewable terms. Board directors should be appointed by member states, with their voting power determined by transparent criteria that also ensure leadership is backed by nations that can facilitate the institution's work. For instance, voting power in a UN-like arbiter should be mildly biased towards those who can contribute effective peacekeeping forces, while funders should have more say in an IMF-like arbiter.

The board should periodically review decisions to make sure they adhere to the institution's mandate. But it should not have the ability to interfere operationally; neither to determine which aggressor to name and shame, nor which country to fund and how much. Those should be the prerogative of leadership.

The old order placed national politics at the core of the multilateral institutions that managed it. When we tire of dog-eat-dog behaviour, we might profitably look for better answers by distancing our institutions from narrow political demands, even as they remain answerable to the world.

The writer is a former central banker and a professor at the University of Chicago

## Letters

### Markets don't exist in a liminal cosmic space

Gillian Tett's meditation on market exuberance amid geopolitical volatility (The Weekend Essay, May 2) offers valuable insights, but I want to push back on one of her framing assumptions and draw out what I believe are its troubling implications.

Tett cautions readers against "anthropomorphising" the market. Yet what are markets if not collections of human feelings and judgments? They are literally aggregations of individual opinions (vibes?) about relative asset values, synthesising the mood and expectations of their participants at a given time.

Markets don't exist in some liminal cosmic space. Markets are us. They are made by humans, reflecting human emotions, biases and blind spots.

For too long we've been conditioned to view markets as external to us to

sustain the illusion of technocracy: that if we delegate all decisions to markets, including moral decisions about what matters, what we value and how we organise our common life, we'll magically arrive at perfect outcomes. Thinkers such as Michael Sandel have explored this with an eloquence I can't match, but as a recovering economist and aspiring theologian, I believe this point bears repeating.

This brings me to my second observation. Having worked on Wall Street for a good part of my career, I observed that most people making buy-and-sell decisions tend to think of capital markets as disembodied entities detached from physical reality.

Very few market participants understand much about the material world. They think of AI, the cloud, oil, gold or power as if these were merely bits of software.

They underestimate — or conveniently ignore, driven by herd behaviour — that our world, despite all the technological advancement, remains profoundly physical, dependent on physical inputs and constrained by physical limits. Not least, planetary limits.

Reminding colleagues of physical realities was occasionally good for my career advancement, but my experience convinced me that too many people who spend their lives in finance would benefit from getting their hands dirty: touching soil, growing food, pumping water. We desperately need to relearn our embeddedness in the physical, natural world of which we are a part.

**Laura Segafredo**  
Former managing director, BlackRock; Co-host, 'Moral Revolution' podcast, Westfield, NJ, US

### So who will be licensing the Trump trademark?

Guy Chazan only hints at financial motives for Donald Trump's branding onslaught on American institutions, but he shies away from digging deeper ("America's Trump makeover", FT Big Read, FT Weekend, May 2).

It is well known that Trump turned to branding after the collapse of his casinos and airline in the 1990s and early 2000s. In response to these failures, the Trump Organization adopted an "asset light" model, focusing on licensing out the Trump brand for products ranging from luxury condominiums and hotels to consumer goods, such as wine, steaks, Bibles and sneakers.

The question is this: are federal and local governments licensing the Trump trademark? The broadcaster PBS reported in February this year that a Trump-owned company filed federal trademark applications to secure rights for using his name on airports, perhaps in preparation for the reported renaming of Florida's Palm Beach International Airport. While the Trump Organization claimed it will not be charging the airport a royalty fee to use the Trump name, what liabilities would a licensing agreement impose on the state? For example, would these naming rights be in perpetuity, with damages to be paid if the Trump name were dropped? Given rumours that there are measures to rename Dulles Airport and other public facilities these questions are significant.

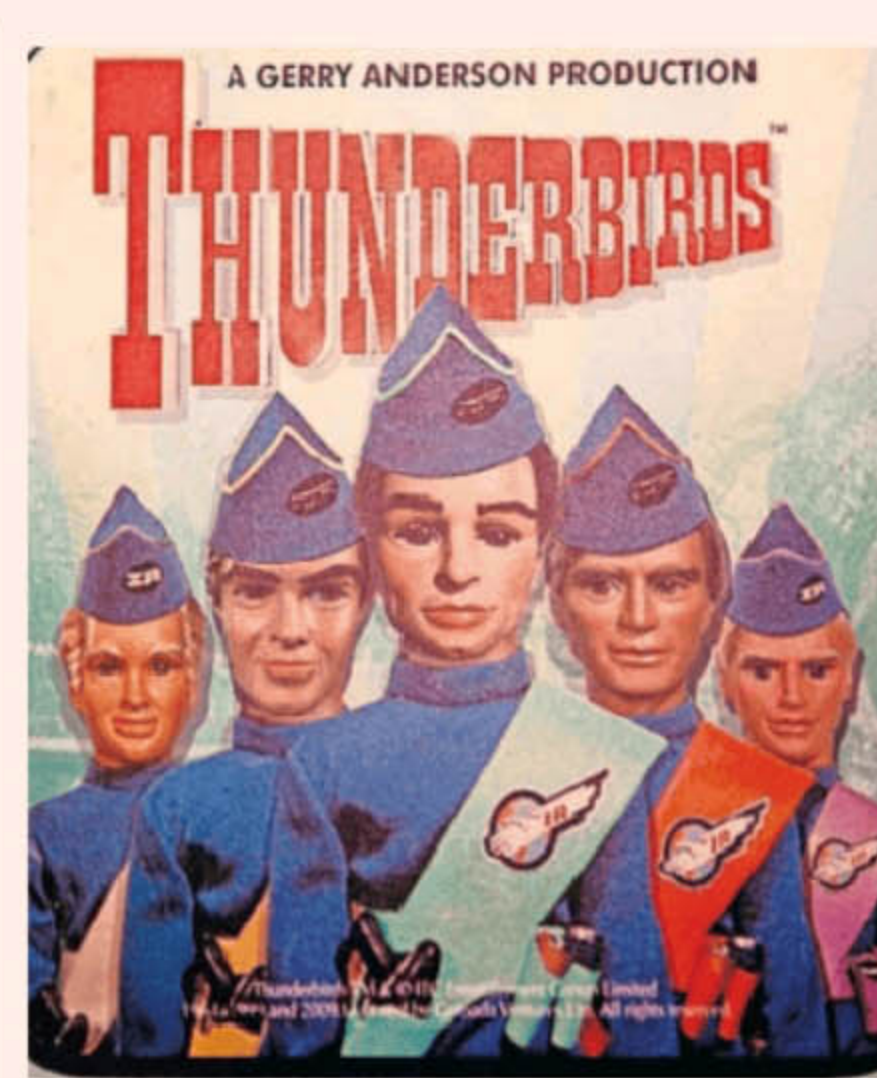
In the licensing business, where brand recognition is itself a currency, the renaming of multiple public institutions can boost the brand owner's valuation. While the views of the various scholars and historians are insightful, a follow up article should seek the opinions of intellectual property lawyers, brand managers and licensing specialists.

**Peter Shay**  
Hong Kong

### Putting the cost of the Iran war in some perspective

Re the report (May 12) on how the war in Iran has cost US taxpayers \$29bn so far, to put that in perspective, that's almost as much as the state of California paid out in fraudulent unemployment claims during Covid, which was \$30bn. At some point the cost of the war may become a real scandal. Just not at the moment.

**David Spirakis**  
London W2, UK



"Thunderbirds", the TV sci-fi puppet series by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson

### How student dissertations are now alarmingly shallow

Gillian Tett's column "Humans still matter more than AI in finance" (Opinion, FT Weekend, May 9), resonated with my own experience as a university teacher.

Over the years, I have supervised many students in their dissertations and sought to challenge their thinking. Recently, however, their written responses have become what the financiers in her column describe as "alarmingly shallow".

Before ChatGPT, my questioning would prompt students to revisit the literature, reconsider their interpretations and arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of their thesis.

Now, many simply feed my questions back into AI and return with an alternative text that sounds intelligent but is, in substance, the same slop. Instead of probing their critical thinking, I now seem to be training an AI model to write a thesis instead. It's more like engineering rather than teaching.

How then do we restore genuine intellectual engagement? The most effective answer appears to be a more relational, face-to-face approach built around oral debate and discussion.

That was always the core of teaching and learning, but it has steadily been eroded by the financial pressures bearing down on higher education.

We may place our hopes in the 2026 intern cohort, but they will only improve if we are willing to reinvest in a more time-intensive, human model of education.

**Melanie Ehren**  
University Professor, Leiden, The Netherlands

### New York Metropolitan Opera's fickle fans

In his analysis of the woes of New York's Metropolitan Opera, Andrew Farach-Colton fails to mention what may be the fatal flaws in the institution ("Anguish at the opera house", Music, Life & Arts, May 2).

First, the Met has over 3,500 seats, more than any other opera house in the world — about 1,000 more than Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. That size means that if one is seated quite far back in the stalls, because of the difference in the speed of light versus sound, there is a mismatch between the movement of the lips of singers, and the arrival of the singing!

Second, the Met audience. It is interesting to observe that there are often subscribers' seats left empty when their owners have something better to do on any particular night, and cannot be bothered to return their tickets to the box office for possible resale.

Third is the fact, which puts terrific pressure on Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, that many patrons are not prepared to go to performances of new productions or where there are no megastars performing.

So if Renée Fleming, Joyce DiDonato, or Jonas Kaufmann are not singing, they are reluctant to attend; and, even if they do, there is clear evidence of empty seats after the interval, as those fickle "socially sensitive" subscribers have left to go to dinner at Picholine (now closed) or other "smart" restaurants close by. At least that way subscribers can claim that they "went last night to hear X or Y", without revealing that they were there only until the interval!

**JML Stone**  
London W1, UK

### Penitent pilgrims

Ah the beds! They were tough to sleep on when we did the Lough Derg pilgrimage a few years ago. One man I heard sigh: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph. What brought me here?" ("To Purgatory and back again", Travel, Life & Arts, April 4). It was busier than you describe. But what was most striking was the sight of older people saying their prayers as they stepped barefoot over the stones. That put one's own discomfort in perspective and prompted the thought that this temporary ordeal is not far removed from some people's daily working lives.

**Veronica Whitty**  
Wallsend, Tyne and Wear, UK

### Doing the Vatican rag!

Reading "What mending a suit taught me about masculinity" (May 2), Josh Spero's Life & Arts feature on the visible repair and its challenge to the sartorial seriousness of the business suit, I was reminded of Patrick Leigh Fermor's book *A Time of Gifts*. Published in 1977, he describes the playing card tricks of the fortune tellers he meets during his walking tour across Europe in the 1930s — how they "flounced in tiers of yellow and magenta and apple-green, perfunctorily shuffled their cards and proffered them in dog-eared fans as they strolled through the crowds".

I wonder whether that description owes anything to the dress of the 15th century *Landsknecht* German mercenaries, the eye-catching warriors of the Renaissance epoch, who were given special exemption from the sumptuary laws and allowed to wear their colourful figure-hugging woollens, the shoulders and sleeves slit and puffed.

After the battle of Grandson (1476), some accounts have it that the forces of the Old Swiss Confederacy slashed up the silk tents they had captured from the Burgundians, replacing their own ruined fustian clothes... ending, some say, with the uniform of today's Vatican Swiss Guards. Nothing it seems is new, especially in fashion.

**Jane Swan**  
Delabole, Cornwall, UK

### What is it about Austrian writers and ocean liners?

Your review of *The Last Movement*, Robert Seethaler's new novella about Gustav Mahler (Books, May 9), might also have mentioned this is not the first time an Austrian writer has used an ocean liner serving routes to and from New York as a setting.

In reverse chronological order, the first is Thomas Bernhard's theatre play *Immanuel Kant*, published in 1978. The second is the *Schachnovelle* written in 1941 by another great Austrian writer, Stefan Zweig. In English it has been translated under different titles (*The Royal Game, Chess and Chess Story*). Is this all too much of a coincidence?

**Konstantinos Magliveras**  
Athens, Greece

### The Surtees novel said it all

I read last night, in my great grandmother's copy of Robert Surtees' satirical novel "Ask Mamma": *Or the Richest Commoner in England* — a Christmas present to her in 1874 — that "if a man wants to be thoroughly disgusted with human nature, let him ally himself unreservedly to a political party. He will find cozening and sneaking and selfishness in all their varieties, and patriotic false pretences in their most luxuriant growth." Sound familiar?

**Charles D Francis**  
Anstruther, Fife, Scotland, UK

### If Starmer's a robot, Burnham's a marionette

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer is often described as being robotic, whereas Andy Burnham, one of his potential challengers, has always reminded me of a puppet in *Thunderbirds*, the 1960s sci-fi children's series.

But if we are going to have a Thunderbird puppet running the country, my vote would go to Lady Penelope, with Parker, her butler/chauffeur acting as her enforcer.

**Barrie Bain**  
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## Opinion

## A cold peace between the US and China is good enough

Jessica Chen Weiss

Xi Jinping's warning to Donald Trump this week about the critical importance of Taiwan was predictable — and alarming. The Chinese president needed strong words about a potential "conflict" to satisfy domestic hardliners. But both leaders know a war in the region would destroy their economies. The more surprising outcome was that Xi and Trump seem genuinely interested in stabilising US-China relations. If hawks on both sides of the Pacific can stomach it, stalemate could become the durable *détente* both countries need. There is now a window of opportunity for this.

Remarkably, Trump has created real breathing room in US-China relations. He's waved away ideological objections,

calling Xi a "good friend" and dismantling many of the tools the US has long used to challenge autocracy. He has signalled an openness to Chinese investment that would bring jobs and deals for American farmers and industry. He has even welcomed 600,000 Chinese students to attend US universities.

Trump has also performed his usual flip-flops. He approved Chinese purchases of Iranian oil in March and has imposed some secondary sanctions. Even as senior US officials acknowledge Chinese efforts to push Iran to accept a ceasefire, others have accused China of taking advantage of the conflict. In Beijing, Xi told Trump he would not sell arms to Iran, curbing speculation about Chinese military support.

The forces that support a schism between the US and China include leading lawmakers as well as tech titans who invoke a race with Beijing to resist safeguards on AI. Meanwhile the American public is more anxious about jobs, affordability and the future of humanity than outdated notions

of competition for global primacy.

China has its own reasons to want stability. Between 10-20mn Chinese jobs depend on trade with the US. Amid double-digit youth unemployment, the Chinese leadership would rather extend the trade truce than risk further turbulence. Xi is preparing to seek a fourth term next year. Beijing wants to show domestic audiences that it can avoid a showdown with Washington, especially as the Chinese military scrambles to recover from a purge of its top brass.

To seize this moment, the US and China need to accept four hard truths.

First, decoupling is a fantasy. The economies of the two superpowers are so symbiotic that prising them apart is impossible. Washington and Beijing are wasting time and energy trying to prove otherwise — and will continue to discover the limits of their ability to succeed without the other. For instance, the US can't quickly wean itself off Chinese rare earths. In 15 years, Japan has only cut its reliance on them from over 90 per cent to 60 per cent. More than a

third of American active pharmaceutical ingredients are sourced exclusively from China. And Chinese companies are equally reliant on the US for advanced chips, animal feed and more. Interdependence runs both ways.

The more important task is how to stabilise these ties. Recoupling in specific areas is sensible — economically

Rather than trying to engineer a breakthrough, this is a moment to prevent deterioration

and symbolically. For example, US auto workers could benefit from Chinese technology and investment in batteries and electric vehicle plants. Security and labour concerns can be mitigated with local ownership, union participation and more. To create jobs in the auto, battery and other advanced industries and catch up, US manufacturers need to be

training with, rather than always against, the Chinese companies that currently dominate these sectors.

Second, stop talking about "strategic competition". In Chinese the equivalent term (*zhànlüè jìngzhēng*) is more linguistically loaded — the government reportedly discourages its use. Such adversarial framing cuts off a coexistence both sides might actually be able to live with. On the US side, it was always more of a catchphrase than a strategy. Even a foreign bogeyman could not assuage public fatigue with unwinnable wars, exploding debt and political dysfunction. Two dozen American and Chinese experts I convened this spring agreed: finding new language is key to changing the mental models on both sides. Alternatives included "coevolution" and "managed interdependence".

Third, nurture moderates. In the US, those urging a "middle way" and restraint are gaining momentum inside and outside the administration but still lack a deep bench. Their ideas need the political infrastructure to sustain them.

Sympathetic voices on Capitol Hill need space to test new ideas and the political cover that comes from strength in numbers. The same problem exists in China. Here too moderate voices face real constraints, including social media channels increasingly filled with inflammatory narratives, as well as the great firewall and limits on what can be said publicly. The people on both sides who knew how to talk to each other are ageing or have been pushed out of office.

The goal right now may just be a "cold peace". Rather than trying to engineer a breakthrough, this is a moment to prevent deterioration. Keeping enough channels open so that a better relationship becomes possible, despite any bluster over Taiwan, is a modest mission, but it may be the only viable one.

Because there is a fourth hard truth for Trump and Xi to face: there is no military solution to that political impasse, only sustained and creative diplomacy.

The writer is a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

## How can Trump turn things around on inflation?

ECONOMICS

Michael Strain



With prices rising faster than wages, workers are losing ground in the US. The consumer price index for April, released this week, shows an increase of 3.8 per cent over the year. The average wage grew by 3.6 per cent over the same period.

Americans are worried — including those the GOP needs to attract to the polls in November's midterms. According to a new CNN poll, 55 per cent of Republicans and 81 per cent of independents say President Donald Trump's policies have increased their cost of living.

To be sure, Trump is not blameless. But much of the culpability for inflation and high prices rests with the Federal Reserve and the previous government.

Simply put, it is the Fed's responsibility to keep inflation low and stable, not Trump's. Those who champion central bank independence — including me — should be the first to acknowledge that accountability accompanies autonomy.

The Fed has misread the economy since Trump's second term began. It has been too confident that underlying inflation would drift back to target in the absence of Trump's tariffs and it has put too much weight on the risk of a meaningful increase in unemployment. The central bank's mistaken diagnoses have kept underlying inflation stuck between 0.5 and 1 percentage points above target over the past two years.

But while above-target price growth plays a part in voters' affordability concerns, it isn't the main culprit. When people walk into grocery stores or look at restaurant menus, they experience jarring sticker shock. The overall level of prices is 25 per cent higher than it was just five years ago.

Part of that increase was caused by pandemic-era supply disruptions. But my calculations suggest that President Joe Biden's massive \$1.9tn stimulus in 2021 contributed around 3 percentage points to that year's inflation. The Fed should have responded aggressively. Instead, it kept interest rates near zero per cent for a full year after the Biden stimulus became law, only raising rates after 12 consecutive months of above-target inflation, by which time CPI inflation was above 8 per cent.

It is true that, given the size of the stimulus, it would have been hard for the Fed to keep underlying inflation close to target. And to its credit, after realising the mistake, it began aggressively raising rates in the spring and summer of 2022. But by then, the level of prices had risen considerably and the inflation genie had been let out of the bottle.

In the 2024 election, Democrats paid a major price for the mistakes of 2021. And it looks like high prices stemming

from 2021 could hurt the GOP this November as well.

Of course, Trump is not wholly innocent. His tariffs have increased the cost of imported goods for households and businesses, pushing up measured CPI inflation while offering Americans little in return. The war in Iran led petrol prices to increase by 21.2 per cent in March, and Trump has not made a serious effort to persuade Americans of the war's merits.

And his public messaging has been abysmal. Earlier this month, he said in a speech that the affordability issue was a "line of bullshit". Last May, when asked about the effect of tariffs on consumer prices, he patronisingly argued that kids could "have two dolls instead of 30 dolls".

What can he do now to turn things around?

Further interest rate reductions in 2026 could cause inflation to accelerate, and Trump should not pressure new Fed chair Kevin Warsh to cut. Jay Powell was remarkably successful at defending Fed independence from Trump's egregious attacks. Warsh should not be put to the same test.

When it comes to prices, Trump should do no harm. He should eliminate the tariffs on allied nations and watch the labour market with an eye towards increasing immigrant inflows if wage pressure starts to build. He should drop the suggested fuel tax holidays and "tariff dividends" for households — these unsound gimmicks would boost demand and add to price pressure.

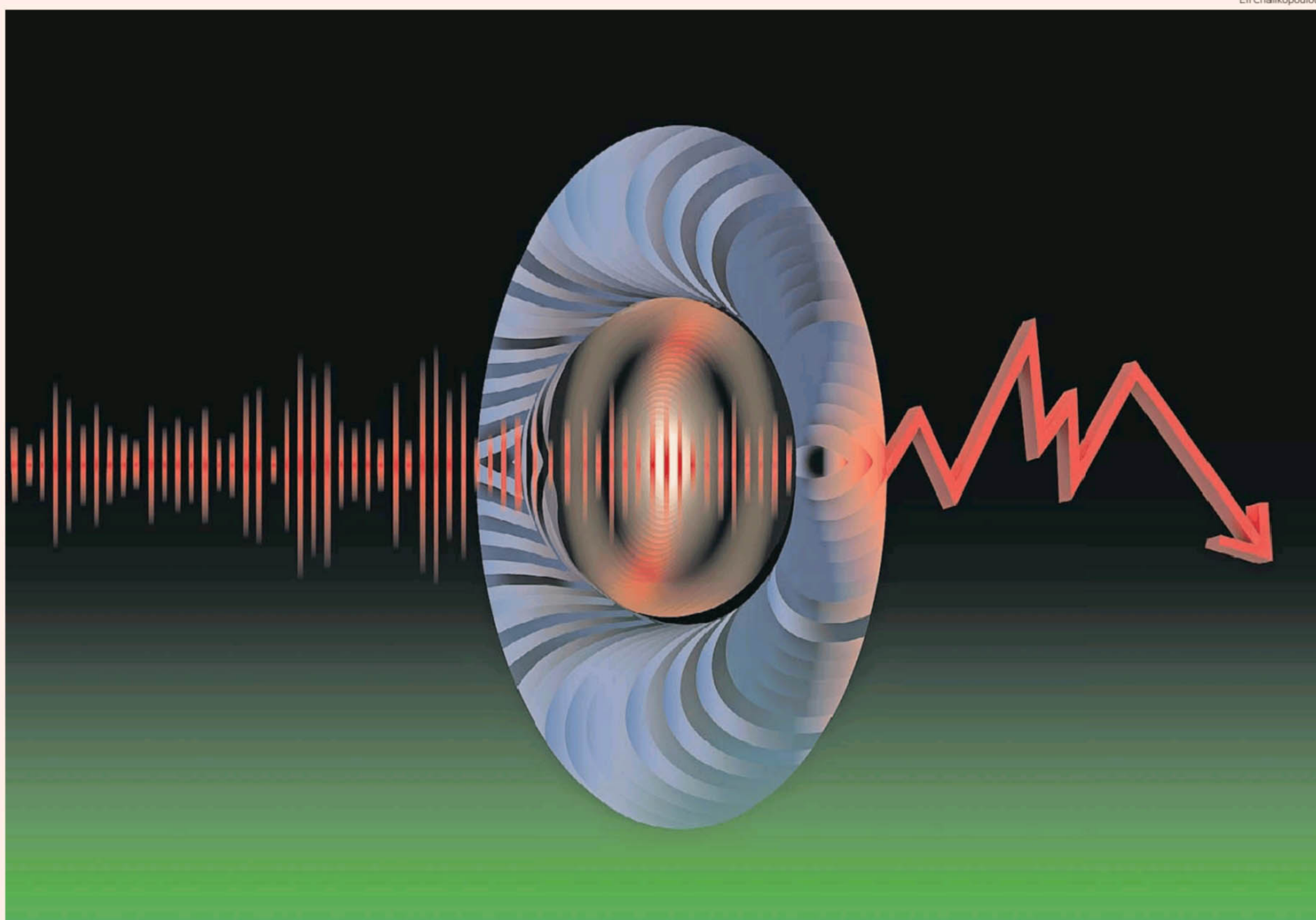
He should eliminate the tariffs on allied nations and drop the suggested fuel tax holidays

In addition, he needs to direct his search for affordability solutions away from statist impulses, such as demands to cap credit card interest rates, that would exacerbate the problem.

Crucially, Trump should also turn his attention away from distractions like building a White House ballroom and renovating the Lincoln Memorial's reflecting pool and towards some of the issues that Americans have been frustrated about for decades, such as the high cost of childcare, housing, healthcare and education.

Making progress here would require master statercraft — proposing solutions, driving a consistent message, persuading voters of their merit and building a consensus in Congress. This would mark a significant change for the president. But a major change is required if he is to convince Americans that he understands their concerns and is moving to address them. If he does not and affordability concerns continue to mount, there will be no way for Trump and his party to escape accountability.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and director of economic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute



## Why Warsh wants the Fed to keep quiet

The incoming chair thinks that constant 'incantations' do more harm than good

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



A dozen years ago, an anthropologist called Douglas Holmes published an ethnographic study of central bankers entitled *Economy of Words*. This posited that it was entirely wrong to view the mandarins of central banking as mere "engineers", who shape our economy by pulling monetary levers.

Instead, this tribe also acts like quasi-shamans, who use words to steer the economy by casting verbal spells. Hence the use of "forward guidance", the tool that central banks use to inform the public about the likely course of monetary policy, especially of interest rates.

Is this a good thing? It is a crucial question now that the US Senate has finally confirmed Kevin Warsh as the next Federal Reserve chair. Particularly because Warsh is assuming the position armed with a pledge to unleash "regime change", supposedly to bolster the Fed's credibility.

By any measure, Warsh faces a hellishly difficult task. President Donald Trump is demanding big interest rate cuts, and such pressure risks undermining Fed independence.

Meanwhile consumer and producer price inflation just hit 3.8 and 6 per cent

respectively. Worse, ten-year bond yields are nearly 4.5 per cent.

Warsh's proposed remedy is to shrink the Fed's balance sheet, co-ordinate better with the Treasury department and narrow the central bank's mission. He also hopes (or prays) that an artificial intelligence boom will produce the productivity miracle that will enable him to cut rates.

However, there is another, less noticed, aspect to his plans too: "a reform to [Fed] communications," as he told Congress. As he observed in a speech last year, "Once policymakers reveal their economic forecast, they can become prisoners of their own words. Fed leaders would be well served to skip opportunities to share their latest musings."

Or as he told Congress this month: "The Fed tells the whole world what their dots are going to be... [and] hold on to those forecasts longer than they should." In plain English: he prefers silence.

This is ironic. We live in a deafeningly noisy era and Scott Bessent, the Treasury secretary, frequently deploys verbal intervention himself. Meanwhile Trump uses social media as a megaphone. Or as Warsh told Congress: "Presidents [always] tend to be for cutting rates. The difference is President Trump expresses it quite publicly."

Moreover, silence is at odds with recent trends among central bankers. They used to revel in opacity. But "their communication has gone [in recent decades] on a long journey from close to zero information to a high degree of

transparency and accountability," as Otmar Issing, the European Central Bank's former chief economist, has observed.

That is partly because central banks need political legitimacy, and think this can best be served by embracing the three "Es" of "Explanation, Engagement and Education," to cite a Bank of England paper.

But, more recently, their talk also reflects policy expediency (or desperation): when western central banks slashed rates to zero after the global financial crisis, they needed new tools to

Interest rates are no longer at zero in most economies and it is hard for anyone to make credible forecasts

fight deflation and verbal intervention seemed a handy option.

Fair enough. However, the challenge for central bankers now is that the world has now changed. Interest rates are no longer at zero in most economies and it is increasingly hard for anyone to make credible forecasts. While economists can analyse demand cycles, they struggle to predict supply-side shocks, let alone domestic politics and geopolitics. Radical uncertainty rules.

Institutions have responded to these difficulties in different ways. The Bank of England has for some time released "fan charts" of possible inflation outcomes, to show that it is not an infallible

oracle. The Fed has its "dot plots" that show where different members of the Federal Open Market Committee think interest rates will be. The IMF recently decided to issue not one but three forecasts to reflect the heightened uncertainty. And when central bankers discuss policy today, they increasingly frame those discussions as "data dependent", reactive to events, not set by prior forecasts.

All this seems sensible. However, one problem with being data dependent is that it undermines any forward guidance. Another is that it can create investor uncertainty and market volatility. Warsh concludes, therefore, that "moving markets with rolling Fed incantations is tempting, but unhelpful". Thus while he is likely to support the publication of Fed reports and press conferences (to show accountability), he may shrink or scrap those dot plots and other forward guidance.

Is this wise? Many media and market participants may argue not. No wonder: they feed off the rituals around central bank communications. And, as critics will note, a policy of silence can sometimes create as much market volatility as excessive noise.

But I, for one, have some sympathy with Warsh's arguments. After all, as Holmes notes, verbal magic stops working when it is overused, or is at odds with the "real" world. So the question for the Fed is whether silence can indeed pay. Will Warsh be an effective economic engineer or a monetary shaman?

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# Opinion

The New York Times

## Powell Was a Genius at Ignoring the President's Bullying

Jason Furman

A contributing Opinion writer who was the chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers from 2013 to 2017.

I FIRST met Jerome Powell, the just-departed head of the Federal Reserve, in late 2011. I was working for President Barack Obama, and Mr. Powell was interviewing for a job as one of the Fed's governors. He was not our first choice. To be honest, he wasn't even our second.

Republicans had already made it clear that we had to rule out any Democrats or else none of our other Fed nominees would get through, which would leave the institution dangerously short-handed.

Our first choice for the Republican slot, a respected macroeconomist, dropped out at the last minute, and we were back to square one. I reached out to several other right-leaning economists, but none of them were interested. Nor did they have other ideas for us.

Then someone at the Treasury Department suggested we consider Jay Powell. I didn't mind having to pick a Republican — I am not a deep-rooted political partisan. But a lawyer with no formal academic training in macroeconomics? That strained my deep-seated economist partisanship. Mr. Powell had something more valuable than academic credentials, though. He had a demonstrated record of integrity and courage. Little did any of us realize how important these qualities would prove to be.

A decade and a half later, Mr. Powell's tenure as Fed chair is over. In normal times, this would be the moment to look back at his policies and performance. We'd be noting that under his leadership, the Fed succeeded in keeping the pandemic from turning into a financial crisis but failed to avoid 7 percent inflation. But these are not normal times, and Mr. Powell's policy successes and failures are not what he'll be remembered for.

At the time Mr. Powell was recommended to us, Washington was locked in a battle over the federal debt limit. Republicans were threatening not to raise it unless they got their way on the budget. Some even argued that if Mr. Obama wanted more money, he should just sell the gold in Fort Knox — or default on our debt to China or find the money in some other way. It fell to Mr. Powell, who was working at the Bipartisan Policy Center, to explain with patience and clarity that these measures were either extremely damaging or outright impossible. That message didn't win him many friends.

Mr. Obama nominated him, unlocking the logjam of Senate approval, and Mr. Powell joined the Board of Governors. He learned on the job, deepening his understanding of monetary economics, soaking up academic research, Federal Reserve analysis and even



ANNA ROSE LAYDEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

what was then known as EconTwitter.

In 2017, President Trump broke with recent precedent and chose not to reappoint Janet Yellen, the Fed chair who had been appointed by Mr. Obama. Instead, the president went with Mr. Powell, who he apparently thought would be more faithful to Mr. Trump's own agenda.

Fortunately for our economy, Mr. Trump could not have been more wrong. At various times the policies Mr. Trump was trying to impose on Mr. Powell, most of all drastically slashing interest rates, would have damaged the economy and made inflation even worse. But more important, they would have diminished the credibility of the institution itself.

In a world where we give the Fed unlimited power to print as much money as it wants, we need confidence that it will not abuse that power — otherwise we get higher inflation, lower economic growth, less job creation and more expensive loans for our homes and our businesses. Mr. Powell focused on what the economy needed, not on what the president

wanted. That infuriated Mr. Trump.

In his first term, Mr. Trump took the remarkable step of tweeting, "who is our bigger enemy, Jay Powell or Chairman Xi?" By chance I was sitting a few feet away from Mr. Powell at that very moment, at a Federal Reserve conference in Jackson Hole, Wyo. I was amazed to see how he took it in stride, something I would never have been able to do.

Mr. Powell has continued to tune out the noise. He hasn't backed down; he hasn't joined the resistance. He just kept doing his job, even as the president threatened to fire him or even prosecute him. In 2024, after withstanding so many years of public intimidation attempts, he was asked at a news conference if President Trump had the power to fire him. Mr. Powell responded with a single word: "No."

He's made mistakes, some of them serious. During the Covid years, the Federal Reserve continued stimulating the economy even as inflation rose and rose. Given the impact of the Biden administration's stimulus package

**The Fed chair served dutifully, even as Trump threatened his job.**

## Is Los Angeles Ready for a Reality-Star Mayor?

Jessica Grose

An Opinion writer for The Times, covering family, religion, education, culture and the way we live now.

WHEN Spencer Pratt, formerly of the reality show "The Hills," announced his bid for mayor of Los Angeles in January, I was not surprised. A celebrity with no political or traditional corporate experience wants to run the second-largest city in the United States?

We have a reality TV president. The transportation secretary, Sean Duffy, and his wife were on MTV's "The Real World." The couple just spent months filming a YouTube show with their family called "The Great American Road Trip," ostensibly to celebrate America's 250th anniversary.

A former star of Bravo's "Summer House," a reality show about a summer share in the Hamptons, who is a model and a maple syrup entrepreneur, is running for Congress in northern Minnesota. And a 2021 contestant on HBO's "FBoy Island," a dating show on which women try to discern whether men are nice guys or commitment-phobes, who worked in finance and loves Zyn is running for Senate in Virginia.

Whether you like it or not (and I do not), reality stars are apparently becoming a staple of our deeply unserious 21st-century politics. Although television and movie stars have been elected to office for decades (Ronald Reagan, Al Franken and Arnold Schwarzenegger come to mind), they were actors, not playing themselves. Reality TV fame allows Mr. Pratt and his peers to get attention for their outsider candidacies, and it gives them much more leeway for bad behavior than the average person enjoys. The public is already used to their antics; that's what made them famous.

As an avid watcher of "The Hills" in the mid-aughts, I think Mr. Pratt is a particularly ill-suited entrant in the Los Angeles mayoral primary, which is a nonpartisan election. He was the dark prince of "The Hills," spreading vile rumors about castmates. He and his wife and "Hills" co-star, Heidi Montag, blew through \$10 million and at one point had to move into a house his parents owned. In a memoir published this year, he explained that he spent \$500,000 on Birkin bags for Ms. Montag and over \$1 million on crystals. So he's not a person I would trust on the fiscal management — to name just one responsibility — of a major American city struggling to balance its budget.

I watched last week's Los Angeles mayoral debate with full knowledge of Mr. Pratt's history. I have to admit that he dominated that performance. I'm not alone in

**'The Hills' primed Pratt for politics, where he must play the hero and the villain.**



ELEANOR DAVIS

that impression: As of Thursday, 89 percent of participants in an online poll on NBC Los Angeles's website said he won the debate.

Mr. Pratt, a registered Republican, has said that he is running for office because he and his parents lost their homes in the horrific Palisades fire in January 2025 and the incumbent, Mayor Karen Bass, a registered Democrat, did not have compelling explanations for her mishandling of the disaster. (She was out of the country when the fire started.) After the fire, her standing with Angelenos fell and never recovered. "I blame this person for burning my house and my parents' house and my town and all my neighbors' down. I am not working with Mayor Bass," Mr. Pratt said.

During the debate, the moderator asked about the homelessness crisis, "Do you support the ordinance that restricts encampments in front of schools or day care centers?" and requested that the candidates answer with a straightforward "yes" or "no." The City Council member Nithya Raman, a registered Democrat and a member of the

Democratic Socialists of America, responded with "I, you know, I, I, support keeping our streets safe. I did vote against the structure of this particular ordinance, and it is because at its best —" before being interrupted by the moderator.

The main reason Mr. Pratt was effective in his campaign of late — is that he is channeling the anger that some Los Angeles residents feel about the state of their city. "I talk to thousands of moms a week. They do not feel safe in the street, no matter what these crime statistics are telling anybody," he said. He ranted about fentanyl, supermeth and people being stabbed on the street. If you believe that crime is out of hand, hearing someone express that vehemently and authentically is far more compelling than Ms. Raman's careful answers about establishing a Bureau of Homelessness Oversight.

I came away from the debate wishing that the Bravo impresario Andy Cohen ran a training institute for wayward Democrats, where the "Real Housewives" all-star NeNe

and the scale of the global supply-chain disruptions, there's a limit to how much impact the Fed could have had. But at a minimum the Fed could have better grasped the problem, instead of Pollyannishly insisting it was all transitory. That would have helped a bit.

The case for the independence of central bankers in general, and Mr. Powell in particular, is not that they are always right. It is that they are willing to learn and change course. That is what the Fed did in 2022 when it raised rates much further and faster than just about any of its critics, including myself, thought was practical or wise. By the end of 2024, inflation was closing in on the Federal Reserve's 2 percent target without causing a recession, a rare so-called soft landing.

Critical to enabling this was Mr. Powell's personal credibility. Trust in his leadership kept inflation expectations from rising. Businesses could slow their price increases knowing that other businesses would be doing the same. Throughout it all, Mr. Powell was crystal clear about the need to avoid being drawn into political controversies and to keep the Fed's decision making truly independent.

In January, the Trump administration significantly ratcheted up the pressure, as the Justice Department opened a criminal inquiry into Mr. Powell himself, relating to cost overruns in the renovation of one of the Federal Reserve's buildings. In economics departments, they teach you how to handle the situations central banks are likely to find themselves in: excessive inflation, financial crises, runs on the banks. But no one teaches you how to handle a situation like this.

Mr. Powell wrote his own playbook. He posted a plain-spoken two-minute video addressing the American public. "No one — certainly not the chair of the Federal Reserve — is above the law," he said. But the president's "unprecedented action should be seen in the broader context of the administration's threats and ongoing pressure." He vowed to continue performing his duties "without political fear or favor."

Within 24 hours, former Fed chairs of both parties, leading Republican members of Congress and the business community had lined up behind him. Mr. Trump's gambit had completely backfired.

Mr. Trump nominated Kevin Warsh, a former Federal Reserve governor, to replace Mr. Powell. Mr. Warsh is well above the bar in terms of both knowledge and experience. His most immediate task will be to finish the job Mr. Powell was doing, bringing inflation down to the Fed's 2 percent target. He will succeed only if he follows through on the promise he made in his confirmation hearing to maintain the Fed's operational independence.

Mr. Powell has shown him — and the rest of us — how that is done.

Leakes could school candidates in the art of snappy comebacks and exquisite facial expressions.

I called Richard Longoria — who is in the political science department at the University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley, and is the author of "Celebrities in American Elections" — to ask what he made of Mr. Pratt's increasingly legitimate candidacy. Mr. Longoria's research has shown that celebrities have outperformed normies because of name recognition and thus may be able to raise more money from fans and high-profile cronies. As of late April, Mr. Pratt was leading the pack on fund-raising.

Mr. Longoria explained that there is some precedent for Mr. Pratt's candidacy in California, home of the entertainment industry: "Sonny Bono and Clint Eastwood both became mayors because of building permit disputes. And Spencer Pratt is out there talking about he can't rebuild his home after the fires because of the permitting process." If you frame Mr. Pratt as a local businessman — the business is celebrity — rather than as a reality TV provocateur, it does make more sense.

Reality TV stardom is, of course, a legitimate form of prominence, said Nelini Stamp, director of mass audience engagement for the Working Families Party. But Mr. Pratt's candidacy and his message probably wouldn't be taking off in this moment if the people of Los Angeles didn't feel they were in some kind of crisis, Ms. Stamp explained. "There's a collective grief that is still happening" because of the fires, she said, and because Mr. Pratt lost everything, he's able to express the pain in a way that resonates with some voters. "I am angry and aggrieved and emotional, which is why I'm voting for Pratt, because he is also enraged and heartbroken and, as a result, the only humane option," Adeline Dimond, who grew up in Los Angeles, put it in Pirate Wires.

The other candidates need to figure out how to reflect these feelings if they want to win.

Ms. Stamp also said something powerful: Being on reality TV trained Mr. Pratt well for the world of politics, where you're the hero one moment and the villain the next. He is comfortable being the villain — saying something aggressive and not caring about the reaction or fighting dirty in public.

The thing is, Mr. Pratt has only ever really fought for himself. The people of Los Angeles, who have the opportunity to vote in the mayoral primary on June 2, would be foolish to think that he'd necessarily fight for them.

If they think he'd be a great mayor, I have a pile of crystals to sell them.

# No One Is Leading Our Health Agencies

**Katelyn Jetelina**

A public health scientist and science communicator.

OVER the past 16 months, there has been a revolving door of leaders within the Department of Health and Human Services. Dr. Marty Makary, who resigned as head of the Food and Drug Administration on Tuesday, is the latest to learn that it's easier to criticize a system from the outside than to change it from the inside.

Scientists, public health professionals, physicians and members of the public all depend on the F.D.A. It ensures that our medications are safe and effective, that our food supply is not contaminated and that our medical devices actually work. For the F.D.A., as for every government agency, there is good and bad in its history. At times, it has been slow to adapt, limited in focus, opaque about its data and captive to a culture of caution.

Unfortunately, despite Dr. Makary's credentials as a creative physician-scientist, the F.D.A. became less reliable and transparent under his tenure. Trust in the agency — among members of the public and among the scientists who make the work happen — has plummeted.

With Dr. Makary's departure, the F.D.A. is leaderless. It's not alone: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hasn't had a permanent director in months (and the most recent one lasted only four weeks). There is no surgeon general. Over the past year and a half, many parts of the U.S. public health system have been dismantled. Staff members have been fired, seemingly haphazardly; funding for core data systems, logistics and community partnerships has been cut; research funding is moving at a glacial pace; and longstanding guidelines have changed on a dime.

Now, as our country and the rest of the globe confront a hantavirus outbreak, the all-too-predictable effects of destruction without a plan have become clear. Who and what can be trusted to keep us safe?

It's true that our public health institutions were largely designed for another time; they were not working as well as they could have. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed that they were unprepared for a global, fast-moving and complex health crisis and were too often disconnected from the communities they serve.

Big systems are extraordinarily hard to move not because the people inside them are evil or complacent but because institutions with decades of regulatory sediment, legal exposure, external influence and deeply entrenched professional cultures are designed, almost by default, to resist disruption.

But changing them is possible. And it is necessary.

Dr. Makary missed his opportunity for reform. Successful leadership requires understanding why the resistance to change is present. (Sometimes it's a good thing: Systems that oversee drug safety should be predictable and deliberative.) It requires valuing historical knowledge while being willing to challenge it. It means clarity of strategy, transparency in execution, coalition building through deep listening and a willingness to admit when you're wrong.

Dr. Makary can boast some laudable wins from his time at the F.D.A., such as leveraging artificial intelligence to monitor clinical trials in real time, and important course corrections, like the long-overdue removal of a black box warning on hormone therapy.

But overall, we've witnessed the erosion of the agency's prestige and capacity — inconsistent standards, showy headlines at the expense of serious priorities, and immense confusion about what scientific evidence does and does not say.



SARAH VAN RIJ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## Makary is the latest Trump pick to learn it's easier to complain than to take charge.

Under Dr. Makary's leadership, the agency refused to review a new flu vaccine (and then reversed course), introduced a program meant to speed up the approval process for rare-disease medications and then ran it in a way that opened it up to political interference and shared unsubstantiated hunches (such as linking Tylenol to autism). Along the way, the United States lost countless high-quality staff members of impeccable integrity whose work kept us all safe from diseases and from unsafe food and medicines.

The consequences of these actions are not abstract. They are measured in lives affected — a person with Huntington's disease who won't be able to get a promising treatment because of regulatory delays, a family who lost trust in a vaccine their child needed or a pregnant woman in an emergency department who needed Tylenol to reduce a fever but didn't get it out of unfounded fears

that it could cause autism. This is, of course, on top of families already feeling abandoned by the health system and overwhelmed by medical bills.

Dr. Makary reportedly resigned because he did not want to bow to political pressure to authorize the sale of flavored vapes. If this is true, it's an admirable stand.

But it also comes too late. Dr. Makary's tenure is just the latest in a cautionary tale about performative disruption — not because he challenged the F.D.A. but because he mistook provocation for the hard, unglamorous work of institutional change.

The opportunity now is to rebuild the institutions Americans rely on, with intentionality. That means appointing leaders at the F.D.A., C.D.C. and H.H.S. who have experience running complex organizations, who understand that public trust is rebuilt one transparent decision at a time through genuine listening and who are willing to do what's right when the science demands it.

Americans' lives depend on it. The decisions at the top determine whether people get safe and effective treatments faster than they do today; whether the food, drugs and devices in our homes are demonstrably safer; and, most of all, whether we can trust what we're being told.

## LETTERS

### Mothers and Daughters: Two Stories

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "I Tried to Become My Mother and Ended Up Becoming Myself," by Molly Jong-Fast (Opinion guest essay, May 10):

There is good news for Ms. Jong-Fast. Forgiveness is not about receiving proof of delivery, as though it were sent by certified mail. Forgiveness is yours to feel and do, and you can do it anytime. And love, should you still wish to express it to your mother, is felt even by bodies that are "all flesh and no mind."

Forgiving who she was and

accepting who she is now are the ways to reach her. From my 30 years of reaching and connecting with people with dementia, this I know: Love can be felt — even by someone you call a "ghost." And she will be able to feel it too.

You are both quite reachable, touchable and lovable — all the way to the end.

ANNE BASTING  
DECATUR, GA.

*The writer is the author of "Creative Care: A Revolutionary Approach to Dementia and Elder Care."*

TO THE EDITOR:

Reading Molly Jong-Fast's essay about her mother, the writer Erica Jong, led me to reflect on my relationships with both my mom and my daughter.

My mother went only so far as middle school, whereas I am the first generation in my family to earn two master's degrees.

When I had my own children, I decided to provide them with the education enrichment I had lacked. I brought them to art museums, enrolled them in piano and violin lessons, traveled the world with them and tried to cultivate a love for books. However, my daughter dislikes art museums and doesn't appreciate her 10 years of music education.

It feels like a pendulum: No matter what we do, it eventually swings back to the moving average. Struggling parents often raise thriving kids, and extraordinary parents have ordinary kids.

But that is fine. I told my daughter that as long as she is happy, I am happy.

HAILING GUAN  
OAK PARK, CALIF.

### Trump in China

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Trump Butters Up Xi, Who Stands His Ground" (news analysis, front page, May 15):

President Trump's China visit exemplifies his approach to governing: meaningless pomp and circumstance, vague diplomatic pronouncements signifying nothing, unseemly meddling by billionaire chief executives, nepotism and the palpable diminishment of America's influence and prestige on the global stage.

Further, it is entirely fitting that before leaving for his overseas trip, Mr. Trump went out of his way to state that he doesn't care about the financial concerns of the American people when he is talking about Iran.

This is a president who views those whom he serves with utter disdain, a feeling that is reciprocated more with each passing day.

MARK GODES  
CHELSEA, MASS.

### A Gift to Big Tobacco: Approving Flavored Vapes

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Trump's Clout Gives Big Win to Big Tobacco" (front page, May 14):

Over decades and across several presidential administrations from both parties, the United States has made enormous progress in reducing cigarette smoking. It is one of the few areas in which we are truly among the world leaders.

Only about 10 percent of adult Americans are regular smokers — among the lowest rates in high-income countries. This has taken a concerted effort from our political and legal sectors and our public health agencies, benefiting Americans with longer, healthier lives and lower health care expenditures for the many types of chronic diseases associated with tobacco use.

The approval of flavored vapes, sure to be irresistible

to children and teenagers, cannot be justified on public health grounds. No one should be vaping for any reason other than as a way to stop smoking, and tobacco and menthol-flavored vapes, already available, mimic the experience of tobacco for daily smokers.

Nicotine is not a harmless substance, and nonsmokers should be absolutely discouraged from vaping.

There are mountains of evidence that demonstrate that whatever the interests of the tobacco companies are, they are not in the public's health. Appeasing those companies will lead to only one thing: making America unhealthy again.

NEIL W. SCHLUGER  
VALHALLA, N.Y.

*The writer, a pulmonologist, is the dean of the School of Medicine at New York Medical College.*

# I'm a Democrat. My Party Has a Double Standard on Antisemitism.

**Josh Gottheimer**

A Democratic congressman from New Jersey.

IN 2017, Democratic leaders denounced the white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville chanting "Jews will not replace us." In 2022, Democrats took Donald Trump to task for having dinner with Nick Fuentes, an antisemite and a white supremacist. Across the Democratic Party's ideological spectrum, right-wing hate is consistently condemned.

But today, too many Democrats are noticeably and shamefully silent when antisemitism comes from the far left — at a moment when the Anti-Defamation League is reporting a surge of antisemitic incidents in the past three years.

It's a glaring double standard.

Consider the response to — really, the embrace of — Hasan Piker, a prominent left-wing commentator with millions of online followers. He referred to Orthodox Jews in Israel as "inbred" and said "America deserved 9/11," both statements he halfheartedly walked back. He said that Hamas — a designated terrorist organization that has killed Americans and taken Americans hostage — was "a thousand times better" than Israel, America's ally, which he called a "fascist settler-colonial apartheid state" — a statement he stands by. None of this should be waved away as mere edgy commentary. Mr. Piker traffics in antisemitic and anti-American extremism that has been met by silence from many on the Democratic left.

Sadly, we've seen several prominent Democrats appear on his show and even campaign with him, granting his views legitimacy.

I've spoken to congressional colleagues who have privately told me that many things Mr. Piker has said are disgusting. Yet they'll say nothing about it in public, even as they rightly rush to condemn President Trump for his unending barrage of offensive comments

and social media posts.

I understand that speaking up isn't easy — if you do, there are many on the left who will heckle you in public and troll you online. But whether we're elected officials, candidates, organizers or activists, we should remember that our constituents don't expect us to take the easy path. It takes far more courage to stand up to those who have long claimed to be in your corner than to oppose your political opponents. That's what principled leadership is all about. But we're not always seeing it.

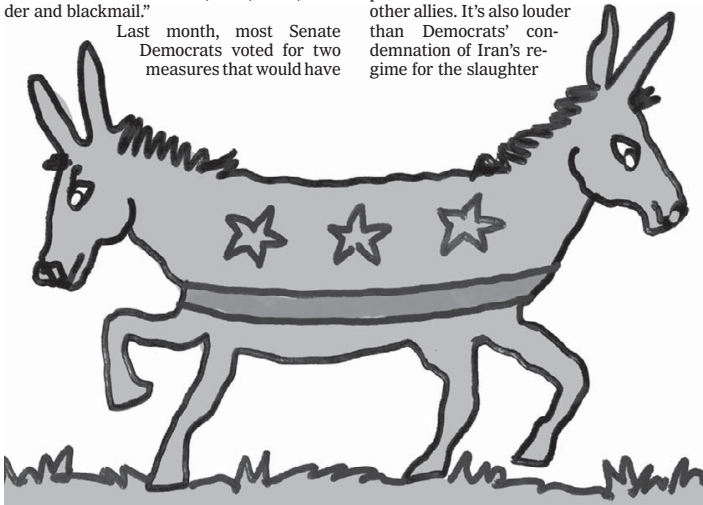
At their recent party convention, Michigan Democrats nominated a candidate to run for a seat on the University of Michigan's Board of Regents who had shared a social media post praising the former leader of Hezbollah as a martyr and another post that invoked age-old antisemitic tropes by referring to Israelis as "demons" who "lie, steal, cheat, murder and blackmail."

Last month, most Senate Democrats voted for two measures that would have

blocked sales of military equipment to Israel, with some arguing that among the reasons for their votes was their assessment of Israel's human rights record. Is this turnabout a legitimate departure from decades of American foreign policy? Or — more likely — is it a politically convenient stance that coincides with a small but vocal and growing segment of the political left making opposition to support for Israel a new litmus test?

If this is now the standard for supporting military aid and arms sales, then Democratic members of Congress should at least be consistent. Do they also believe we should block weapon sales to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, given the history of human rights abuses in those countries?

The Democratic condemnation piled on Israel's government is overwhelming in comparison with that directed at other allies. It's also louder than Democrats' condemnation of Iran's regime for the slaughter



LIANA FINCK

## When talking about which allies to support, the left shouldn't shift its principles.

of thousands of Iranians in December and January. Israel has been decried by some leading Democrats as an "apartheid" state. But I haven't heard any of them claim apartheid when it comes to how women and L.G.B.T.Q. people are treated across the Middle East.

One Democrat, a very likely presidential hopeful, recently argued that Israel can afford its own security and that Israelis don't need America's "financial aid" — even though Israel has been a stalwart partner in America's fight against Hamas, Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations. Wouldn't the logical extension of that point of view mean that we should also pull our military installations out of well-resourced allied countries like Germany, Japan and Kuwait?

Democrats have justly denounced the Trump administration for its broadsides — in some cases, threats — toward some of America's closest allies. But many increasingly excuse, or join, feverish denunciations of Israel, our longstanding, democratic and strategic ally.

When we're talking about which allies to support or which communities we defend, our principles shouldn't shift.

When Mr. Trump lashes out at Pope Leo XIV in ways that millions of Catholics rightly find deeply offensive, none of us should look the other way. When a Republican congressman tries to dehumanize Muslims, we should all speak up. When Candace Owens and Tucker Carlson use hateful rhetoric, they should be rebuked.

The same should go for Mr. Piker. Everyone has a right to express his or her views, however repugnant those views may be. But Democratic leaders have the same right — and a duty — to challenge them.

There should be one response to those who express hatred toward any American: condemnation. Hate is hate. It doesn't get a pass because it comes from your side of the aisle.

هِيَ النَّفْسُ مَا حَمَلَتْهَا تَحْمَلُ  
وَلِلدَّهْرِ أَيَّامٌ تَجُوزُ وَتَعْدِلُ  
(علي بن الجهم)

**YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB**

*The soul can endure whatever you burden it with, and life is all about days of justice and injustice.*

All bin Al-Jahm  
(Abbasid-era Arab Bedouin poet)

# Opinion

## GCC states — from de-risking to longer-term security

DR. ABDEL AZIZ ALUWAISHEG

Iran's 7,000-plus attacks against Gulf Cooperation Council countries and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz have transformed how the GCC looks at Iran in fundamental ways. Perceptions of threats emanating from Iran have critically sharpened and the need to counter them has never been more urgent.

The first reaction is de-risking by improving air defenses. Although their interception rates exceeded 90 percent, there is room for improvement. There is a need to restore normality in the Strait of Hormuz by getting the UN Security Council to shoulder its responsibility, assert the international nature of the waterway and insist that no country is allowed to interfere with international shipping through it. The draft UN Security Council resolution that is currently under discussion was proposed by the GCC and it tracks the maritime rules stipulated by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on international waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz.

Russia and China vetoed the draft resolution when it was first voted on last month. Their objections were inexplicable because China is among the countries most affected by the closure, as it gets a third of its oil from the Gulf and its significant trade with the Gulf has been seriously disrupted. Even if Iran were to allow Chinese ships to pass, the US maritime blockade would not allow that.

There are hopeful signs regarding China's position on the draft resolution. On Thursday, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said following the China-US summit in Beijing: "The Chinese side said they are not in favor of militarizing the Strait of Hormuz and they're not in favor of a tolling system, and that's our position."

Russia is also contradicting its own declared desire to be part of any Gulf security arrangements. By putting the arrangements under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, Russia gets a front seat as a permanent UNSC member.

Bahrain, the GCC's rotating presidency, has resubmitted the draft with



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the confidence that it will pass this time around. Seventy-five days of closure have severely affected nearly every country in the world. Rejecting this balanced draft would ignore the serious damage the closure has done to the lives and livelihoods of billions of people.

Once the UNSC resolution is adopted, the UN could step in to implement it. In addition, the UK and France have put together a coalition of some 50 countries with the aim of securing the strait and helping restore freedom of navigation.

Until that happens, the GCC states are using alternative routes to export their products and are planning on building additional pipelines and routes to bypass the strait.

Longer term, the GCC states are immunizing themselves against future attacks along four parallel tracks.

First, they are beefing up their militaries, especially their missile and drone defenses and maritime security forces.

Second, they are giving unprecedented priority to integration and connectivity,

both between member states and with the rest of the world, to ensure the safety and security of supply chains. Additional pipelines for oil, water and other products are planned and railroads and air links are being given a higher priority.

Third, they are strengthening their alliances and partnerships in light of the war. They are also coordinating with like-minded regional states, such as Pakistan, Türkiye and Egypt, all of which have an abiding interest in restoring regional security.

Fourth, they are preparing legal cases against Iran to demand reparations for the unprovoked attacks against their territories.

Trust between the GCC states and Iran has clearly been broken by the latter's attacks and its closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Restoring that confidence is going to be difficult without some concrete action from Iran, including it demonstrating contrition and committing not to attack them again. Iran's acquiescence with the international regime securing the strait could serve as the first building block toward restoring that lost trust.

**Trust has clearly been broken. Restoring that confidence is going to be difficult without some concrete action from Iran**



COURTESY: AMALIO RASMI/SHARQ AL-AHSAN

**Israeli human rights groups have spoken out against the new law, opposing the principle of capital punishment, but also warning against 'show trials'**

## Torture allegations burst Israeli moral bubble

DAOUD KUTTAB

With almost no one noticing, Israel passed a law on May 12 establishing a special court to try about 400 Palestinians from Gaza accused of involvement in the Oct. 7 attack on the Gaza envelope. The new judicial structure is devoid of the normal checks and balances that a fair system of justice is expected to provide to persons presumed innocent until proven guilty. This decision would implement yet another racist and controversial discriminatory law that applies capital punishment only to Palestinians. The law does not apply retroactively, and Israel has refused to try those detained to date, so as to apply capital punishment en masse.

Israeli human rights groups have spoken out against the new law, opposing the principle of capital punishment, but also warning against "show trials" based on confessions allegedly extracted under

torture. The law would relax legal procedures, lowering the bar of military courts, which have a conviction rate over 99 percent of the cases almost all based on confessions derived under torture.

A New York Times columnist, Nicholas Kristof, has accused the Israeli government of turning a blind eye to cases of extreme sexual torture of Palestinian prisoners. Video evidence of Israeli guards sexually abusing and raping Palestinian prisoners at the Sde Teiman detention facility in southern Israel aired on Israeli media in August 2024, appearing to show Israeli soldiers sexually abusing a Palestinian detainee. The Israeli military dropped the charges against five soldiers and said the indictments were withdrawn. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised the decision.

But while the Israeli government swept that case and other torture accusations under the rug, Kristof blew the lid off the cases of rape against Palestinians. In a column titled "The Horror of Sexual Assault in Israeli Prisons,"



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he argues that sexual violence by Israeli forces against Palestinians is widespread. The columnist details a pattern of systemic abuse and "unrestrained power" within Israeli detention centers that challenges the international community's moral silence. Kristof interviewed Palestinians who gave detailed testimony of what happened to them. He spoke to Israeli, Palestinian, and international human rights organizations that confirmed the existence of widespread rape. Kristof concluded his column by saying: "We're anti-rape. The horrific abuse inflicted on Israeli women on Oct. 7 now happens to Palestinians day after day."

Instead of shock or anger at Israel, the award-winning American reporter was maligned and fiercely attacked as peddling "blood libel," and an entire PR campaign was launched against him without anyone suggesting that such things are carried out by Israelis, or anyone calling for a serious investigation.

Kristof responded with a short reply that

those questioning his conclusions should urge Israel to allow the Red Cross to visit the 9,000 Palestinians held in Israeli jails, at least one-third of whom have not been charged or tried.

For its part, The New York Times stood by its reporter and described him as "drawing on on-the-record accounts and citing several analyzes documenting the practice of sexual violence and abuse conducted by various parts of Israel's security forces and settlers."

In reality, Kristof's article has shattered the myth that Israel and its army are the world's most moral force. It debunks the narrative of a cherished democratic utopia, painting it as a colonial US-backed military power bent on grabbing Palestinian land and using extreme violence to do so. By challenging the self-defense narrative, it exposes that Israel's occupation is illegal and marked by the torture of Palestinians, casting Israel as an apartheid, Jewish-supremacist state that is neither democratic nor moral.

## Opinion

## Better late than never: NATO must step up on defense

LUKE COFFEY



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During a press conference last week in Montenegro, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte said he was "extremely optimistic" about NATO's future, pointing to recent increases in defense spending across the alliance, and adding that US President Donald Trump's reelection "played a large role here."

This was followed by comments from Matthew Whitaker, the US ambassador to NATO, who said the upcoming NATO summit in Türkiye will serve as a "report card" for the progress European allies are making on defense spending.

Heading into the summit this July, several issues will be on the agenda, from continued support for Ukraine to air defense across the alliance and the implications of the war with Iran. But top of Trump's mind will be defense spending and burden sharing. There is no doubt he will want to see meaningful progress on this issue, one he has been consistent about since the early days of his first term.

The US leader is not alone among American presidents in criticizing Europe for failing to spend enough on its own defense, but he has certainly been the most vocal. At the 2006 NATO summit in

Riga, alliance members first committed to spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. However, progress did not materialize. By the time Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, only three NATO members — the US, UK, and Greece — met this benchmark.

Later that same year, at the Wales summit, the alliance recommitted itself to reaching the 2 percent target by 2024. Since then, real but slow progress has been made. European defense spending has

increased year on year in real terms since 2014, but this has not been enough. By the 2024 deadline, which also coincided with NATO's 75th anniversary, almost one third of member states still had not met the 2 percent benchmark.

When Trump returned to office in 2025, he made

defense spending the cornerstone of that year's NATO summit and convinced allies to agree to spend 5 percent of GDP on defense and defense-related items by 2035. Of this, 3.5 percent would go toward core defense spending, while 1.5 percent would be allocated to related areas such as cyber defense, infrastructure improvements, and projects that support military operations.

Even though it has been only one year, Trump will want to see progress at the summit in Ankara. At a minimum, he will

expect each member state to present a concrete roadmap for how it plans to reach the 5 percent goal — and the sooner, the better. Every NATO member agreed to this except Spain, which secured an exemption and has become a source of frustration for the Trump administration, not only on defense spending but also over Iran. Even though every country other than Spain committed to the new benchmark, only a handful of allies — Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia — currently meet the broader 5 percent benchmark or have a credible near-term path to do so.

As the alliance prepares for its July summit, there are several concrete steps it should take to demonstrate to Trump that it is serious about increasing defense spending.

First, NATO leaders need to know that optics and symbolism are important in international affairs. Leaders of the alliance must show up with a plan and be prepared to present it to Trump.

Second, in addition to the usual meetings of heads of state and government, the summit should include a special session for member states' finance ministers or their equivalents.

Finally, NATO members should arrive in Ankara with a plan to enshrine the 5 percent target into domestic law. Quite a

few European countries have similar laws on the books regarding minimum amounts of GDP to be spent on international aid, but they have failed to do the same for defense spending. In the case of the recent 5 percent benchmark, only Latvia has enshrined this commitment into law. NATO should encourage all members to do the same, with associated timelines to achieve this goal. This would increase transparency and political accountability, while also making defense spending less politically controversial for domestic audiences.

It is important

that NATO members continue to spend more on their defense capabilities, and right now the alliance is heading in the right direction. Perhaps the pace is not as fast as Washington would like, but Trump can take

credit for doing something no other US president has been able to do.

Looking beyond the summit, while Ankara may be used as a report card to determine where each member state stands, the alliance needs to think beyond this summer. Many of the geopolitical challenges NATO faces today are likely to remain in place and could become even more complex in the future. It is better late than never that NATO gets its spending back on track.

**Trump is not alone among US presidents in criticizing Europe for failing to spend enough on its own defense**

**Many of the geopolitical challenges NATO faces are likely to remain in place and could become even more complex in the future**

## Türkiye and Armenia edging closer to normalization

DR. SINEM CENGİZ



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Fourteen years ago this month, a media bus tour was organized to foster dialogue between Türkiye and Armenia. Journalists from both countries traveled together across the two nations with the aim of breaking down prejudices and creating space for dialogue. I was among the journalists who joined the tour, which began in Istanbul and ended in Yerevan. That two-week tour played a significant role in shaping my understanding of why Turkish-Armenian normalization matters and why people-to-people engagement is so important.

This week, Ankara announced that bureaucratic preparations for the launch of direct trade with Armenia had been completed and that work toward reopening the border between the two states was still ongoing.

Turkish Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz was in Yerevan this month, becoming the highest-level Turkish official to visit the city in 18 years. During his visit, Ankara and Yerevan agreed to jointly restore the medieval Ani Bridge, which once linked

Türkiye and Armenia along the historic Silk Road. While restoring the bridge is technically key for regional connectivity, its significance goes far beyond that. It is actually about the restoration of trust, hope and connection between two peoples on opposite sides of a river.

The Turkish-Armenian normalization process began in 2022. Türkiye's special envoy on the issue is Serdar Kilic, who describes it as a "trust-building" process rather than a "normalization" process. I

strongly agree that it is a process of reconciliation rather than normalization. Normalization is technically the establishment of diplomatic ties and opening of borders; but before that can happen, a reconciliation process is needed.

The efforts of nonstate actors have been

ongoing for years to bring Turkish-Armenian relations to this point. Even with official diplomatic ties between Armenia and Türkiye nonexistent, civil society and media organizations on both sides have undertaken significant tasks. Their Track II initiatives have had a positive impact on Track I diplomacy, as can be seen in the recent developments.

There is a strong political will to normalize ties but there are also significant external regional pressures to accelerate the pace of this process. Three key developments have pushed the rapprochement: the Russia-Ukraine war, the US and Israeli war with Iran, and the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan that was signed last year.

First, the Iran war has brought Türkiye, Armenia and even Azerbaijan closer. The frequency of telephone diplomacy among these states, along with their efforts to stay away from the fallout of the war, accelerated the Türkiye-Armenia and Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization processes.

Second, Yerevan is gradually distancing itself from Russia and increasingly engaging with Western institutions. Russia's credibility as Armenia's security

guarantor suffered a significant blow during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, while Moscow's war in Ukraine is also giving incentives to the Armenian leadership to shift its focus. Relations with Türkiye, a member of the EU Customs Union and NATO, have become more significant. Moreover, the EU and US are both strongly endorsing the normalization

of relations between Armenia and Türkiye.

Third, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan last year took crucial steps to normalize ties with both Türkiye and Azerbaijan. He signed a peace deal with Baku and made the first official trip by an Armenian leader to Türkiye since 2009. Since assuming office in 2018, Pashinyan — who is seen as a pragmatic leader — has placed great importance on the normalization process. He has been trying to pursue a significant shift in Armenia's foreign policy,

with economic incentives playing a critical role. Within this context, the June 7 parliamentary elections are viewed as a critical referendum on Pashinyan's policy aimed at strengthening Armenia's connectivity with neighboring Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Unlike previous normalization attempts, this time, in addition to goodwill, the escalating tensions in the region serve as a significant driving force. Like Türkiye, Armenia must navigate the volatile environment caused by the regional wars. Their shared concerns and mutual interest in the stability of the South Caucasus are rapidly paving the way toward normalization.

**Normalization is the establishment of diplomatic ties and opening of borders. Before that, a reconciliation process is needed**

**The efforts of nonstate actors have been ongoing for years to bring Turkish-Armenian relations to this point**

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## YOUR VOICE

# Chicago owes its identity to the beloved ramp. It's time to reclaim that heritage

By **Tim Larson**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Wild leeks, or ramps, are among my favorite things.

These modest little plants at one time proliferated along the Chicago River, at a site that became the great city of Chicago. The city's name, in fact, is thought to derive from the French rendering "checagou" of the Indigenous Miami-Illinois word "shikaakwa" — which refers to the perennial species *Allium tricoccum*, better known as wild leeks or ramps.

The word checagou can also refer to "striped skunk," and it is true that the humble wild leek emits a pungent smell.

Leeks grow abundantly on the hillside next to my home in northern Minnesota. Their aroma made their presence known long before I learned to identify and appreciate them.

In other parts of North America, notably in Appalachia, wild leeks are highly prized for their place in local cuisine and celebrated in ramps festivals each spring, sometimes to the detriment of the plants themselves, which are vulnerable to over-exploitation — so much so that in Quebec, they are a protected species.

Wild leeks are popular with foragers and food enthusiasts for good reason. Their green leaves are often first to emerge after long winters, giving cause for celebration in cold climates. They are strongly flavored, with a taste often described as oniony and garlicky; but they also come



Wild leeks near Tim Larson's home in Duluth, Minnesota, on May 3. **TIM LARSON**

with a peppery kick and smooth, buttery texture. They are a healthful spring tonic high in vitamins A, C and K along with folates, antioxidants and essential minerals.

To my palate, they taste like real food, like other staples of traditional Indigenous food culture such as wild rice and maple syrup, and make for very satisfying eating. I feel alive when I gather, prepare and eat them, and that feeling persists afterward. I think you have to harvest them for yourself to appreciate them fully.

Some of my favorite ways to enjoy them are simple: a sliced bagel with butter or a thin layer of cream cheese, topped with

a healthy helping of chopped wild leek greens; diced into salads, scrambled eggs and omelets; or as a topping with potatoes. They can substitute for onions and garlic in recipes, doing double duty as both a spice and a vegetable.

Wild leeks occasionally are found in grocery stores and farmers markets, but they can be uncommon and difficult to find even when they are in season in spring.

You can also grow them yourself from bulbs or seeds; however, bare bulbs, too, can be scarce, and they tend to sell out quickly. To meet demand, local suppliers would need to, uh, ramp up production. Wild leek bulbs can, however, be purchased from mail order suppliers; and wild leek seeds are available from native plant and seed vendors.

Is it time for Chicagoland to reclaim this essential part of its heritage?

To restore the wild leek to its rightfully esteemed place in Chicago cuisine and culture, a homegrown solution may be required.

Writer and entomologist Doug Tallamy is promoting the creation of a Homegrown National Park, which would involve reclaiming over 20 million acres of ecologically unproductive lawns across America by restoring these lands to native habitat.

Perhaps a million or more of these acres exist in greater Chicago. A significant portion of these lands might be suitable for reintroduction of wild leeks, which once profusely populated the region.

Suitable habitats would include moist corners of yards beneath hardwood trees where there is sunlight in spring, shade in summer and plenty of leaf litter. Suitable locations should be free of lawn chemicals. Once established, wild leeks require not exactly cultivation, but respect, care and encouragement.

Here is a bonus that gardeners will appreciate: Deer will not eat wild leeks unless they are desperate for food, while rabbits are not known to eat wild leeks at all.

If a Taste of Checagou Festival were to become reality, one or two precautions might be in order to make everything go smoothly. Certain relationships between people, including those involving roommates, families and couples, could potentially be affected if one or more people freely consumed wild leeks while others did not. However, if everyone concerned shared in consuming leeks, no one would know the difference. Work relationships, too, might suffer. A bit of extra attention to personal hygiene could at least mitigate potential problems in the workplace.

Rise up and ramp up, people of Chicagoland, not just as celebrants and consumers, but as participants in an authentic Taste of Checagou!

*Tim Larson is a longtime forager, amateur native plant enthusiast and retired college English instructor. He lives in Duluth, Minnesota, where spring arrives even later than it does in Chicago.*

## Voice of the People

### Cubs proposal about money

At an East Lakeview meeting this past week, Cubs executive Michael Lufrano returned to neighbors to again make the case for adding 368 new parking spaces to a Cubs-owned parking lot. The updated design has trees added to the perimeter, and lighting that Lufrano said would be aimed down so as to minimize spill to adjacent bedroom windows.

As if to imply this parking lot is a benefit to the community, and not just about making money, Lufrano spoke of his 93-year-old father, who needs to drive to games because it's not that easy for him to get around anymore.

At one point, he said, "We're going to start enforcing a right-turn-only out of the parking lot after games, to reduce conflicts."

Lufrano returned to the word "conflict" several times, as if the problem were some neutral design challenge rather than the predictable result of concentrating hundreds of more cars into an already congested neighborhood: drivers stuck in traffic, drivers cutting through side streets, impatient drivers honking at each other, drivers circling neighborhood blocks looking for free parking, cars with impaired drivers.

No matter how you slice it, expanding that parking lot by 368 new spaces, multiplied by 81 home games, adds 29,808 additional cars, each and every summer, to the already-clogged streets. This doesn't bode well for the levels and frequency of conflict (and just general frustration and misery).

This parking lot isn't about Cubs fans in their 90s; it's about the Cubs making more money. There's no coming back from it should Ald. Bennett Lawson let them do it, and right now is the time to call him and tell him not to.

— *Cyrus Dowlatshahi, Chicago*

### Prevent boating tragedies

With boaters returning to Lake Michigan and surrounding waterways as National Safe Boating Week, May 16 to 22, arrives, it is important to recognize that one of the biggest risks on the water is not bad weather. It is overconfidence.

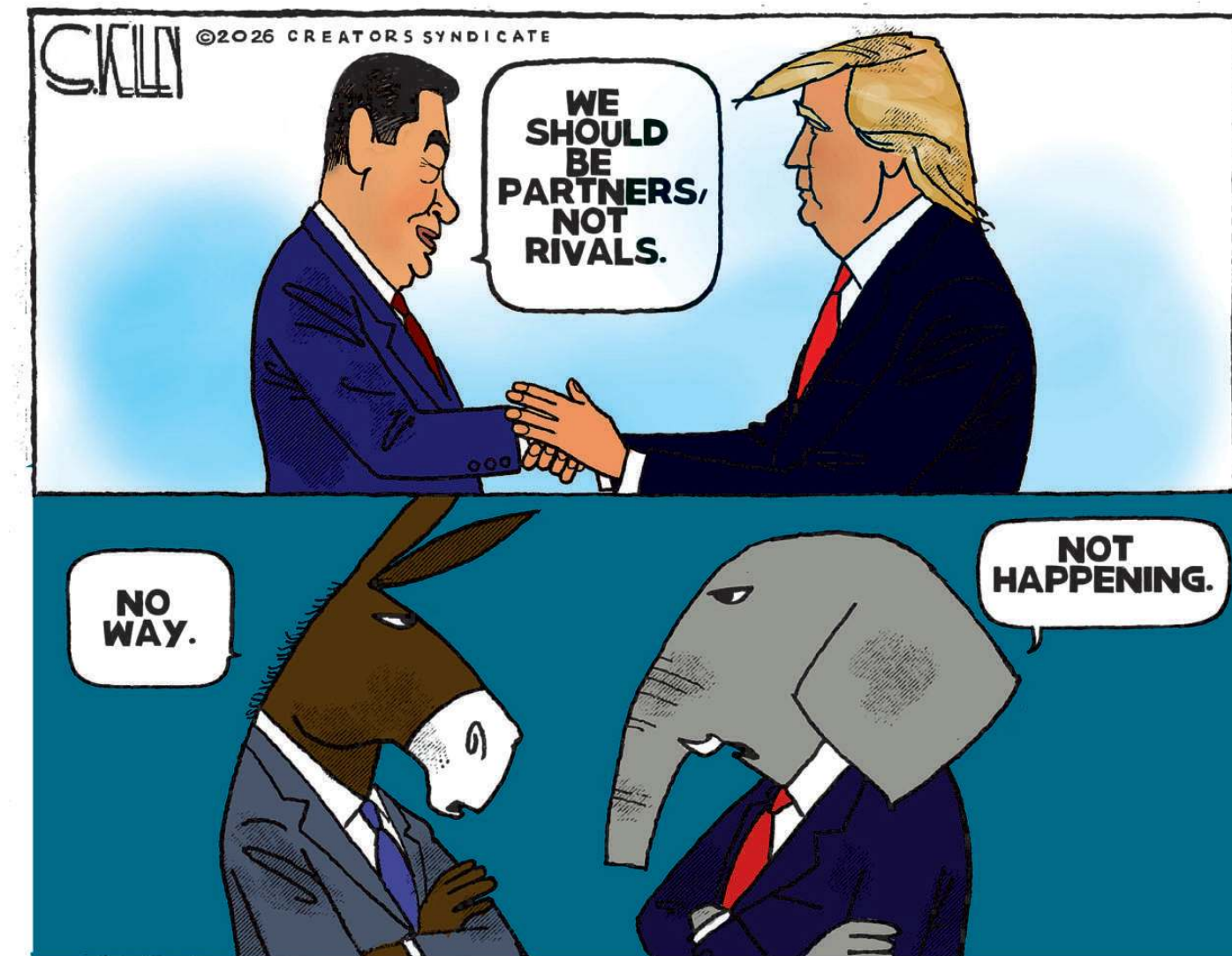
Early in the season, cold water and changing conditions can create dangerous situations even on calm, sunny days. Yet many boating incidents begin long before a vessel leaves the dock, when boaters skip routine safety steps because they assume, "I know what I'm doing."

Whether you boat, fish or sail, even experienced boaters can fall into habits of complacency. Life jackets stay unworn. Safety gear goes unchecked. Weather and conditions become an afterthought instead of a first step.

These are not reckless decisions. They are routine ones.

According to the latest Coast Guard statistics, there were 3,887 recreational boating incidents nationwide in 2024, resulting in 556 deaths and more than 2,100 injuries. Many involved inattention, inexperience or lack of preparation, issues that can be addressed before a boat ever leaves the dock.

This topic has received growing attention across the Great Lakes region as boating accidents and fatalities continue to make headlines. The Tribune has reported on several incidents involving recreational



STEVE KELLEY/CREATORS SYNDICATE

boaters on Lake Michigan and nearby waterways, underscoring the importance of preparedness and safety awareness.

At my foundation, we see the same pattern every year at the start of boating season. Batteries go untested. Safety gear is not checked. Small oversights made before leaving the dock are what most often lead to serious situations on the water.

Start with life jackets. Drowning is the cause of death in 76% of boating fatalities, and most of those victims were not wearing one. Wearing a life jacket before leaving the dock is one of the easiest ways to reduce risk on the water. But safety is not one decision. It is a routine.

Before every trip, boaters should check navigation lights, communication devices and fire extinguishers. Boaters should also use engine cutoff switches, which can stop a runaway vessel if an operator is thrown overboard. Conditions deserve the same attention. Weather can change quickly, and Lake Michigan can become dangerous even when forecasts indicate calm.

Boaters should treat every trip like the first of the season. Experience does not excuse skipping the basics, especially when others are counting on you.

— *Ted Sensenbrenner, director of boating safety, BoatUS Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water*

### Idea for rural communities

We in rural areas beyond the far suburbs (50 miles and farther from downtown

Chicago) are suffering from depopulation due to the transition to corn and bean crops from diversified farming. Rural villages have abandoned businesses and houses. Towns have abandoned main streets and empty lots. Schools are half-filled. Jobs are scarce.

The pandemic forced many to work remotely. Although such people live within commuting distance of Chicago and were encouraged to work remotely, some might relocate to less costly rural housing, easing housing shortages and lowering prices. In turn, some larger rural cities could enjoy a revival.

The state might offer homestead grants to enable families to move to rural housing instead of spending billions building affordable housing in urban areas, which creates school overcrowding, traffic and overcrowded neighborhoods.

Might Tribune editorials promote such diaspora?  
— *Alphonse I. Johnson, Lisbon, Illinois*

### Healing power of chaplains

In making my rounds recently in the nursing home where I am a volunteer visitor, I met Ava, a middle-aged lady recently discharged from the hospital. She had just endured an operation in which two toes were amputated. A very large bandage hid the wound on her foot, but not the wound in her heart.

She told me about her final days in the hospital, how doctors and nurses scurried

in one after the other, examining the foot, showing medical students "how beautiful was the cut" and how skilled was the surgeon.

Only when a hospital chaplain visited did Ava get to talk about her "real pain," the pain of losing part of her body, a part of herself. She told the chaplain about her feelings of loss, and he immediately understood. Any amputation is surely a great personal loss and isn't just physical; it's psychological and spiritual as well.

Chaplains aren't in hospitals just to comfort the dying or offer prayers for patients and their loved ones. They are also marvelous listeners for anyone who just needs to vent, cry, curse or mourn. These magnificent men and women are a very important part of the healing process.

I salute them, as should we all.  
— *Kathleen Melia, Niles*

### What mothers really want

A big bravo and thanks for last Friday's editorial ("Mother's Day isn't about brunch. It's about being seen," May 8). The Tribune Editorial Board put into words what most mothers want to let their families know.

— *Dorothy Evenhouse, Waukegan*

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