

## The Tribune

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## West Asia in turmoil

India's tightrope walk gets tougher

**T**HE killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by the US and Israel has plunged West Asia into a crisis with global ramifications. The large-scale strikes that targeted Iran's leadership and strategic infrastructure are an alarming escalation by Western powers against Tehran. The attacks also killed senior Iranian military officers and damaged key installations. Retaliatory attacks have been reported across the Gulf, raising fears of prolonged turmoil.

Global reactions reflect deep anxiety amid disrupted oil supplies and heightened security risks. For the region — and the world — this is not simply another flare-up but a crisis with a geopolitical and economic fallout that could reshape alliances and redefine the global strategic balance. Much depends on how soon — or whether — the Iranian regime can recover from this onslaught. US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu won't find it easy to go the whole hog if the regime regroups strongly and the conflict spreads.

The US-Israel military operation has triggered protests not only in Iran but also in countries such as Iraq, India and Pakistan. The strikes have come close on the heels of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel, where he reinforced bilateral ties and strategic cooperation. India's good relations with Iran have made the tightrope walk even more difficult for Delhi. The Opposition has questioned the timing of the Israel trip, accusing the government of moral failure. India's foreign policy is under fire for closely aligning with the US and Israel at the expense of regional stability. Delhi's much-touted strategic autonomy will be put to the test. The challenge is to maintain diverse partnerships, even as global power dynamics shift in an increasingly volatile region.

## Rahul's rebukes

Punjab Congress leaders must unite

**W**HEN Rahul Gandhi chose Barnala for his *mazdoor kisan mahila* rally, the target was twofold: Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his own divided party in Punjab. Rahul's sharpest barb was directed at the India-US interim trade pact. He described it as a "death warrant" for farmers and MSMEs. Alleging that the Centre conceded agricultural access under pressure from US President Donald Trump, he warned of a flood of American soybeans, pulses, apples, cotton and walnuts into Indian markets. In a state where agrarian anxiety runs deep, the charge is politically potent. Punjab's small landholdings and high input costs make the fear of competition from heavily mechanised US farms an easy rallying cry. Rahul's claim that New Delhi has committed to buying goods worth Rs 9 lakh crore annually and that a deal stalled for months was cleared in "15 minutes" demands clarification from the Centre. If agriculture is indeed part of tariff concessions, farmers deserve transparency. Trade ambition cannot ride roughshod over rural stability.

Barnala was also about Congress housekeeping. The Congress party in Punjab remains hobbled by entrenched factional rivalries, leadership one-upmanship and competing caste-regional loyalties that have repeatedly undercut campaign coherence and both-level mobilisation. Rahul's warning to leaders to "team up or sit at home" was overdue. The party cannot hope to channel farm discontent if it remains organisational-ly fractured ahead of the 2027 Assembly polls.

Punjab BJP chief Sunil Jakhar dismissed the visit as theatrics. But the stakes are larger than partisan point-scoring. For the Centre, the issue is safeguarding agriculture while pursuing trade. For Rahul, it is about proving that internal unity can precede external credibility. The test is whether the Congress can convert agrarian anxiety into political momentum or will remain divided in the face of opportunity.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, TUESDAY, MARCH 2, 1926

## Education in Punjab

THE report on the progress of education in Punjab for 1924-25 has just been issued and is bound to be of special interest as it is the last annual report issued under the regime of Mian Sir Fazl-i-Hussain. The report claims that the main principles which have guided the policy of Fazl-i-Hussain have been expansion, economy, efficiency and equality. These are very laudable principles and their soundness cannot be questioned; but the report amply and unmistakably demonstrates that they have been applied with a set purpose for the benefit of a particular community at the expense of other communities. The expansion has been largely confined to particular areas and a particular section of the population, and if other areas and other sections of the population have also to some extent benefited by the new institutions or show an increased number of scholars, that was inevitable under the circumstances and could not be helped. As to economy, the expenditure on all government institutions has been reviewed and readjusted to suit the needs of a particular community. The report says: "The first step has been to review the expenditure of all government institutions with the object of effecting economies. The next step has been to apply the economies thus effected in government institutions to aided schools by a revision of the grant-in-aid rules. And the third step is to use the money thus rendered available for the expansion and improvement of secondary education in rural areas. A large number of schools in these areas have now been placed on the grant-in-aid list."

## Iran regime change may elude Trump

Tehran would want to be seen extracting revenge from Israel and the US



KC SINGH  
FORMER SECRETARY, MEA, AND  
EX-AMBASSADOR TO UAE AND IRAN

**A**FTER the June 2025 attacks by the US and Israel on Iranian nuclear facilities and military leadership, the US declared the Iranian nuclear programme as "obliterated". A fresh onslaught now can hardly be justified on the same grounds. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's assassination leads to the unavoidable conclusion that the real objective, with most of the ruling families in the Gulf endorsing it, is an Iranian regime change.

Oman mediated and encouraged dialogue for a peaceful settlement of US-Iran differences. Reportedly, a deal had almost been finalised. Iran was to hand over its stockpile, containing 300-400 kg of 60% enriched uranium. This is a step away from 90% enrichment, which is required to produce 10 or more nuclear weapons. The attack may trigger that move.

Unlike in June last year, Iran was now prepared to immediately retaliate, having rebuilt its defences and re-equipped its missile arsenal. China apparently provided new-generation defensive and offensive weapons. This would enable China to test the effectiveness of its missiles against US naval assets and anti-missile defence systems. This is crucial if it militarily attempts to occupy Taiwan, which it claims as its territory. There have also been reports of Russia upgrading the Iranian air defence systems. In the past, Iran had S-300 systems but not the more advanced S-400. Any military attack must have clear objectives and exit ramps. In June 2025, the US ended its intervention claiming total destruction



FLAWED: The US assumption that Khamenei's killing would trigger the regime's collapse is probably mistaken. REUTERS

of the Iranian nuclear programme. If the objective now is regime change, then multiple factors exist. Firstly, Iran is not Venezuela, where a pliant leadership immediately emerged after President Maduro's abduction by American special forces. The US intelligence successfully exploited divisions within the ruling establishment in Venezuela.

In Iran, the ruling dispensation is an alliance between the clerical order and the pro-regime Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Assisting them is the Basij, a paramilitary volunteer militia with 600,000 active members and 25 million reserves. The late Supreme Leader realised the threat to his life. However, he defied and led, while creating multiple layers of successors to all sensitive leadership positions. It also appears that instructions were issued to officers at the operational level to act without guidance from the higher ranks. This was to ensure that the chain of command's severance did not stall planned retaliation.

What happens next? The IRGC has announced massive retaliatory attacks. In turn, US President Donald Trump has warned that "we will hit them with a force that has never been seen before". There is widespread public anger in Iran over Khamenei's death.

## PM Modi's unwillingness to criticise Israel during his recent visit of his neutrality.

The US assumption, based on Israeli arguments, that the assassination would make the Iranian regime collapse is probably mistaken. Although constitutionally the next Supreme Leader would be approved by the Assembly of Experts, a three-member interim leadership council will govern the country for the time being. It includes Ayatollah Alireza Araf, President Masoud Pezeshkian and the head of the judiciary, Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejehei.

According to a February 28 YouGov poll, only 33% of the Americans support the US attack on Iran, with 45% opposing it. Democrats are protesting over the US Congress being bypassed before starting a war. Consequently, President Trump may seek an early off-ramp to claim victory and end the campaign, although his real aim of regime

change may not be achieved. It is likely that the late Supreme Leader's successor may be either another cleric, who is as or even more committed to religion-inspired governance, or a serving/former IRGC member.

A prompt ceasefire, however, is unlikely. Iran would want to be seen extracting revenge from Israel and the US. This can mean considerable damage to institutions and infrastructure in Israel. The attack on all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, except Oman, is foxing analysts. They wonder why Iran would alienate neighbours which had announced that their airspace and territory were barred for launching any attack on Iran.

The UAE and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords with Israel in 2020. They did not withdraw even after Israel's massacre of Palestinians in Gaza. Furthermore, many nations have functioning US air or naval bases, including some with radars to track Iranian missiles. Also, there are news reports that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been surreptitiously goading the Americans, alongside Israel, to decapitate the Iranian regime and disarm it, especially its nuclear programme.

The rivalry between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia is a historical one. Each claims the lead-

ership of the Islamic world. Of the 12 Shia Imams, only one is buried in Iran (at Mashad). Saudi Arabia has ignored many Imam burial spots in their country. Having weakened Iran's surrogates like Hezbollah, besides overthrowing Syria's Shia Assad regime, Israel has focused on deposing the Iranian Islamic regime.

Iran is drawing the GCC countries into its standoff with the US and Israel. Dubai, after being targeted by Iranian missiles, might lose its charm as a tax-free haven as well as a trading and investment centre. Iran wants the American "puppets" to face reality and end their double game. Unless the Iranian regime gets replaced by a pro-West government, stability may not return to the Gulf anytime soon.

India also stands to lose from these developments. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unwillingness to criticise Israel during his recent visit, days before the attacks, has robbed India of its neutrality. India is unlikely to forget it. Having ostensibly aligned with one side, Delhi will lose leverage if Iran's Islamic regime survives. In danger are security and remittances of the diaspora, Dubai and the Gulf as India's commercial entrepôt, and the reliability and cost of energy supplies. Just when the Taliban need military and economic support to fight Pakistan, Indian supply routes via Iran are blocked.

The BJP may find ideological affinity with Zionism, but Sufism, which blended Islamic mysticism with Shia Islam, inspired the Bhakti movement. Sufism and Sikhism have deep historical and mystical links. That is why 130 of Baba Farid's *sloks* and *shabads* are in the Guru Granth Sahib. Thus, the developments in the Gulf and West Asia have economic and spiritual relevance for India.

Hopefully, Trump is merely bluffing and would allow Iran a face-saving retaliation without escalating the conflict. In that case, a quick off-ramp may be available. Otherwise, chaos and massive economic disruption are inevitable.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

It's the mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to erase Israel from the map of the region. — Ali Khamenei

## Welcome to our feline republic

SY QURAISSI

**M**Y late wife, Ila Sharma, was passionate about animals, always surrounded by rescued dogs and cats. Her daughters, Sachin and Shaiyia, inherited this passion.

Sachi was posted in Mumbai with Bank of Baroda and wanted a cat. She found a flat she liked, but the landlord was allergic: either the cat or the house. Sachi chose the cat.

Weeks later, heading to work, a small white and brown kitten came crying to her at Santa Cruz railway ticket counter. She cancelled her travel, picked him up and went straight back home. He was named Ticket — soon shortened to Tiku. The next day, as if summoned by feline telegraph, another insistent stray arrived at her door. She was let in and named Jugni. The two grew up together, companions on the start.

A few months later, in a restaurant, Sachi noticed a small calico cat moving from table to table, begging for food. A friend wanted to adopt her but was shifting houses. "Can you keep her for a couple of months?" Two months became permanent. She was named Dulwara, or Dulu.

Then came Sachi's transfer to Gurgaon — right in the middle of Covid-19. Moving three cats from Mumbai to Delhi felt impossible. All my VIP contacts were mobilised! The GM of Eastern Railway spoke to his Mumbai counterpart. The railway coupe arrived in Delhi bearing three carriers, three cats and the beginning of our feline republic.

Tiku, the first arrival, has never forgiven Dulu for existing. In his day, he snarls whenever she ventures too close. When offended, he registers a protest in unmistakable ways — by urinating precisely where it will cause maximum inconvenience: on beds, inside suitcases, over freshly folded clothes. It is not discipline; it is performance.

The girls are entirely different. Juna — formerly Jugni — is calm, tidy and impeccably behaved. Dulu, despite being the outsider, is gentle and patient, careful never to provoke. Between them, they quietly restore order whenever Tiku stages one of his rebellions.

Then there is the seasonal duplicity. In winter, all three insist on human body warmth. They climb onto laps, wedge themselves under blankets and occupy beds for hours, radiating entitlement. Come summer, they behave as though they have never met you. Attempts at affection are met with cool glances and swift exits. You are acknowledged only when the food bowl appears.

For me they are calming therapy. The trio has acquired a doting fan — Anna, my son's four-year-old daughter, is passionately in love with the cats. Every morning, she cries to come down "to meet Dada" — but heads straight for the cats with whom she plays for hours.

Our maid manages them, tantrums and all, with unruffled calm. There is no shouting, no attempt to reform personalities. She cleans up, adjusts routines and carries on. The cats follow us from room to room when they choose, ignore us when they don't.

Cats are not wired to please. They choose, they stalk, they select selectively. In our home, they have found not obedience — but acceptance. And from being Nana to two boys in London, I'm now Nana of three cats as well!

The writer is a former Chief Election Commissioner

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Political discipline necessary

Apropos of 'Congress scores another own goal'; the 'banian' protest by the Indian Youth Congress workers violated the decorum of an important global event in which representatives from over 80 countries participated. Such a demonstration suggests a lack of political discipline. Transforming the role of the Opposition from obstruction to being constructive and offering policy alternatives can effectively contribute to nation-building. A strong and principled opposition upholding national interest by cooperating on crucial matters of security, unity and integrity above narrow partisan gains can protect against authoritarian drift and help prevent the collapse of democratic institutions.

VAIBHAV GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

## Congress calling BJP's bluff

With reference to 'Congress scores another own goal'; the narrative pushed by a subservient media that the IYC protest at the AI summit in Delhi was a blunder reeks of bias. Isn't showcasing a Chinese rook dog at an AI Summit a bigger blunder? What about filing false cases against opposition CMs? Shirtless demonstration is a form of defiance and cannot be labelled as 'anti-democracy'. The Congress and Rahul are calling the BJP's bluff, and the media is playing the role of the ruling party. PM Modi's *Mann Ki Baat* gets prime time, while Opposition's responses are barely reported. When will the media stop being the BJP's PR wing? The Congress is battling well; it's the BJP that's on the back foot.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

## CBI's image dented

Apropos of 'Refer to AAP'; the trial court's exoneration of former Delhi CM, his deputy along with 21 others in the excise policy case has put the CBI in the dock. Allegations of corruption against the AAP top brass led to the toppling of the Kejriwal government in Delhi, where the BJP desperately wanted to make a comeback after 26 long years. Over-activism by the CBI in trumping up charges against the AAP leadership has dented the reputation of the premier investigation agency. How will the irreparable damage to AAP leaders be mitigated?

DEEPAK KAUSHIK, KURUKSHETRA

## Trade not the only panacea

Refer to 'Trade corridors can rebuild Punjab'; economist W Arthur Lewis considered trade as the 'engine of growth'. Experience from the developed world advocates the building of domestic economy on priority basis before plunging to international trade channels. Therefore, trade is not the panacea for revival of a disturbed economy like Punjab. Amidst the present economic crisis in the state, the diversified farm sector along with medium scale non-farm sector should be strategically linked with international trade. No doubt, a vibrant agricultural infrastructure came into existence thanks to the Green Revolution, but the state failed badly to turn agricultural surplus into trade-driven industrial sector.

JASKARAN SINGH GILL, PHAGWARA

## Mockery of justice

Apropos of 'Punjab's 30,000 undertrials & the case for reform'; the article is the grievous truth of thousands of prisoners who are languishing in jails without facing trial. It represents a mockery of justice for the undertrial prisoners. The government, on the one side, gives a chance to hardcore criminals to surrender before law-enforcing agencies as done in Chhattisgarh, whereas thousands of prisoners are languishing in jails without trial in Punjab. Most of the prisoners have no financial resources to fight their cases and everybody knows that it takes years for the falsely accused to prove their innocence.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

## Oppn parties must come together

Refer to 'Cong questions Kejriwal clean chit timing, alleges AAP-BJP collusion'; while every imaginable thing is possible in today's politics, the AAP and Congress, by indulging in slugfest, are ensuring a smooth path for the BJP which is already on a political rampage. The INDI alliance will be further weakened by giving such misleading statements. Until all parties contain their own ambitions to cement their bloc, the BJP juggernaut cannot be stopped in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat — wherever elections are to be held shortly.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: letters@tribuneindia.com

# Punjab's future lies in its cultural imaginary



**RANA NAYYAR**  
FORMER PROFESSOR,  
PANJAB UNIVERSITY

In the recent articles on Punjab's future, two eminent scholars of the region have made valuable interventions in the columns of this newspaper. Prof Pritam Singh put into perspective the history of the creation of the Punjabi-speaking state (*Sacrifices of Hindus, Sikhs created new Punjab*, Nov 24).

Dr Arvind has looked into the whys and wherefores of Punjab's cultural identity dwelling on how it has been shaped over the centuries (*Reimagining Punjab identity in 21st century*, Dec 15). It was heart-warming and refreshing to see both scholars exude hope and confidence about Punjab's future. It is this spirit of aspiration and resilience that I, too, share. In this article, I propose to argue for the 'cultural imaginary' of Punjab, which is both real and imagined, historical and ahistorical, sacred and secular, literary and cultural.

To my mind, the questions of survival and the future of Punjab are closely linked to this idea of 'cultural imaginary'. If we can sustain this idea, Punjab would not only have a bright and vibrant future, but also a progressive one.

Let us first understand what is meant by 'cultural imaginary' and how it is to be envisioned in the context of Punjab. More than a landscape or a geographical terrain, Punjab is, to my mind, a cultural space, with footprints of numerous, often diverse, religious traditions and belief systems, communities and linguistic or ethnographic groups, each with its own archive of distinctive literary and cultural practices. It has been home to the sacred geography of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity. This cultural space has continued to resonate with the chants of the Vedic hymns, kalamas of Sufi saints, *shabads* of venerable Gurus and parables of the Bible.

Within this cultural space, the sacred sits comfortably next to the secular, the classical and the privileged with the folk and the popular; the *quisas* with the *varnas*, the heroic with the non-heroic and the narrative with the poetic. No distinctions of religion, caste, creed, class, status or language are ever made or matter in any way. Here *'Isha Majaz'* often becomes a way of experiencing *'Isha Haqiqi'* or vice-versa.

In this shared cultural space, the common man is the real king. No wonder this space is, at once, non-hierarchical, counter-hegemonic and pluralistic in character. It is in this space that narratives of dissent are often created or popular socio-political movements take birth on notions of social and political hierarchy are challenged, even overturned. It is this cultural space that



**UNINTERRUPTED HISTORY**: Hopefully the cultural glue will continue to shape and define Punjabis in the future as well. AN

has dominated the imagination of the Punjabis down the centuries. And it is this cultural imaginary that has kept diverse communities and social groups glued together, despite the schisms and ruptures they have had to face, historically.

This notion of cultural imaginary has had an uninterrupted history and dominated the popular Punjabi imagination until the end of the 18th century. Waris Shah could be seen as one of its last major exponents. He wrote his *Heer* at a time when the Sikhs were bitterly fighting the Mughals. Maintaining his distance from the ruling class, he created his legendary *Heer*, a woman-centric narrative, emphasising her multiple oppressions, challenging the patriarchal notions of Islam and critiquing the dubious role of the qazi. Waris *Heer* is a testimony to the fact that the



The future of Punjab is secure so long as every Punjabi is willing to affirm his/her unflinching faith in this pluralistic culture.

cultural imaginary could sustain itself through the worst of times, too.

In the 19th century, thanks to the machinations of the British, Punjab faced one of its worst-ever challenges in terms of the divide-and-rule policy, which set different communities in Punjab on a collision course of identity politics, with each community searching for its own past and its own narrow, sectarian identity.

It is common knowledge how this resulted first in several reform movements in the 19th century, and later consolidated itself to create schisms, leading to the Partition, perhaps the biggest ever disruption in the history of Punjab's cultural imaginary.

In the post-Partition phase, one may mention two very significant developments in Punjab that almost threatened to rip through the very fabric of its cultural imagi-

nary. The first was the creation of the Punjabi-speaking state in 1966, where it was largely seen as an exclusive demand of the Sikh majority population. History tells us that the facts are otherwise as both Sikhs and Hindu leaders had jointly fought this battle.

The second was the extended phase of identity politics, with Punjab witnessed through the 1980s and 90s, which not only created hostilities among the Sikhs and Hindus, but also shattered the mutual trust they had built over the centuries.

But even the traumas this phase inflicted on the collective psyche of Punjab failed to drive a permanent wedge between the two main communities. Not only did they stand by each other through these testing times, but both communities have, over the years, managed to reclaim the trust that they felt had been eroded, irrevocably.

This cultural imaginary largely concerns with the shared values, belief systems and cultural practices of Punjab that have survived the onslaught of history and despite all odds, have continued to fertilise the soil of Punjab with the same intensity and fervour with which its five rivers had been doing in the past.

Punjab may have shrunk in terms of territory and may now have only three rivers running through it, but this cultural imaginary, this spirit of *'charhi kalan'*, this credo of *'kirat karo'* has not only consolidated itself into a living practice, but also become our most visible, global marker. Now that the Punjabis have a presence across the globe, it is this 'cultural imaginary' that not only provides Punjabis with the wherewithal of survival but also enables them to earn enviable recognition, worldwide.

Politicians may come and go; they may or may not perform, crises may come and go, but this cultural imaginary continues to nurture the spirit and soul of every Punjabi, continues to inspire and spur him on to struggle and survive even in the face of the most insurmountable challenges.

The future of Punjab is secure so long as every Punjabi, regardless of where she is located, is willing to affirm his/her unflinching faith in this pluralistic culture of shared values and beliefs. If this cultural imaginary has sustained us until now, it is to be hoped that it will continue to shape and define us in the future as well.

## Hormuz closure could hit half of India's oil supply



**AUNINDYO CHAKRAVARTY**  
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

A COUPLE of weeks before Israeli and American missiles began raining down on Iran, one of the Islamic nation's two naval wings, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy, shut down the Strait of Hormuz for several hours as it conducted an exercise to test its new defence doctrine, the 'Smart Control of the Strait of Hormuz'. The objective was to show to the world that Iran had the capability to block any seaborne trade through the strait.

More than 20 million barrels of crude oil pass through the Strait of Hormuz every day. That makes up 25% of the world's crude shipments and 20% of global crude consumption. For us, the importance of the strait is even larger: 50% of India's crude imports transit through it.

Any sustained blockade will increase our crude import costs dramatically, over and

above the impact it will have on global crude prices.

Defence analysts are divided over whether Iran can actually implement the blockade for long. Some say that Iran has war-gamed this exact scenario for years and has built up maritime defence capabilities that rival the best in the world. *Janes*, the much-respected defence analysis group, once called Iran the "foremost... practitioner of small boat 'swarm' tactics", which is of crucial value in the Strait of Hormuz.

It also has over 5,000 naval mines, including Chinese-made EM-52 rising mines, that can lie dormant on the sea bed until they sense there is a high-value target above.

Iran also has the largest anti-ship missile arsenal in West Asia, including the short-range Noor and the mid-to long-range anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), Khalij Fars, Zolfaghar Basir and Qasem Basir.

Other defence experts say that the US and Israel have abundant firepower to take out this entire naval configuration within a few days and clear up the Strait of Hormuz within a week. Yet, even if this were true, they would not be able to rule out guerrilla strikes on ships, like the Houthi rebels have demonstrated in the Red Sea.



**CRITICAL**: More than 20 million barrels of crude oil pass through the Strait of Hormuz every day. REUTERS

That means ships will need to pay very high insurance premia to transit through the strait. Already, the additional war risk premium (AWRP) charged on ships that travel through the region has risen from 0.05% to 0.1% of the vessel's hull value.

That means a very large crude carrier (VLCC) with hull value of \$100 million will have to pay up to \$1 million in insurance. In some cases, major maritime insurers have simply withdrawn insurance coverage for any ship going through the Strait of Hormuz.

This will have a deadly impact on the crude basket we import, whose price is estimated using a combination of the price of heavy sour

India's crude basket might rise from the current \$70 per barrel to \$100 per barrel or even higher.

crude from Oman and Dubai and sweet Brent crude.

We will have to pay more for the crude coming from the Gulf and also increase our dependence on crude from North America, which will drive up our import price. Estimates suggest that if the disruption in Hormuz continues, India's crude basket might rise from the current \$70 per barrel to \$100 per barrel or even higher.

There are four major effects of any large rise in crude prices on our economy. The first is the impact on our oil import bill and the current account deficit (CAD). The second is the cost of refining crude. The third is the impact on the price of fuel that a common citizen pays at the local

petrol pump. And the fourth is the effect on what the Centre and states earn from taxes on petrol and diesel.

Estimates suggest that for every \$10 increase in the global price of a barrel of crude, our oil import bill will go up by \$13-14 billion since we pay lower prices than the global average.

If global oil prices rise to \$100 per barrel, our oil import bill will rise by \$30-40 billion. Other things remaining the same, this will raise our CAD — the gap between our imports and exports — to 2.3% of the GDP.

If crude import prices rise, oil refineries will proportionately increase their refinery gate prices — the price at which they ship it to petrol pumps — to maintain their profit margins. If the Centre and state governments continue to tax at the same rate as they currently do, consumers will spend much more when they buy petrol and diesel.

At \$100 per barrel, refineries will sell petrol at Rs 80 per litre and consumers will end up paying between Rs 115 and Rs 135, depending on which state they are in. That, in turn, will have a huge impact on the overall retail inflation.

It is estimated that for every \$10 increase in the global price of crude, the consumer price index rises by

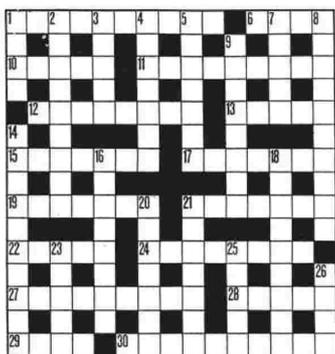
one-third of a per cent. A \$100 per barrel crude could add a full percentage point to retail inflation. That will force the RBI to reverse its stance on interest rates by raising them to curb inflation. In a situation where both investment and consumption are already strained, this would have a dampening effect on India's GDP growth.

One way to compensate for the inflationary impact of rising crude prices is for both the Centre and states to reduce the taxes levied on petrol and diesel. Currently, the Centre imposes Rs 13 per litre as central excise on petrol and Rs 10 on diesel. State VAT rates vary widely, ranging from 16% to 26%, depending on the fuel type. If retail prices are to be kept where they are, the Centre could end up losing as much as Rs 1.5 lakh crore in tax revenue, which will push up the fiscal deficit to 4.6-4.7%.

The government will have to borrow more to fill the gap, increasing the supply of government bonds and pushing up yields. Corporates will also have to follow suit by offering higher returns on their bonds.

In short, whether the rise in crude prices is passed on to consumers or absorbed by the government, interest rates could rise and affect India's GDP growth in the coming financial year.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



**ACROSS**  
1 Behaving as expected (4,2,4)  
6 Become less appealing (4)  
10 Consciously haughty (5)  
11 China (9)  
12 Set fire (8)  
13 An argument (3-2)  
15 Needing something to drink (7)  
17 Interrogate after a mission (7)  
19 Colouring matter (7)  
21 Find refuge (7)  
22 An amassed store (5)  
24 Romantically chivalrous (8)  
27 Insurrection (9)  
28 Urgency of action (5)  
29 Lacking real interest (4)  
30 Leave quickly (4,6)

**DOWN**  
1 Ordered (4)  
2 Constant (9)  
3 A culinary herb (5)  
4 Ornamental shrub-clipping (7)  
5 Give warning of (7)  
7 Be in store for (5)  
8 Expected path of a missile (4,2,4)  
9 Practicable (8)  
14 Halt a series of failures (4,3,3)  
16 Fast (8)  
18 Belonging naturally (9)  
20 A Mexican alcoholic drink (7)  
21 A branch of knowledge (7)  
23 Blank book for photographs (5)  
25 Alternative of two (5)  
26 Untidiness (4)

**Saturday's Solution**  
**Across:** 1 Subvert, 5 Decor, 8 Easygoing, 9 Cub, 10 Pelt, 12 All in all, 14 Take on, 15 Senora, 17 Unabated, 18 Opal, 21 Pun, 22 In the know, 24 Petty, 25 Runaway.  
**Down:** 1 Steep, 2 Bus, 3 Edge, 4 Trifle, 5 Dog-tired, 6 Cock-a-hoop, 7 Rubella, 11 Like as not, 13 Locality, 14 Trump up, 16 Mentor, 19 Lowly, 20 Lean, 23 New.

### SU DO KU

	6		7		8
2		3	6	1	
4	5		9	7	2
7	9		2		1
	6				5
3		8			4
	8	9	1	6	3
	7		5	3	9
6		7			4

### SAURASHTR'S SOLUTION

3	5	2	1	7	8	6	9	4
8	9	6	5	3	4	7	1	2
1	7	4	6	9	2	3	5	8
6	4	8	7	5	9	1	2	3
7	3	5	4	2	1	8	6	9
2	1	9	8	6	3	4	7	5
5	6	3	9	8	7	2	4	1
9	8	1	2	4	6	5	3	7
4	2	7	3	1	5	9	8	6

### CALENDAR

- MARCH 2, 2026, MONDAY
- Shaka Samvat 1947
  - Phalgun Shaka 11
  - Phalgun Parvashite 19
  - Hijri 1447
  - Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 5:56 pm
  - Alaganda Yoga up to 12:19 pm
  - Ashle Nakshatra up to 7:52 am
  - Moon enters Leo sign 7:52 am

### FORECAST

SUNSET	MONDAY	TUESDAY	18:22 HRS
SUNRISE	06:46 HRS		
CITY	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	30	13	
New Delhi	32	15	
Amritsar	28	11	
Bathinda	29	12	
Jalandhar	28	11	
Ludhiana	30	14	
Bhiwani	31	14	
Hisar	33	14	
Sirsa	30	13	
Dharamsala	24	11	
Manali	19	05	
Shimla	18	09	
Srinagar	20	02	
Jammu	28	13	
Kargil	07	-06	
Leh	08	-05	
Dehradun	29	12	
Mussoorie	21	09	



## Imperial war

American and Israeli thuggery has no place in the international system

Donald Trump came to the White House promising to end America's endless wars. That promise now lies in ashes in West Asia. The far-right Republican, who, along with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, launched an all-out war against Iran on February 28 and killed its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has proved to be one of the most reckless warmongers ever to occupy the Oval Office. Blood is on the hands of these two men — one a mercenary hard nationalist who is turning America into a rogue superpower, and the other, an expansionist ethnonationalist who wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court. Mr. Trump has bombed at least seven countries in the 13 months that he has been in office. Under Mr. Netanyahu, Israel has operated far outside the boundaries of international law. Iran has responded with missile and drone attacks, targeting Israeli and American bases in the Persian Gulf and Jordan, that risks widening the war. Tehran has also announced the closure of the critical Strait of Hormuz, a move that risks a global economic fallout, especially for major oil importers such as India.

To be clear, this is not a "pre-emptive" war, as Israel has claimed. There was no evidence that Iran was preparing to launch an attack. On the contrary, Tehran was involved in serious negotiations with Washington under Omani mediation. On February 27, Oman's Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi said that a deal was within reach, based on Iran's commitment not to build a bomb or stockpile nuclear material. Within hours, American and Israeli missiles struck Iran, killing its head of state and top leaders. This is not the first time that diplomacy has been overtaken by force. In 2018, Mr. Trump single-handedly sabotaged the 2015 nuclear agreement. In June 2025, while Iran was negotiating with the U.S., Israel launched a unilateral attack, triggering the 12-day war. This time, however, the attack is far more dangerous. This war is not about giving Iranians their "freedom" either, as Mr. Trump has claimed. The U.S. maintains close ties with several repressive monarchies and dictatorships, where freedom rarely enters the equation. Nor has Washington shown any qualms about Israel's crimes against the defenceless, stateless Palestinian people. This is a war of choice, launched to eliminate an adversary and reshape the region to suit American and Israeli interests. Such thuggery cannot be accepted in the international system. The war machines of the imperial duo have already wrecked the region. Before the fire spreads further, this war must end. America should step back and Israel must be reined in. Otherwise, even the last vestige of the rules-based order will be shredded entirely.

## Selective outrage

Judiciary seems quick to take offence only when it sees itself under attack

The Supreme Court Bench that took up the NCERT Class 8 social science textbook case might have been surprised when it saw the critical references to the judiciary as a "deep seated conspiracy" and declared that it will not allow "anyone on earth" to tarnish the judiciary's integrity. While the government has expressed remorse, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's statement that action will be taken against officials responsible for inserting references to case pendency and "judicial corruption" is an exercise in executive arbitrariness prompted by judicial overreach. In fairness to the Court, it would likely not have taken offence to the passages had these been in any other book. But textbooks are official, authoritative accounts and the judiciary found the passages ill-motivated. Instances of judicial corruption are real and censoring textbooks is not a corrective measure.

Since the BJP came to power, rewriting school and college textbooks has been a key part of its agenda. Right-wing commentators often find court judgments, such as those giving precedence to the environment as against development, or worse, as against religious practices of Hindus, and therefore not nationalistic or beneficial to the vast majority of the people of India. An adviser to the Prime Minister recently called the judiciary the single biggest obstacle to development. The Court, perhaps, saw the textbook as an attempt to intimidate the judiciary. Some of the sentences were indeed in the form of broad-brushing social media assertions not carefully constructed with rigour. The textbook, for instance, said, "People do experience corruption at various levels of the judiciary" and went on to describe complaints and redress mechanisms. But, such critical references had been used in chapters dealing with the government or the political executive as well. The chapter on elections had a picture of currency notes apparently found in the car of a candidate. The textbook writers probably aimed to spark critical awareness, not offer bland tutorials in civic studies. But as with other textbooks, there are problematic passages. The many history chapters uncritically valorise medieval Hindu kingdoms and portray their struggle to retain power as rightful resistances to Muslim rule. Wars for plunder and territorial expansion have always been part of history, and they did not begin with Muslim invaders. Chapters on Muslim kingdoms briefly refer to Akbar's tolerance and Babur's intellectual curiosity but remain largely negative. The chapter on penury under British rule and Mughal-era wealth is not balanced. The problem is not that the textbook selectively targets the judiciary; it is that the judiciary selectively targets certain portions.

# Sixteenth Finance Commission — misses and concerns

The Sixteenth Finance Commission had significant flexibility in determining its approach and methodology, as its terms of reference followed directly from constitutional provisions, unlike earlier commissions that operated under detailed central directives. This Commission, as before, addressed the two key dimensions of fiscal transfers — namely the vertical and the horizontal.

### The vertical dimension

The Commission took note of the increase in the share of States in the divisible pool of central taxes from 32% to 42% by the Fourteenth Finance Commission. The Fourteenth Finance Commission had justified it on account of a discontinuation of State plan grants, amounting to only 3% of the divisible pool of central taxes at the time of transition. The subsequent reduction to 4% was due to the change in the status of Jammu and Kashmir. The Sixteenth Finance Commission noted the Centre's concern about the reduction in its fiscal space. The Centre had responded to this substantial increase in the share of states by the Fourteenth Finance Commission by, first, increasing the non-sharable cesses and surcharges, second, reducing its share in the financing of centrally sponsored schemes and third, not accepting sector-specific/State-specific grants recommended by the Fifteenth Finance Commission. In the end, however, the Sixteenth Finance Commission retained the States' share at 4%, imparting to it a kind of semi-permanence.

The Sixteenth Finance Commission makes no recommendations regarding the non-sharable cesses and surcharges which, by their very nature, should be limited and levied for finite periods. These should be earmarked for specific purposes and not merged with the Centre's general funds. Instead, Sixteenth Finance Commission recommended a 'grand bargain' (paragraph 7.67) between the Centre and States saying that 'States would agree to a smaller share in the resulting larger divisible pool, with no loss of revenues to either side' provided the Centre agreed to merge a large part of the cesses and surcharges in the regular taxes.

The Commission did not take into account its constitutional duty as enumerated in Articles 270 and 280 for objectively determining the share of States in the shareable pool of central taxes while making its observations on the cesses and surcharges. It would have been better had the



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Commission at least pointed out to the Centre that the steep increase in cesses and surcharges was not warranted and not in the spirit of the Constitution. Further, the Commission chose to discontinue the revenue deficit grants and did not recommend any State and sector specific grants. This became a route to lower the share of States in the Centre's revenue receipts as compared to the Fifteenth Finance Commission.

The average effective transfers covering tax devolution and Finance Commission grants to the States as a percentage of the Centre's pre-transfer gross revenue receipts were 27.0%, 27.2% and 28.3%, respectively during the Finance Commission periods (I, II, 13). This share increased sharply to 35.6% during the Fourteenth Finance Commission period. In the Fifteenth Finance Commission period, covering the years 2020-21 to 2024-25, this share came down marginally to 34.4%, still considerably higher than those of the Eleventh and Thirteenth Finance Commission periods. This steep increase in resources transferred as a proportion of gross revenue receipts of the Centre should not be overlooked.

Looking at the first year of the Sixteenth Finance Commission's award period, 2026-27, this ratio is 32.7% as per the Centre's budget estimates. The Sixteenth Finance Commission's projections for later years may prove to be overestimates since the 2026-27 nominal GDP growth, assumed at 11%, is higher than the Budget estimate of 10%. The Commission also did not factor in the revenue reducing effect of the major Goods and Services Tax (GST) reforms undertaken in September 2025, while the Commission was still in session.

### Horizontal dimension

The Sixteenth Finance Commission introduced a new criterion of contribution to reflect an efficiency consideration. But it measured it through the share of a State's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) in an all-State GSDP.

There is a need, however, to differentiate the efficiency of the production system from that of the fiscal system. In the production system, the inter-State distribution of GSDP depends on many factors which includes the inter-State movement of financial and human resources. It largely depends on market forces which tend to lead to a concentration of productive capital stock in a limited number of States. Human resources also move from less developed to the more developed States.

This change involved using GSDP in two opposite ways. In the income distance formula, the lower the per-capita GSDP of a State, the higher the per-capita share of that State. In the contribution criterion, the higher the per-capita GSDP of a State, the higher is its share. However, the Commission did not finally use the GSDP. Instead, it used its square root. This was meant to reduce the excessive effects of using GSDP to reflect contribution on some States.

In the devolution formula, the weights of some of the other criteria have also been changed. These are purely judgemental. Dropping the tax effort/fiscal discipline criterion, which was a fiscal efficiency criterion is not consistent with the Commission's own narrative.

### Losses and gains

Consequently, the main States that have lost on account of the Sixteenth Finance Commission devolution scheme as compared to the Fifteenth Finance Commission are Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. The other group of losing States are Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim, and Goa (the north-east or extremely small States). The gain by other richer States has not been uniform.

Ideally, the losses of some States could have been mitigated through normatively determined revenue gap grants. Devolution is not enough to capture the finer details of cost and need differentials of India's highly differentiated States. Further, if a Finance Commission changes the tax devolution formulae, then the consequential loss of some of the States could be neutralised by the revenue gap grants.

In fact, Article 275 provides an important mode of fiscal transfers for the consideration of State-specific 'needs'. It should not be confused with revenue deficits. Needs can be estimated in order to equalise standards of critical services such as health and education.

This would have facilitated accommodating the performance argument of the richer States while still promoting the equalisation objective. Even if there are difficulties in estimating revenue gap grants since it involves normative assessment of States' needs and resources, the Sixteenth Finance Commission need not have taken the shortcut of dropping these altogether. While ad hoc State-specific grants are not appropriate, equalisation grants still have a place.

The views expressed are personal

# Skill India as herculean challenges, Galgotian blunders

Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity requires a herculean effort. India's demographic dividend, that ends by 2040, is one such opportunity. Several European Union countries and China have successfully financed skill systems. In these countries, approximately 50% of secondary-level students are enrolled in vocational education streams. In India that share is 1.3%, reflective of an educational system that neglected school education till 1990, and vocational education till 2006. However, in 2020, India's National Education Policy (NEP) said: "By 2025, 50% learners will be exposed to vocational education." "Exposed" still reveals an attitudinal problem among policy designers. Vocational education in most countries is around 2% of the education budget. For China and Germany it is 1%. India has no data that is publicly available due to fragmented training schemes in Ministries. India's strategy rests on Budget announcements which falter year-on-year. A scheme that was celebrated last year is forgotten the next year. Consider the internship scheme announced in Budget FY 2026: only 5% of the allocated funds were spent and its design proved ineffective.

### CAG reports, issues raised

The herculean task of making India "the skill capital of the world" is inconsistent with "Galgotian" blunders. Issues of financing skills are crucial. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in 2025 audited the flagship Skill India scheme. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) 2015-22. Ten years ago, it had similarly looked at compliance and oversight issues of skill institutions.

Both reports raise issues of financial impropriety. In 2015, the CAG dealt with financial reporting delays and unclear accountability of disbursed funds. In 2025, the report mentions that 94.5% of bank accounts were invalid and approximately 41% of trainees in short-term training achieved placement.

How have we evolved from 2015 through 2025? When the short-term skill ecosystem was started, the vision was to create a vibrant public-private market for skills. Over the past decade, however, the focus on quantity through short-term training

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has yielded limited results. Since the CAG's direct concern is fund use, we list three ideas for it.

Imagine a scenario where no operational funding was provided by the PMKVY. What if the amount upward of ₹10,000 crore spent annually was extended as skill loans to students? This would have led to more choices for students, improved the quality of institutions as they competed for enrolment, and promoted demand-driven skill development, benefiting students as they are from economically weaker backgrounds. A model similar to that for educational loans could have been followed. The worst case would be non-performing assets, which we have ways to handle. It is not too late. We can do so now and use skill loans better. There is already a policy framework in place. Priority needs to shift: part of PMKVY funding could be through skill loans. Of course, design work is needed to roll this out, but it is doable. It needs a product-market that has banks and non-banking financial companies on board. It is worth questioning why the National Skill Development Corporation began as a non-banking finance company, later became a funder for training partners, and now primarily implements government schemes.

### Using skill vouchers

Use of skill vouchers is another trainee-based skills financing idea, more so for distribution of public funds. It allows flexibility for policymakers and a choice for students. There is no better way to implement the NEP priority of lifelong learning.

Since vouchers follow the trainee rather than the institution, it incentivises delivery and outcomes. It creates a competitive market. Vouchers can also be good tools to provide upskilling for Artificial Intelligence (AI)-led transition, providing targeted skills in AI, digital and green skills. They can be used for needed segments such as enhancing women workforce participation or provide foreign language learning for global labour markets.

Purchasing power in the hands of learners will drive quality and accountability and be a driver of a demand-based skills market. Singapore and Croatia have implemented them well. It will also

encourage school leavers to pursue vocational courses instead of defaulting to degrees, which often inflate tertiary enrolment.

### The idea of skill levies

Skill levies on organised industries, used in more than 90-plus countries, is another fundamental idea. A well-designed skills levy can sustainably finance skills. In 2017, we had designed and recommended a Reimbursable Industry Contribution (RIC) to the Government of India for the Twelfth Five Year Plan. At that time there were 62-plus countries doing it; now, 90-plus have adopted it, for good reasons.

Across Latin America, in Germany, Singapore, South Africa and South Korea, such models have been used to ensure industry ownership of skills and to create stable funding insulated from political and budgetary cycles. Linking contributions to firm size and payroll and then returning them to the industry when training has happened makes employers in-charge of skill development.

Today, skills programmes are supply-driven and government-financed.

Employer engagement in today's system is inadequate. We can move from an employer-engaged to an employer-owned system through the RIC reform. It is tested world-wide and there is a small demographic window for this policy choice.

Finally, real time skills demand must feed into policy. Understanding this trajectory needs transparent rules. A mandate for online job boards to share data in a form that safeguards their business interest but also provides aggregate understanding to the government is needed. Data mining and AI modelling can help. Periodic/off-the-shelf gap studies (as has been the norm) cannot achieve this goal. The data shared can be made public in the National Career Service (NCS) portal. India's goal to construct a labour market information system has not materialised. This may be the only workable way for skills planning.

Enough strategic errors have been made. By 2040, the demographic dividend will end. It is time for a course correction — we know we can. We hope, we will.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Iran attacked

The U.S.-Israel assault on Iran is best understood as an economic war, not merely a security operation. The architecture goes back to Richard Nixon's petrodollar deal of 1973 — oil priced in dollars, OPEC surpluses recycled into US Treasuries. The 1979 Iranian Revolution was intolerable precisely because it shattered this arrangement,

creating the first major oil state outside dollar subservience. Since then, the pattern is consistent — Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, Iran today — each had challenged dollar dominance. U.S. President Donald Trump is defending the same financial order, whatever his rhetoric. Until we debate this economic dimension honestly, we will keep misreading these

conflicts entirely. **Gopalaswamy J.,** Chennai

The U.S. has this tendency to call North Korea, Iran and others as rogue states because they challenge America's hegemonic ways. In fact, rogue nations are not those that intend to or possess nuclear weapons, but those which attack others on flimsy or

unfounded grounds. At a time when the Russian war in Ukraine is on, the strikes on Iran will prove catastrophic for security in West Asia. It is the U.S. that always

indulges in aggressive sabre-rattling and unprovoked military interventions across the world. **Prabhu Raj R.,** Bengaluru

The killing of Iran's Ali Khamenei is a blatant violation by the U.S. The U.S. under Mr. Trump is becoming a rogue country. With the UN long useless, the world is becoming a dangerous place. **V. Ganapathy Subramanian,** Nagore, Tamil Nadu

### Corrections & Clarifications

The photo caption that accompanied a report, "President undertakes sortie in Prachand" (Inside pages, February 28, 2026), erroneously identified Group Captain N.S. Bahua as Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh.

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## How UGC rules prioritise quick justice

**T**he University Grants Commission's (UGC) 2026 regulation on the promotion of equity in higher education has triggered protests by a section of general category students and a *Sadhu sangathan* (organisation of ascetics). The matter finally reached the Supreme Court which has put the implementation on hold for its complete vagueness.

Opposition to the regulation stems from the apprehension that marginalised sections, taking advantage of the vagueness in the new rules, might misuse the regulation to victimise upper castes. This reflects deep distrust and insecurity which is fuelled by fears that measures aimed at providing justice to one section of the population could turn out to be unjust for others.



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**Caution against speedy justice**  
This regulation is necessitated by an undeniable reality. Caste, gender and religion-based discrimination in higher educational institutions are neither sporadic nor episodic, and instances of the same have lately been rising. Grievance redress mechanisms have been notoriously slow, often discretionary, and at times only symbolic, leaving students from marginalised communities to suffer the consequences in silence.

Even the most ardent opponents of this new regulation cannot, therefore, deny the necessity of such an intervention. Their consternation arises from the apprehension that the overemphasis on speed to meaningfully deliver justice in institutions shrouded by layered hierarchies, informal power, and uneven capacities might be misplaced, as speed and justice share a very complicated relationship. Too slow, and it loses meaning, too fast, it risks losing judgment altogether.

The 2026 regulations insist on swift redress, strict accountability, and institutional consequences for silence or inaction. Complaints

must be acknowledged immediately, committees convened swiftly, and inquiries concluded within rigid timelines. This design rests on a powerful assumption — that speed and fairness naturally reinforce one another. Yet, justice systems across the world suggest otherwise. When urgency is institutionalised without explicit safeguards, decisiveness begins to substitute for deliberation. Quick timelines and central monitoring without clear procedural standards create fear. Institutions worry about regulatory penalties as well as reputational damage from complaints processed rapidly and unfairly. The new regulation assumes that the time taken in due diligence and completing procedural formalities is akin to institutional inertia. It seeks to ensure rapid educational by threatening higher educational institutions with dire consequences. They could be de-recognised and lose the power to award degrees. However, whether this shift commands legitimacy, will depend not on intent alone, but on the architecture of enforcement.

**Vague process**  
The experience of U.S. universities during the 2010s is instructive. Faced with the pressure to act swiftly on campus misconduct, institutions prioritised speed, only to encounter sustained judicial pushback over vague evidentiary standards, unclear rights of response, and reputational harm inflicted before findings were even established. The backlash did not arise because protection was unnecessary, but because the process was thin.

Clearly, justice that moves quickly but unclearly destroys trust. That risk is magnified by how the UGC regulations distribute authority. They do not specify offences or penalties. Investigation is delegated to internal equity committees, and punishment is imposed through existing institutional services or

disciplinary rules. Faced with the threat of de-recognition or funding withdrawal, universities are encouraged to prioritise visible action over careful adjudication, which produces fear. And fear, in regulatory environments, rarely fosters justice.

**Rewarding privilege**  
At this point, legal design collides with social reality. The ability to document harm, articulate it in institutional language, and navigate committees remains unevenly distributed. Students from rural areas, and linguistic minorities often struggle to translate everyday discrimination into administratively legible complaints. Meanwhile, those with greater cultural and institutional exposure, sometimes from dominant sub-castes within protected categories, are better positioned to mobilise the system. The result is a quiet paradox. A regime designed to amplify marginal voices ends up privileging the most institutionally fluent among them. These pressures inevitably spill into classrooms. When academic judgment is subjected to regulatory scrutiny without procedural clarity, risk aversion becomes the most logical course. Faculty respond by diluting feedback, avoiding difficult conversations, and sanitising evaluation. And over time, institutions learn ways to bypass the complexities. Committees multiply, documentation thickens, and compliance becomes performative. Scholars describe this as compliance theatre, a phenomenon where organisations learn to demonstrate reform without addressing underlying hierarchies.

Justice in universities must not be a race to the first response. It should be a long and difficult conversation. One that demands urgency, yes, but also precision, patience, and the humility to revise. Without that balance, equity will quietly and persistently slip out of the room.

Students from rural areas and linguistic minorities often struggle to translate everyday discrimination into administratively legible complaints

## How one seat will test the MVA's unity

MVA's fragile alliance lies in the balance in the upcoming Rajya Sabha elections

### STATE OF PLAY

**Vinaya Deshpande Pandit**  
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**O**n February 26, the Election Commission (EC) issued a notification for the election to 37 Rajya Sabha seats in 10 States. Of them, seven seats are from Maharashtra. Among those who will complete their tenures on April 2 this year are leaders like Nationalist Congress Party-SP (NCP-SP) president Sharad Pawar and Union Minister Ramdas Athawale. As political parties across alliances in Maharashtra try to gain the most at the negotiating table, the election to one Rajya Sabha seat is likely to test the fragile unity of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), a regional alliance of the INDIA bloc.

The major questions this election will raise for the MVA are whether the Congress will be willing to compromise at a time when both the Rajya Sabha elections and Legislative Council elections are to take place in Maharashtra; whether Uddhav Thackeray will forsake his party's claim to the sole Rajya Sabha seat when his is the biggest party in the State's Opposition; and what Sharad Pawar will decide.

Negotiations are ongoing within the Mahayuti as well. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wants four seats, the NCP has declared Parth Pawar's (Ajit Pawar's son) name. Eknath Shinde is keen to get two seats.

### The MVA tussle

The battle within the MVA throws light on the aspirations of each of the three parties. It is defined by an undeniable shadow of distrust towards the NCP-SP, after talks of a merger with Ajit Pawar's NCP

were revealed. In Maharashtra, the NCP (earlier led by Ajit Pawar and now by his wife Sunetra Pawar) is in power with the BJP as part of the Mahayuti alliance. The NCP-SP (led by Sharad Pawar), on the other hand, is a part of the Opposition MVA, with Congress and Shiv Sena Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray (UBT).

While some leaders said that the death of Ajit Pawar had effectively halted the possibility of a merger, others questioned whether the Rajya Sabha seat will remain with the INDIA bloc in the future, if the NCP-SP decides to go ahead with the merger. "Even if Sharad Pawar himself may choose to stay with the MVA, what if his party goes ahead with the merger?" asked a leader. Some even raised concerns about Sharad Pawar's health. He is currently recovering at a hospital in Mumbai. The NCP-SP counts on the help of a national leader like Sharad Pawar to propose that his candidature alone can lead to an unopposed Rajya Sabha victory in the State.

Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena UBT is keen to take this Rajya Sabha seat for itself. It believes that since it is the largest party in the alliance, and had left its stake in 2019 to support Fauzia Khan (NCP-SP), it should be supported for this bid. While five leaders are in the fray, the preference seems to be for Priyanka Chaturvedi, whose term expires next month. "We have been a loyal

partner in the INDIA bloc. We have taken up several national issues including the Aftershock of Mumbai. Our presence in Rajya Sabha is crucial," a Sena leader said. The Congress, on the other hand, feels the need to increase its presence in the Rajya Sabha to play an effective role as the national Opposition party. "For us, each seat in the Parliament matters to strengthen Mallikarjun Kharge ji," a Congress leader said. The BJP has refrained from issuing any statement on the differences within the MVA so far. But the possibility of more candidates being in the fray will only mix the chances of unopposed elections, and will lead to complex number crunching in an open ballot election.

### A game of numbers

The number game in Maharashtra is quite clear. Rajya Sabha members are voted in by the MLAs of the State. In a House of 288, the actual strength today is 286. The election quota for the Rajya Sabha election in Maharashtra is 36. In the ruling Mahayuti, the BJP has 131 MLAs, Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) has 57 MLAs, and NCP has 40. Along with smaller allies, the Mahayuti strength is 234. Effectively, it can easily elect six of the seven Rajya Sabha members. It will have a handful of excess votes too. On the Opposition side, the MVA can also elect one candidate on the basis of its cumulative strength if it sticks together. The Shiv Sena UBT has 20 MLAs, the Congress has 16 and the NCP-SP has 10. Along with the smaller allies, its total strength is 52. The final decision will now hinge on talks between the top three leaders of the MVA. The Opposition will be able to keep uncertainty at bay only if it can achieve consensus.

## U.P. receives over 84% of all out-of-State MPLADS funds

Only 21 MPs, two of them from the Lok Sabha, accounted for all of the out-of-usual-area spending

### DATA POINT

**Nitika Francis**  
**Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

**T**wenty-one MPs recommended works outside the State or constituency they were elected from or are associated with, using their Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) funds, an analysis by *The Hindu* has found. And of the more than ₹18 crore spent on works which were completed based on these recommendations, the vast majority — 84% — went to districts in Uttar Pradesh.

Of the 530 MPs for whom "completed works" data is available, these 21 MPs account for all of the out-of-usual-area spending. All other MPs used their allocated funds in the districts or States they represent or are associated with.

The analysis by *The Hindu* covered around 21,000 works completed between 2023 and 2026. The data were sourced from the Empowered Indian MPLADS dashboard and cross-verified with the mplsads.gov.in website. It was collected on February 23, 2026.

An elected Lok Sabha MP can generally recommend works in the district(s) their constituency encompasses. An elected Rajya Sabha MP can recommend works only within the State they are elected from, while nominated MPs can recommend works anywhere in the country. There are also limited exceptions: MPs can recommend up to ₹50 lakh in a financial year outside their usual region (raised from ₹25 lakh after April 2023) and can also contribute up to ₹1 crore per annum for rehabilitation and reconstruction in areas affected by natural "calamities of severe nature", as declared by the Government of India, subject to additional scrutiny.

### Exhaustive list

Of the 21 MPs, only two are from the Lok Sabha. Mala Rajya Laxmi



**In the works:** Reconstruction of a road begins near NH-709B, Sisana village, in Bagpat, Uttar Pradesh on February 4. ANI

Shah of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Lok Sabha MP from Uttarakhand's Tehri Garhwal, spent ₹49,96,274 on footpaths and pedestrian ways built in two villages of Agra district. This amount is about 57% of her total spending of ₹87.4 lakh on all completed works. In other words, more than half of her spending on completed works went to Uttar Pradesh, with the rest spent in the Dehradun district, where parts of the Tehri Garhwal Lok Sabha constituency lie. When *The Hindu* reached out to her, she declined to comment.

Another Lok Sabha MP, Kirti Vardhan Singh from Uttar Pradesh, spent ₹10 lakh on a protective structure in Nagaland. Sadanand Mahlu Shet Navavade, the sitting Rajya Sabha MP of the BJP from Goa, spent ₹48.6 lakh on street light poles installed in 20 locations across the Shahjahanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. The amount is about 27% of his total spending on all completed works.

Channalal Garasiya, the sitting Rajya Sabha MP of the BJP from Rajasthan, spent ₹98 lakh on LED lights installed in two districts of Uttar Pradesh, about 80% of his total spending on all completed works. He said he did not remember the specific areas for which he had recommended the works from the MPLADS funds. "I don't exact-

ly remember the sectors or areas for which I have made recommendations. These things are handled by my private secretary. I have not even completed two years in office," Mr. Garasiya told *The Hindu* over phone. Mr. Garasiya was elected to the Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan in April 2024.

Sitting Rajya Sabha MP of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha from Jharkhand, Sarifaz Ahmad, spent ₹92.03 lakh on installing LED lights and building roads in the Agra and Pilibhit districts. This is one of the very few instances of such "out-of-State" funding wherein the involved MP is from a regional party and has contributed such a substantial amount to a State where said party has no footing. "I have followed the rules of the Rajya Sabha and as a member I am entitled to recommend a certain percentage of the MPLADS funds to other States as well. I have recommended the funds to Jharkhand also," Mr. Ahmad told *The Hindu* over phone. Asked about any other specific reason to recommend funds out of his usual area, Mr. Ahmad said, "The way I have my people in Jharkhand, in the similar way I have my people in Uttar Pradesh as well."

Other sitting Rajya Sabha MPs who sent money to works in Uttar Pradesh include BJP's Rajendra

Gehlot and Congress's Pramod Tiwari, both from Rajasthan; BJP's Satish Chandra Dubey from Bihar; and Congress' K.T.S. Tulsi and Phulo Devi Netam from Chhattisgarh. Together, they sent around ₹75 lakh to various projects in Uttar Pradesh. Of the ₹18 crore out-of-usual-area funds, about 6% went to Bihar, and sitting BJP Rajya Sabha MP Dhananjay Bhimrao Mahadik from Maharashtra accounts for most of it. He spent close to ₹1 crore on works in Bihar, spread across two financial years.

### The established norm

While nominated Rajya Sabha MPs are allowed to use their MPLADS funds anywhere in the country, few actually do so beyond the State they're associated with. Most concentrate spending in the States where they built their careers — the very achievements that led to their nomination.

For instance, ace track and field athlete P.T. Usha, who was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, has spent all of her MPLADS funds thus far on roads and playgrounds and to purchase school buses across Kerala. Similarly, Dharmasthala's Veerendra Hegde spent all his funds till now in Karnataka.

### The lion's share

Gulam Ali Khataba is a notable ex-

ception. He was born and educated in Jammu & Kashmir and has his permanent residence in the Union Territory. He is identified as a BJP member in his Rajya Sabha profile and has served as a spokesperson of the party's J&K unit. At the time of appointment, he was the lone member representing the State in the Upper House. Of the 20 questions he has raised in the Rajya Sabha, 16 relate specifically to matters in J&K, including questions on welfare funds for tribal communities and their forest rights. Mr. Khataba is a member of the Scheduled Tribe (Gurjar/Gujjar) community, according to his Rajya Sabha profile. Yet he spent nearly ₹12 crore of his MPLADS funds to install LED lights in various districts of Uttar Pradesh, accounting for over 95% of his total MPLADS expense. Of the 21 MPs analysed for mismatched funds, Mr. Khataba accounts for the largest share. Uttar Pradesh already receives a large share of MPLADS funds because it sends the most MPs to Parliament. Of the 20,858 works completed between 2023 and 2026, 26% were in Uttar Pradesh. Around a fifth of the utilised funds also went to the State. Uttar Pradesh utilises more than twice as much MPLADS funds as the second-ranked Tamil Nadu, with the latter accounting for around 9%.

Against this background, the mismatch is more pronounced: over 84% of the out-of-usual-area funds were directed to Uttar Pradesh. In several instances, the funds came from MPs elected from or associated with States with lower per capita incomes and a smaller share of MPLADS funds. J&K, with which Mr. Khataba is so strongly associated, received only 0.6% of the MPLADS utilised funds and accounted for only about 1% of completed works.

With inputs from Mohammed Iqbal, Ishita Mishra, Amit Bhehari, who are reporters at *The Hindu*, and Suman Raj L., Shirram N., and Nivedha M. who interned with the Data Team.

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 2, 1976

## Arafat suggests UN buffer zone in Israeli-held area

Washington, Feb. 29: Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leader Mr. Yasser Arafat has proposed the creation of United Nations buffer zone in Israeli occupied Arab territory as a step to a West Asian peace conference and recognition of Israel's right to exist. The *Washington Post* newspaper reported today.

It said he put the proposal to Democratic Senator, Mr. Adlai Stevenson during the Senator's recent tour of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Israel.

According to the proposal, the U.N. would take over the occupied areas except for parts of the Gaza strip and the west bank of Jordan adjoining Israel. These adjoining parts will be administered jointly by Israel and the U.N. the newspaper said.

The newspaper said Mr. Arafat indicated to Senator Stevenson that if Israel made that first move it could break the deadlock that has held up resumption of West Asian peace talks in Geneva.

The *Post* said that according to Senator Stevenson, who met the PLO leader in Beirut and took his proposal to the Israeli and U.N. Governments, the Israelis showed little interest in the suggestion. — Reuter

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 2, 1926

## Fastest car in the world

The London correspondent of "The Englishman" cables under date Feb. 6 —

What is expected to prove the world's fastest motor car was to-day surrounded by a dozen experts and detectives in a closely guarded shed in the Sunbeam works at Wolverhampton.

I was among the few privileged persons who inspected the car, which has been shrouded in secrecy during the last eighteen months. Major Segrave, who will drive the car on the Southport sands probably to-morrow, hopes to beat the world record of 150.269 miles an hour secured on the Pendine sands in South Wales in July last year. The car has twelve cylinders and is only 33 horse-power according to Treasury ruling but it is claimed that it can develop 300 horse-power at 6,000 revolutions. France, Italy and the United States are all making hectic preparations to produce cars which will attempt to beat the mile and kilometre records now held by Britain.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Percentage increase in Gross GST collection in February**

**8.1** in per cent. Gross GST collection increased by 8.1% to over ₹1.83 lakh crore in February, led by higher growth in revenues from imports and domestic sales. Gross domestic revenue rose 5.3% to about ₹1.36 lakh crore, while gross import revenue climbed 17.2% to ₹47,837 crore. PTI

**International flights to West Asia cancelled by Pak. after Iran attack**

**184** At least 184 international flights of different airlines from Pakistan to West Asia have been cancelled since Saturday. International flights in West Asia have all been badly disrupted or suspended after the closure of the Dubai and Abu Dhabi airports. PTI

**Worth of projects inaugurated in Madurai by PM**

**4,400** in ₹ crore. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday also laid foundation stone for four-laning of Marakkanam-Puducherry section and Parakkudi-Ramanathapuram section of key NH routes. PTI

**Number of calls received by NORKA helpdesk**

**381** A 24-hour helpdesk set up by NORKA Roots, following the Israel-Iran conflict, has received 381 calls till 11:30 a.m. on Sunday, officials said. It was established as per the direction of Chief Minister's Office to assist Non-Resident Keralites and their family members. PTI

**Persons killed in a blast at explosives factory in Nagpur**

**18** At least 18 persons were killed and 20 others injured in a blast that tore through an explosives manufacturing factory in Maharashtra's Nagpur district on Sunday, police said. The blast took place at the SBL Energy Limited factory, a senior police official said. PTI  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Missile interceptors in U.S.-Iran war

How is this conflict different from the 12-day war? What is missile defence and how does it work? How effective are Iron Dome and Patriot systems? Can saturation attacks exhaust interceptors? What systems are Iran deploying?

**EXPLAINER**

Vasudevan Mukunth

**T**he outbreak of fresh hostilities between the U.S.-led coalition, including Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and Iran seems to have triggered a newly integrated regional air defence network different from the one these actors deployed during their brief yet intense conflict in June last year.

The 12-day war in 2025 was until then the most significant test of the Integrated Air and Missile Defence, with the alliance faced with having to blunt retaliation by Iran that included more than 500 ballistic missiles and over twice as many 'suicide drones'. This time, with the theatre of conflict including the Persian Gulf, the UAE has brought to bear its South Korean defence system together with the debut of U.S. systems that were only prototypes last year.

While many of these systems showcase new abilities, they also highlight the U.S.' and Israel's need to 'ration' them to keep costs down and ensure they're still available should the conflict drag on.

**What is missile defence?**

Missile defence refers to a military system that finds and destroys incoming missiles before they hit their targets. These systems use sensors — including satellites in earth orbit and radar stations on the ground — to watch the sky and, when they spot an enemy missile, track its speed and direction.

Then, military command centres use powerful computers and military personnel to receive the data from the sensors and based on that calculate which targets the missile endangers and which response is most suitable. One important kind of response is the interceptor — which is a missile that flies towards the incoming threat with the purpose of destroying it.

In addition to saving lives and property, missile defence can discourage enemies from starting conflicts that could require missiles, since the interceptors could render them ineffective, as well as give leaders more time to deliberate.

**How an interceptor works**

Let's use the example of the U.S. Patriot system, which consists of several components connected by cables or wireless data links.

Its radar unit remains stationary on the ground rather than spinning, like the radar you see in airports. It steers thousands of radio beams across the sky to scan for objects. When these beams hit an aircraft or incoming missile, they bounce back to the radar and a computer analyses the returning signals to estimate the object's speed, location, altitude, and direction.

If the object is deemed to be a threat, a connected computer can concentrate the radar's energy at that point in the sky. Such focused tracking is called a lock, and in this condition the radar will update the target's position continuously.

Meanwhile, the computers at the Engagement Control Station (ECS), a mobile command centre operated by soldiers, calculate the trajectory of the object and determine when to fire a counter-measure. When the system commands a launch, a signal goes to a launcher truck, which ignites the rocket motor of an interceptor. As the interceptor lifts off, the ground radar will continue to track both the target and the missile simultaneously. The ECS will compare the positions of both objects and



An interceptor flies in the sky as missiles from Iran are fired to Israel, as seen from Tel Aviv. FILE PHOTO

send commands to the interceptor to guide it through the air.

In the final seconds of flight, the interceptor will use its onboard seeker — a component that acts like its driver — to find the target. Since interceptors often move at multiple times the speed of sound, seekers have to be very precise. The interception itself can happen in one of two ways. Older missiles use a proximity fuse that senses when the target is nearby and blows up a powerful warhead, destroying the object with shrapnel. Newer interceptors are hit-to-kill: the missile steers itself directly into the body of the target, using the kinetic energy of the collision to shatter it.

The radar observes the impact to confirm the target has been destroyed before resetting to engage the next threat.

**How effective are interceptors?**

The efficacy of an interceptor varies depending on the target.

The short-range rockets that Israel uses as part of its 'Iron Dome' system is effective against simple, slow-moving rockets, with the country reporting 80-97% success rates in recent conflicts.

The U.S. Patriot system on the other hand deals with targets moving much faster and is less successful in absolute terms. For example, in May 2023, about a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine had begun, Patriot had 100% success against six Russian Kinzhal hypersonic missiles on one night over Kyiv and more than 60% against the Iskander-M ballistic missiles.

After that, Russia modified Iskander-M to release decoys and make sharp turns through the air just before it strikes. Russia has also been launching larger groups of missiles and drones at once. So even if a Patriot battery has a high success rate, it only carries a limited number of interceptors. Altogether, its rate has reportedly dropped to around 10% since.

According to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "The only programme designed to protect the entire United States homeland from a long-range missile attack is the GMD [Ground-based Midcourse Defence] programme. GMD has a failing test record: a success rate of just 55% in highly scripted tests, including three misses in the last six tries."

**What makes Cheongung II different?**  
In the ongoing conflict, the UAE has

activated a missile defence involving the South Korean Cheongung II missiles while the alliance has been using the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) and the Patriot batteries supplied by the U.S. The UAE acquired Cheongung from South Korea to intercept low-flying Iranian cruise missiles and tactical ballistic missiles over the Gulf.

These missiles use a hit-to-kill technology similar to the U.S. Patriot system but are also optimised for threats in the Persian Gulf.

A missile launched from coastal Iran can reach the UAE within minutes. Older versions of Patriot used radars that scanned for objects in a 120° cone. If a threat came from outside this cone, the battery had to physically rotate, losing precious seconds. Cheongung II however uses a 'Vertical Launch System' fit with a rotating multi-function radar that can fire in 360° without moving the launcher.

Missiles called "skimmers" can fly just above the surface of the Gulf's waters to stay under the radar's view, so the Cheongung II missile is also equipped with a radar in its nose, which it turns on in the final seconds of flight to not have to depend on the ground radar as it approaches impact.

**How does cost shape interceptor use?**

While the U.S. relied heavily on its expensive Patriot defence system during the June 2025 conflict, it has deployed its new Indirect Fire Protection Capability to protect bases in the UAE and Kuwait. This system uses AIM-9X Sidewinder missiles as interceptors and helps with rationing Patriot.

Patriot's cost is relevant because Iran's strategy, called a saturation attack, has been to fire a flurry of cheap missiles to exhaust the alliance's interceptors. The system's PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement (MSE) interceptors however cost around \$4 million per shot.

The U.S. Navy has deployed SM-6 missiles in their 'dual' configuration, in which they can intercept ballistic missiles in their terminal phase as well as Iranian fast-attack craft.

Finally, after Israel introduced it during the 12-day war, the country's 'Iron Beam' high-energy laser has become the primary defence against drone swarms. As with the U.S. and Patriot, Iron Beam is reportedly allowing Israel to ration its Arrow 3 and Stunner.

**What changed after the 12-day war?**

During the 12-day war, the first line of defence comprised the Israeli Arrow 3 system and U.S. Navy destroyers with SM-3 missiles. Arrow 3 engaged medium-range ballistic missiles in space, before they reentered the atmosphere, although the intensity of the barrage rapidly depleted Israeli stockpiles by the second week of the conflict. Likewise U.S. destroyers in the Red and the Mediterranean Seas recorded the heaviest use of the SM-3 missiles in combat until then.

The endo-atmospheric defence system used U.S. THAAD batteries and Israel's legacy Arrow 2 system. Then came Israel's David Sling with its Stunner interceptors, with Patriot forming the last line.

Against the 'suicide drones', the alliance used the 'Iron Dome' and its Tamir interceptors and 'Iron Beam', with help from air to air missiles fired by the U.S. Air Force and Navy, the Royal Air Force, and France's Rafales.

As of January this year, an important focus area for the U.S. and its allies was to replenish the expended munitions. The U.S. Department of Defence has already quadrupled production orders for THAAD and PAC-3 MSE interceptors and has accelerated the deployment of directed-energy systems to naval vessels.

This said, "Production of all munitions — interceptors for THAAD, Patriot, Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome... — is far slower than current combat use or anticipated future high-intensity war requirements," Charles Corcoran and Ari Ciceur wrote in *RealClearDefence* in January 2026. Maj. Gen. Corcoran is a former chief of staff of the U.S. Air Forces Central Command and Ciceur is the associate director of foreign policy at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America.

They added that "Replenishing THAAD shortages ... will take at least 1.5 years at current production capacity" and that U.S. manufacturing has "not scaled for high-tempo operations in decades".

**How strong is Iran's air and missile defence network?**

Iran's most advanced interceptor is an upgraded version of the Bavar-373 system using the Sayyad-4B missile, reportedly designed to intercept targets at ranges exceeding 300 km. Iran also recently unveiled its Arman Ballistic Missile Defence system, which it has said is optimised to intercept short-to-medium-range ballistic missiles with 360° radar coverage.

To counter cruise missiles as well as F-35 and F-15 fighter jets, the military is using the Sevom-e-Khoradad missile system. It's highly mobile, which means it can fire from one place and quickly relocate to another, making it harder for U.S. forces to destroy its radars. Iran is reportedly using Sayyad-3 missiles with this system to protect its Natanz and Isfahan nuclear facilities.

With reports of strikes in Tehran, Iran is also using the Russia-made Tor-MI short-range missiles to intercept precision-guided bombs and the Majid and Azaraksh systems to counter low-flying drones and cruise missiles.

This said, reports of explosions in Tehran and Isfahan indicate the U.S. and Israeli barrage could be overwhelming Iran's interceptors with sheer volume. This is possible because once a battery fires one batch of around six missiles, it needs to reload, leaving the site defenceless until then. The Bavar-373 system's purported ability to detect stealth aircraft has also been in question since the alliance has struck targets in Tehran.

**THE GIST**

▼ The outbreak of fresh hostilities has triggered a newly integrated regional air defence network, with the UAE activating Cheongung II and the U.S. deploying prototype systems alongside Patriot and THAAD.

▼ Interceptors such as PAC-3 MSE, SM-6 and AIM-9X are being rationed amid saturation attacks, as production remains far slower than current combat use.

▼ Iran is using Bavar-373, Arman BMD, Sevom-e-Khoradad and Tor-MI systems, but sheer volume and reload gaps may be overwhelming its interceptors.

CACHE



In the lower atmosphere, a returning capsule can still reach hundreds of kilometres per hour, far too fast for a safe landing, so the parachute has to be deployed to reduce the velocity for a soft landing in the sea. PTI

# How do astronauts return from space and survive re-entry?

A launch vehicle's ascent battles gravity to gain orbital velocity, while re-entry is a controlled struggle against the atmosphere to systematically shed that immense kinetic energy through aerobraking, thermal protection and precise guidance within the re-entry corridor

Unnikrishnan Nair S.

The ascent of a launch vehicle is a battle against gravity to gain the immense velocity required to stay in orbit – while re-entry is a struggle against the atmosphere to shed that same energy in a systematic way.

Initially, aerospace scientists believed that surviving atmospheric re-entry would be impossible because the massive kinetic energy of an orbiting space capsule would be converted into intense heat energy upon re-entry. The resulting temperatures would be so extreme that they would melt any known structural material. The breakthrough came with the blunt body theory, which proved that if the space capsule's forebody is rounded with a large radius, it can deflect most of the re-entry heat into the surrounding air rather than being directed into the capsule.

More than 98% energy of a re-entering capsule is dissipated through the atmosphere and converted into heat. The capsule is shielded from this intense thermal environment by its heatshield, which has a robust thermal protection system: it dissipates the heat through either ablation – where the material sacrificially chars and erodes to carry heat away – or thermal insulation, which uses low-conductivity materials to prevent the heat from reaching the capsule's primary structure.

**What is a re-entry corridor?**

To return to earth, a space capsule must break its orbit by reducing its velocity. It does this by performing a deorbit burn: turning 180 degrees and firing its engines in the opposite direction of its travel.

Since forward speed is what maintains the orbit, losing that speed allows gravity to overcome the capsule's centrifugal force. The capsule then drops out of its stable circular path and enters a shallow, downward elliptical curve, leading it into the upper atmosphere for re-entry.

The re-entry corridor is a precise atmospheric window that a spacecraft must hit to return safely, balanced between two extremes. If the entry angle is too shallow (the overshoot boundary), the capsule will act like a stone skipping across a pond, bouncing off the atmosphere back into space. Conversely, if the angle is too steep (the undershoot boundary), the capsule will hit the dense air too hard, generating lethal deceleration forces and frictional heat that exceed what the crew and capsule can survive.

**What is a semi-ballistic body?**

A ballistic body behaves like a falling stone: it cannot steer by itself and is slowed only by the air resistance (drag). In contrast, a semi-ballistic body flies at a specific angle, known as the angle of attack. This is achieved by intentionally offsetting its centre of gravity laterally, causing the body to fly at an angle relative to the oncoming air.

As the vehicle slams into the atmosphere at hypersonic speeds, this angle forces the air to flow asymmetrically over the body, creating an aerodynamic lift force apart from the drag force, which acts perpendicular to the direction of velocity. This lift force is strategically manipulated to allow the capsule to glide and bank through the atmosphere, providing the cross-range capability necessary to steer it precisely toward a targeted landing zone.

**What is a communication blackout?**

Another issue during re-entry is the communication blackout. The extreme heat generated during re-entry strips electrons from air molecules, turning it into a layer of ionised plasma. This plasma sheath acts like a metallic bubble around the capsule that reflects and blocks radio waves. Because signals cannot pass through this electrified layer, it causes a communication blackout, leaving the crew and ground control unable to speak to each other until the capsule slows down enough for the plasma to vanish.

To manage the dreaded communication blackout during re-entry, engineers utilise a combination of orbital relay networks and high-frequency signal physics. By transmitting data upward to relay satellites (such as NASA's TDRSS) rather than downward to ground stations, the signal passes through the thinner, less dense regions of the plasma sheath in the rear of the capsule.

**Why are parachutes deployed for landing?**

When a capsule re-enters the atmosphere, it is decelerated by aerobraking, which is the process of using atmospheric drag to slow down a capsule. As the air density increases at lower altitudes, the capsule's speed drops until it approaches its terminal velocity – the point where the upward force of air resistance balances the downward pull of gravity. Any further reduction in velocity has to be achieved by deploying additional aerodynamic surfaces like parachutes. For a capsule returning from space, the terminal velocity in the lower atmosphere is still hundreds of kilometres per hour, far too fast for a safe landing.

Practically, even before reaching the terminal velocity, the parachute has to be deployed to reduce the velocity further to make a soft landing in the sea.

**How will the Gaganyaan crew module re-enter?**

ISRO pioneered its re-entry capabilities with the 2007 Space Capsule Recovery Experiment (SRE), proving it could safely return an orbiting craft to earth. This was further advanced by the 2014 Crew Module Atmospheric Re-entry Experiment (CARE), which validated the full-scale thermal protection and parachute systems essential for surviving the extreme heat of a sub-orbital re-entry.

The Gaganyaan orbital module has two parts: the crew module (CM) and the service module (SM). The orbital module will be de-orbited by the thrusters in the SM and after that, the SM will separate and be destroyed by the intense heat of re-entry. Upon atmospheric re-entry, the CM maintains its trajectory within the re-entry corridor, strictly avoiding undershoot and overshoot boundaries. Operating as a semi-ballistic body, the CM executes controlled manoeuvres to reach its targeted landing site by modulating its lift vector through bi-propellant thruster firings.

Once the module reaches lower altitudes, a three-stage redundant parachute system is deployed to ensure a safe and smooth splashdown in the Bay of Bengal, which is the primary landing zone for the mission.

Unnikrishnan Nair S. is Former Director, VSSC and IIST; Founding Director, HSFC; and an expert in launch vehicle systems, orbital re-entry and human spaceflight technologies. Currently Dr Sarabhai Professor at VSSC.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

## She barged in on their conversation

Then complained the cafe was overpriced, though it was simply expensive

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of the expression 'to barge in on'? (S. Jambunathan, Coorg)

When you 'barge in on someone', you intrude on the individual; you walk into their room without their permission – very often, upsetting the person. You interrupt, quite rudely, whatever it is the person is doing. It is also possible to 'barge in on someone's conversation'. When you do this, you rudely interrupt a conversation that two people are having; you poke your nose into something that you have no business doing.

From now on, make it a point to knock. Don't just barge in.

The expression can also be used to mean 'to bump into or collide with someone or something'. In this case, you 'barge into someone or something'.

I nearly barged into Tara as I was turning the corner.

'Barge' comes from the Latin 'barra' meaning 'boat', and the word was initially used to refer to any small boat. Over a period of time, however, the word underwent a change in meaning. Today, it is mostly used to refer to any flat-bottomed vessel, mainly used to transport cargo. These vessels are mostly found on rivers and canals and are incapable of independent movement.

Being big and heavy (because of the cargo they are carrying), they are usually towed or pulled by other boats, any attempt to quickly change direction or come to an abrupt stop usually results in an accident, with the barge sometimes colliding with the boat towing it.

What is the difference between 'overpriced' and 'expensive'? (Aparna Das, Puri)

'Expensive' is the opposite of 'cheap'; when you buy a product that is 'expensive', you are paying a lot of money for it. In addition to hitting at the price of the product, the use of the word also suggests something about the quality and value of the product. When you say that something is 'expensive', you are suggesting that given the quality of the product, it is worth the money you are paying for it. In other words, you are getting your money's worth. We must, however, remember that 'expensive' is a relative term. What you and I may consider 'expensive', someone else may not.

Sandeep has a big collection of very expensive watches.

The use of the word 'overpriced' suggests that you are passing judgment on a product – you are saying it is not worth the money that you are being asked to pay. While the product may not be expensive, you are being made to pay a lot more than it is worth. You are being made to pay way too much money for a product of low value.

I couldn't talk my friend out of buying a pair of ridiculously overpriced shoes. I looked at the menu and walked out. Every item in the restaurant was overpriced.

upendrankye@gmail.com

## THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on the Ranji Trophy 2025-26 season that concluded last week

V.V. Ramanan

**QUESTION 1**

How many different teams prior to Jammu & Kashmir have won the Ranji Trophy?

**QUESTION 2**

Which bowler finished the season with 60 wickets?

**QUESTION 3**

Which team made it to the semifinals for the first time in its history?

**QUESTION 4**

Who won the Plate Championship for the 2025-26 season by defeating Manipur by a

massive margin of 568 runs in the final?

**QUESTION 5**

What remarkable feat did Arjun Sharma and Mohit Jhangra of the Services achieve for the first time in the 91-year history of the Ranji Trophy in the match against Assam?

**QUESTION 6**

The highest individual score in the 2025-26 Ranji Trophy season was the 299 recorded by a batter from a team which made the last four. Name the batter and team.

**QUESTION 7**

Who was named Player-of-the-tournament?



Visual Question: Name this batter who amassed the most runs this season (950). EMMANUAL YOGINI

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. An early Steinbeck novel, this book portrays a group of 'paisanos' – literally, countrymen – a small band of errant friends enjoying life, and wine, in the days after the end of World War I. Name the book. **Ans: Tortilla Flat**
  2. Steinbeck himself considered this book his magnum opus. The novel brings to life the intricate details of two families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, and their interwoven stories. Name the book. **Ans: East of Eden**
  3. The Grapes of Wrath focuses on a poor family called the Joads. Which famous prize did this book win? **Ans: Pulitzer Prize**
  4. Which American philosopher influenced Steinbeck's writing, including the characters of Doc and Friend Ed? **Ans: Ed Ricketts**
  5. In which year did Steinbeck win the Nobel Prize for literature? **Ans: 1962**
- Visual: Identify the film that was adapted from a novel of the same name written by Steinbeck. **Ans: The Grapes of Wrath**
- Early Birds: Dodo Jayaditya | Arun Kumar Singh | Varghese Joseph | Sachin Thukral | Sadhan Panda

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

## Word of the day

**Trepidation:**

a feeling of alarm or dread

Synonyms: worry, unease, panic

Usage: she waited with trepidation for the phone call.

Pronunciation: newsth/lev/ trepidationpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /trɛpɪdeɪʃən/

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

# Why key to coconut cultivation today is sustainability, not productivity

The 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' must not be limited to distributing high-yield seedlings but must prioritise the development and mass multiplication of climate-resilient varieties for farms along the east coast and in peninsular regions, and wilt-tolerant varieties for coconut-growing regions along the west coast

R. Ranjit Kumar

**T**he 2026-27 Union Budget announced a 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' with the primary aim of improving productivity by rejuvenating old, non-productive gardens with high yielding coconut varieties and establishing new plantations along the coast. The farming community has welcomed the announcement.

The Coconut Development Board (CDB) is already implementing a similar scheme, which has helped rejuvenate old gardens and expanded cultivation into non-traditional areas, including in parts of Gujarat, Assam, and other non-peninsular regions – sufficient to partially offset the widespread destruction of coconut palms in Kerala and Tamil Nadu by disease.

## Heat and disease

India is the world's largest producer and consumer of coconuts. The domestic prices of coconut and tender coconut remain far higher than prevailing international prices even though the productivity per palm in India is already higher than in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In places like Anaimalai in Tamil Nadu, Dwarf x Tall hybrid palms regularly produce 250 to 300 tender coconuts per tree.

Today, climate change and disease are greater concerns than productivity.

Research by the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute (CPCRI) has projected that temperatures in regions with plantations may rise by 1.6-2.1°C by 2050 and up to 3.2°C by 2070. Higher temperature without a significant change in the rainfall levels will increase the vapour pressure deficit and intensify drought stress.

Studies have also found that large parts of interior peninsular India, including parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, along with the south interior region of Tamil Nadu and the east coasts could become less suitable for coconut cultivation in the coming decades as a result.

## Expanded scope

The CPCRI has found that coconut can still be cultivated along the Western Ghats belt in Kerala, coastal Karnataka, and western Tamil Nadu even during the high temperature regimes. However, these regions are beset by root wilt disease; in Alappuzha and Pollachi districts, the coconut landscape has been completely devastated.

Therefore, the new 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' must not be limited to distributing high-yield seedlings but must prioritise the development and mass multiplication of climate-resilient varieties for farms along the east coast and in peninsular regions, and wilt-tolerant varieties for the traditional coconut-growing regions along the west coast.

Large tracts of land vested with the



A coconut farm at Poosaripatti near Pollachi in Coimbatore district. PERIASAMY M.

State horticulture departments and universities can be used to establish mother palm gardens. Similarly, the State should consider strengthening research in institutions like the CPCRI and the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, so that they can identify and breed heat-tolerant, drought-resilient, and disease-resistant genotypes.

Farmer producer organisations (FPOs), cooperatives, and credible private nurseries should also be enabled to mass-produce these resilient seedlings.

The aspect of the scheme to enhance productivity entails distributing free or subsidised inputs. Many such schemes often distribute biological inputs, microbial formulations, micro-nutrients, etc. But in practice, they are often substandard or poorly stored, reducing the microbial viability.

Instead, the State should consider direct benefit transfers, since farmers must be trusted to decide whether they need irrigation systems, soil amendments, labour for rejuvenation or other improvements.

## Failed take-off

The third area that merits a serious rethink is adding value. In many coconut-growing regions today, production barely meets strong domestic demand for culinary purposes. The domestic price of coconut has increased three-fold since 2024. Encouraging FPOs to invest in processing units during lean supply periods without also assuring them of marketing channels will only expose them to financial risk. The equipment already supplied under such schemes often lies idle.

The 'Cluster Development Programme' implemented by the National Horticulture Board (NHB) has an outlay of about ₹150

## Studies show that parts of interior peninsular India, including Karnataka and A.P., along with southern T.N. and the east coast could be less suitable for coconut cultivation due to climate change and diseases

crore for three verticals: production, value addition, and marketing. However, the programme didn't take off because its high investment barriers prevented FPOs and cooperatives from being meaningful participants as implementing agencies. Even after repeated stakeholder consultations and deadline extensions, private firms were not interested in being the implementing agencies.

The CDB is already implementing schemes that provide a 25% capital subsidy to the industry involved in coconut value addition, so there is no reason for them to subscribe to the same variant of the scheme implemented by the NHB, that too with numerous compliance requirements, including inspection and auditing regulations. The subsidy percentage also varies across the verticals, confusing farmers and investors alike.

The banana cluster in southern Tamil Nadu is another example of an enterprise that remains largely on paper.

## Smaller but better

The government must evaluate these experiences in good faith, including by adopting fool-proof metrics to measure the success of schemes rather than resorting to official reports and stage-managed interactions with farmers. Large, centrally designed clusters may not be the answer. Instead, smaller pilot

models anchored in a genuine cooperative spirit with hand-holding – for example, marketing partnerships with experienced FMCG players like Amul or ITC – could be tested in locations such as Tiptur (which grows ball copra),

Anaimalai (tender coconuts), and Pollachi (coconut oil). Smaller but better designed projects can yield more useful lessons as well.

Dovetailing the 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' with the 'Cluster Development Programme' could also eventually help fund the multiplication of better coconut saplings.

## Real crises

Farmers rarely have the institutional voice that large industries possess. Policies are often drafted based on official briefings rather than ground realities. A simple visit to affected areas like Alappuzha and Pollachi will reveal that root wilt disease is destroying livelihoods and that climate stress is no longer theoretical.

The 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' is an opportunity to study and develop climate-resilient and disease-resistant coconut varieties, and to acknowledge that enhancing productivity alone won't secure the future. Climate resilience, will resistance, direct trust in farmers, and honest evaluation of past failures must guide implementation.

If these principles are adopted in full spirit, the scheme can protect India's leadership in coconut cultivation for decades. If not, however, it will be yet another well-intentioned allocation that doesn't address the real crises facing coconut cultivators.

(R. Ranjit Kumar is managing director, Pollachi Nutmeg Farmer Producer Company, and ICAR-IARI Innovative Farmer Awardee. ranjitct@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

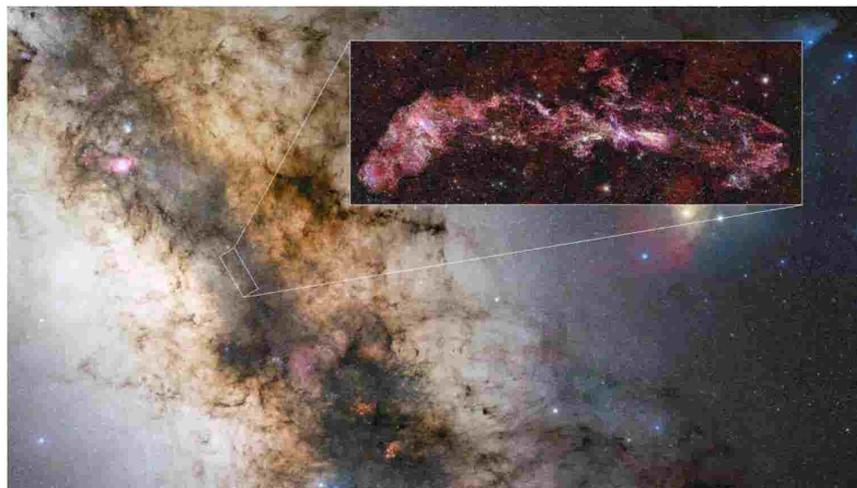
India is the world's largest producer and consumer of coconuts. However, the domestic prices of coconut and tender coconut remain far higher than prevailing international prices

The 2026-27 Union Budget announced a 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' with the primary aim of improving productivity by rejuvenating old, non-productive gardens with high yielding coconut varieties and establishing new plantations along the coast

Today, climate change and disease are greater concerns than productivity for coconut cultivation in the country

Climate resilience, will resistance, direct trust in farmers, and honest evaluation of past failures must guide implementation of the scheme

## BIG SHOT



The Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) has mapped the Central Molecular Zone, a region at the core of our galaxy rich in dense and intricate gas clouds; this image was released on February 26. Scientists have been able to observe this region of the Milky Way in detail for the first time, where star formation could provide keys to understanding the origins of the universe. AFP

## WHAT IS IT?

# Salar de Pajonales: Mars analogue

One of the best places to practice hunting for life on Mars could be in the Atacama Desert in Chile. Scientists recently studied the Salar de Pajonales, an incredibly dry and freezing salt flat located 3.5 km above sea level. Together with the fact that it is blasted by ultraviolet radiation, the Salar is a near-perfect analogue of the conditions on Mars.

The scientists focused on rocks made of gypsum, a mineral (CaSO<sub>4</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O) found on both earth and Mars. Specifically, they looked at layered rock structures built by microbes over long spans of time called stromatolites. They found that this mineral has acted like a protective shelter for life in the Salar in two ways.

First, they found living microbes hiding just millimetres beneath the rock's surface. Because gypsum is translucent, it allows enough sunlight for the microbes to subsist on but blocks harmful radiation and traps small amounts of moisture. The resulting conditions allow life to survive in an otherwise hostile environment. Second, deeper inside the stromatolites, the team found fossils and chemical fingerprints of ancient life, meaning after the microbes died, the gypsum



A view of the Salar de Pajonales from the International Space Station's Expedition 6. NASA

sealed their remains and preserved them.

The study is important because scientists know Mars has large deposits of gypsum, and orbiters and satellites could look there in future. If gypsum can protect microbes and preserve fossils in the earth's most extreme desert, it is reasonable to think it could be holding secrets of ancient Martian life as well.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Science'

the hindu businessline.

MONDAY - MARCH 2, 2026

## Fresh pain

Iran-Israel war can destabilise economies, markets

**O**n February 28, the US and Israel launched an alarming attack on Iran, which has quickly intensified into a volley of strikes and counter-strikes enveloping countries with substantial US assets such as United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Jordan. Iran's Supreme Leader since 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has been killed in the attack, intensifying the sense of geopolitical uncertainty.

It is hard to say how long this war will carry on or what destructive turn it takes, especially if it drags in China and Russia in some form to support Iran. But it will surely disrupt the oil and global trade in general, with possible knock-on effects on capital and currency flows. India, which gets almost half its oil supplies through the Straits of Hormuz (about 2.6 million barrels per day), faces the risk of both supply and price shocks, especially because it cannot possibly fall back on Russian oil. Over \$40 billion of its exports are routed through this region as well. In the worst case scenario, we could see plummeting markets, a pull-out of capital from emerging economies, spike in crude oil prices from \$75 a barrel (by \$5-\$20, according to analysts) and an increase in shipping and insurance costs. As for the potential impact on India, a Reserve Bank of India study (2025) has estimated that a 10 per cent rise in global crude prices could raise headline inflation by 20 basis points. Even if pump prices are kept in check, higher input costs would raise wholesale prices and core inflation. Apart from fuel and commodity-induced price increases, the currency too could come under stress. Exporters, already coping with tariff turmoil and an uncertain business environment, may have to contend with further disruption, both in terms of logistics costs and global demand. This could widen the trade deficit.

In a dire scenario of an extended war with Iran's attacks on the Gulf states intensifying, remittances could suffer if expatriate Indian workers there choose to return. According to a March 2025 RBI paper on India's remittance economy, the diaspora in Gulf Cooperation Council countries, at about 9 million, accounts for half its total global diaspora. Over 40 per cent of the trade deficit is financed by \$120 billion remittance flows. And, about 40 per cent of these flows are from the GCC countries. Meanwhile, capital flows have been unreliable on account of US-induced disorder. The RBI will have to keep a tab on the external account in these trying times, notwithstanding the fact that forex reserves are at comfortable levels.

These are but scenarios to be considered, and it may not turn out to be that bad, after all. The Centre and RBI will have to keep a tab on inflation, and be alert to the developing situation. With strategic petroleum reserves and fuel stocks with oil companies enough to meet at least a month's demand, there is no cause for anxiety. India is food-secure. Yet, caution should be the watchword.

## FROM THE VIEWROOM.

## J&amp;K scripts history and how

**B Baskar**  
Amidst the hype surrounding the ongoing T20 World Cup, Jammu and Kashmir quietly scripted history on Saturday afternoon by winning its maiden Ranji Trophy. It steamrolled Karnataka in the finals held at Hubballi. Right from the first session it dominated the eight-time Ranji champions.

Underdogs defeating their more fancied opponents always makes for a good story and gladdens the hearts of even the neutrals.  
J&K reached the quarter finals three in the past, missing the semi-final berth last year to Kerala with a heartbreaking one-run loss. There have been many heroes for J&K this season — Auqib Nabi, (the season's highest wicket taker), captain and 41-year-old veteran Paras Dogra, Qamran Iqbal (who as a last minute injury replacement scored a century), Shubham Pundir and Sahil Lotra. Mention must also be made of Vanshaj Sharma and Abdul

Samad's contributions throughout the season.  
J&K coach Ajay Sharma also played a key role in instilling that most undefinable attribute of sport — "the winning mentality".  
J&K's victory is a progression of a trend seen in domestic cricket in the last decade — States seen as cricketing backwaters have emerged to the forefront — Vidharba, Saurashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

Karnataka despite having five current and former India internationals were completely outplayed by J&K.  
The Ranji Trophy tournament has over the last two decades diminished in stature largely due to the unavailability of international stars who are busy on national duty almost throughout the year. It has now become the poor cousin of the glibly and glamorously IPL.  
But for young players wanting to don the national colours, especially in the Test format, the Ranji tournament is an invaluable stepping stone.

## LINE&amp; LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

**W**hy do successive governments of India manage the macro economy so well and make a complete dog's breakfast of the micro economy? This question was first asked in the late 1960s by Jagdish Bhagwati and the late TN Srinivasan.

As is to be expected in a bureaucratic state with a semi-colonial and semi-imperial outlook, no one paid a blind bit of attention to this highly perceptive insight and hugely uncomfortable question. But it remains valid even today.

Just look at the record of even governments that have tried to solve the problem. After nearly a dozen years, the three Modi governments have provided massive macroeconomic stability. But unfortunately nothing much has changed for the business environment. This, after trying quite hard since 2014 to improve the "ease of doing business". The low rate of private investment is proof of the comprehensive failure of this effort. India remains a very bad place to do business in. Sharad Marathe, one of India's foremost economists between 1950 and 2008, put it baldly. "India is the only country that says to its businessmen, thou shalt not produce." This is despite the fact that we have always needed an investment rate of at least 37-38 per cent. But we are stuck at about 30 per cent. China, and all of East Asia, managed to get close to or more than 40-plus per cent investment rate for three straight decades. That's why they are where they are now and we are where we are.

All this has been known for many years. But our political, administrative and, of late, sociological arrangements are such that we are unable to dig ourselves out of this very deep hole.

**INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS**  
Politics is about power and the way it is distributed in a country. In India there is very little clarity about this because the Constitution makers opted for the best design, forgetting that in these matters the best is the enemy of the good.

I am referring to the three lists that distribute power in the Union of India: the Central list, the States list and the Concurrent list. This last is a colonial abomination. It well and truly divides the waters especially in economic matters because much of microeconomic policy and execution is a State subject.

The economic consequences of split jurisdiction are absurd. Thus while interest rates are a Central subject, wage rates are a State subject. However,

Indian economy:  
Macro, 100. Micro 0

Indian business is subject to political, judicial and bureaucratic oppression

environmental policy is both a Central and a State subject. These examples can be multiplied. Suffice it to say that we have glorious confusion. So what should be done? The answer is simple but politically very difficult. We should abolish the Concurrent list by transferring most items in it — notably those in which the Centre has very little interest — to the States list.

The point is this: the Concurrent list was necessary as a reassurance in 1950.

**We should abolish the Concurrent list by transferring most items in it — notably those in which the Centre has very little interest — to the States list**

It isn't any longer. Today it's just a hindrance and a handy provider of excuses for non-action by the Centre as well as the States.

In truth we have the worst aspects of both China and the US. In China there's virtually no independence for the provinces. In the US it's the federal government that's constrained by the freedom that the states have. In India both the Centre and the States constrain each other, which, I must say, is a new interpretation of "checks and balances".

As to the administrative aspects, they are easier to sort out, except when the sociological complications make them difficult. The central problem here is pervasive incompetence caused by flawed induction on the one hand and excessive job protections policies on the other. You can't employ the unfit and then keep them on for 35 years. Efficiency is the victim.

**THREE BIG CONTRADICTIONS**

There are three other huge contradictions. The judiciary tries to ensure "justice for all". The executive tries to ensure equity via distribution and redistribution. But absolutely no one tries to ensure efficiency. Indeed, the persistent and extreme focus on equity, orchestrated by the Left, damages both justice and efficiency. We thus have the worst of all worlds, at least where the microeconomics of India is concerned. Indian business has been reduced to a sad Kafkaesque spectacle of political, judicial and bureaucratic oppression.

It is no one's case that equity and justice are not important. Of course they are. But should they come at the cost of efficiency to the extent that prevails in India? I mean why cripple your own racehorses? As that TV news anchor used to say, the nation wants to know. Or at least I do. Maybe you should too.

## Challenges of the post Khamenei era

The US' gameplan is regime change. Finding a regime that gives up the N-programme and anti-US rhetoric will be hard

Sridhar Krishnaswami

**I**t came down to regime change. Negotiations in Geneva and in the Middle East on a nuclear deal with Iran provided a convenient sideshow to carry out a well planned and targeted bombing campaign that claimed the lives of the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, some of his family members and supposedly the elite commanders of the regime.

For a person who built his foreign policy campaign in 2024 and earlier being against nuclear building and regime change and consistently ridiculing past Presidents for their policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Donald Trump did exactly that.

From the beginning Washington's rant about Iran's continuing nuclear plans somehow lacked credibility and for a good reason. In June 2025 Trump had claimed that "Teheran's program had been 'obliterated'" with B2s leveling the facilities in Nantanz and Fordow.

But American intelligence and analysts were far more circumspect of the results; and not too long ago there were reports of Teheran starting to further fortify the perimeters so as to

withstand the bunker busters for a second time. But in the end it all boiled down to a compound and a building in Teheran where the regime's top honchos were meeting.

If the US had said at the beginning that its objective was regime change and preparations to that effect were underway, not many in Iran or elsewhere would have shed tears. After all, here was a regime that had been around for about four decades, known for its brutal crackdowns and repressive laws in the name of religion.

In fact the Trump administration would have been hailed as a hero if it had stepped in when the brutal crackdowns were going on starting this January with an estimated 7,000 killed according to independent observers.

**CHANGE IN OBJECTIVE**  
After starting initially that the curbing of the Iranian nuclear programme was the stated objective, wiping out of Teheran's top leadership seems to be an afterthought.

The taking out of the top leadership is indeed a major blow to the clerics but it sets in motion a process that need not be stabilizing for Iran, the region and the world at large, at least from the



REGIME CHANGE. Elusive goal for US

short-term point of view. From the current posturing the Iranian military has shown a capability to hit targets — however weak it may seem to military analysts — in the Middle East, disrupt air travel and threaten the vital sea lanes in an around the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz.

The proxies of Iran like the Hamas, Hizbollah and Houthis may have been considerably weakened at the pounding received in the Gaza, Lebanon and elsewhere, but by no means a spent force.

Trump knows very well that getting rid of ruthless and unpopular regimes is

easy; but putting in place a viable group or an individual who can command respect is difficult. In the case of Iran, Washington and Tel Aviv have thrown out the clerics without any visible alternatives and hence raising the troublesome spectre of political instability bordering on regional factionalism and violence.

In 1953 the Central Intelligence Agency and the British Intelligence MI-6 conspired to bring down the lawfully elected Mohammad Mosaddegh to get a pliable Shah of Iran who was ousted by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.

Seven American Presidents starting with Jimmy Carter in 1979 have been dealing with Iran and several of them had to deal with the issue of its nuclear program. Teheran's refrain that its nuclear program is strictly for peaceful energy purposes and not for making nuclear weapons has long been dismissed. The question now is whether Washington and the international community can find a regime that can politically survive without a nuclear program and calls for the destruction of Israel.

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

## BELOW THE LINE



Brahmani Nara, Executive Director, Heritage Foods

**Diplomatic response**  
Brahmani Nara, Executive Director, Heritage Foods, during the Fireside Chat in businessline's Fifth Agri and Commodity Summit in New Delhi recently was asked if it was a challenge or opportunity to run her

business given that she is the granddaughter of the late Telugu star and Telugu Desam Founder NT Rama Rao and the daughter-in-law of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu.

She said she was brought up leaving titles outside, thanks to her parents and in-laws. "We are a pan-India company and a national player. We have kept away from politics and have never taken any undue advantage from any government," she said. Heritage Foods's largest procurement is from outside Telangana and Andhra Pradesh and "how does it influence?" She asked. "We run the business with trust. We have been rated among the top 50 F&CG companies in India," she said.

**The West Asian tightrope**

Israel's decision to strike Iran just days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Tel Aviv has placed the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in an uncomfortable position.

Questions are being raised regarding whether New Delhi had any foreknowledge of the impending strikes. The Opposition has criticised the MEA for visiting Israel at a time when military escalation was foreseeable.

The MEA, however, was quick to react, reiterating India's emphasis on respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity. While the MEA's official statement on Saturday did not explicitly criticise the strikes by Israel and the US, nor comment on

Iran's retaliation, it advocated restraint from both sides. It maintained that diplomacy should be pursued to de-escalate tensions and address underlying issues. Given India's long diplomatic and economic ties with Iran, seeking a diplomatic resolution remains the most viable path.

**Weekend AI lessons**  
It looks like AI will soon make C-suites cancel their weekend plans, as the head of a major Indian company said that the group has now started running AI lessons for its senior leadership every Saturday morning. Called AI fusion for CXOs, a few hundred senior team members attend these lessons each weekend to

understand how AI is changing their business. When the push comes from the top, you cannot play truant!

**Photo op with PM!**  
The AI summit maybe over but its reverberations are still being felt. Several senior international leaders who had come for the event are travelling across the country to visit their India offices, meeting colleagues. Most of them praised the steps taken by India to stay ahead in the AI race. However a senior leader of a well known tech giant lamented that a promised interaction with the Prime Minister had 590 people in the room and turned into a mere photo-op. **Our Bureaus**

# The metabolic crisis

A prevention protocol from a metabolic health coach

## BOOK REVIEW.

Gina S Krishnan

Health influencer Karan Sarin, who posts on Instagram as @Sweetreactions, and has 256,000 Followers, started the page focused on metabolic health after two incidents in his family—his father suffered a debilitating heart attack and he lost his brother-in-law at age 49. The posts have now led to this book.

The book is a journey, recounting the quest of a son and brother who wanted to understand the root of the problem that leads to heart disease. The journey of being one of the caregivers to his father led him to becoming a certified metabolic health coach.

The book starts with an introduction to metabolic disorders which have become a silent epidemic and the biggest health crisis affecting our country. According to a major health study published in the *Lancet* in 2023, 101 million people in India are diabetic. 1.36 million are pre-diabetic and a large number remain undiagnosed. Genetic predisposition, along with changing lifestyles has changed the pattern of diseases in India. From being a nation riddled with infectious diseases, now a large part of the country's population is prone to lifestyle diseases.

The opening part of the book explains the myriad factors including genetic ones that leads to insulin resistance. This, according to the author, is the starting point of many diseases, not just diabetes, but also heart ailments, neurological disorders, PCOD and infertility. All this is laid out in simple, easy to understand language.

The next part of the book looks at how to diagnose insulin resistance while the final chapters are prescriptive, providing a playbook to deal with insulin resistance. The playbook rests on three golden pillars—Nutrition, movement and managing sleep and stress.

### SELF EXPERIMENTS

In order to understand metabolic disorder, Sarin has extensively self-experimented with constant glucose monitoring (CGM) to check and test the effect of all kinds of foods on his body. He goes into great detail in explaining the role of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, micro nutrients and how they affect



**Title:** Sick Nation  
**Author:** Karan Sarin  
**Publisher:** Wyzr Content  
**Price:** ₹599

insulin resistance. He tells you about how the hidden sugars in everyday meals. He has given clear logical and science-backed guidance for a vegetarian diet. Interestingly, he advocates eating fat for he says fat is the first required to burn carbohydrates. His chart on Glucose Response Hierarchy is simple but gives adequate guidance to anyone looking for information at a glance.

For years, the Indian system of medicine has looked at food as medicine but over the years, our food has changed, our food habits have changed and so has the makeup of food. Take what for example, dwarf wheat developed by Norman Borlaug has replaced almost all traditional wheat and through constant breeding has a higher content of starch and is high in a compound called amylopectin, a compound which gets digested quickly and causes sugar spike. At the same time traditional grains like Bajra and Jau have been replaced.

Sarin makes a case for daily movement, starting with walking 15 minutes after having a meal, using non exercise activity thermogenesis—standing while talking on the phone for instance, or choosing stairs over elevators. He advocates resistance training and aerobic activity like dance, yoga, walking and cycling for heart health. Sleep and stress management is one of the most significant pillars to good health.

The last chapter has the protocols written in simple terms for taking charge of your health and getting yourself out of the spiral that is insulin resistance. All in all, it is a well written, well researched book by an author who has learnt by literally living by what he preaches.

The reviewer is an independent journalist who has been tracking the healthcare sector

# Women, drivers of Tier-2 dynamism

The author documents how women entrepreneurs from beyond the metros are redrawing India's economic map

## BOOK REVIEW.

Monica Jasuja

When a dentist in Amritsar casually says she also manages a gas station, it means something that normal economic data doesn't show. Shinjini Kumar's *Busy Women: Building Commerce and Culture in Middle India* tells the stories of women entrepreneurs in 30 tier-2 cities in India. After 30 years in finance including at the RBI, she spent three years mapping how women in "middle India" start enterprises. Her discovery challenges conventional inequality narratives: although India's economic middle has shrunk, tier-2 cities are creating entrepreneurial vigour that traditional measures miss. Anyone interested in India's economic opportunities—especially those who are building for middle and mass markets—should read this book.

Shinjini's link to "middle" spaces—cities, institutions, and economic classes—shapes the book's core argument. After 30 years of liberalisation, consumption is split between luxury items and volume commodities. The narrative veered between billionaires and MGNREGA payments, missing what was happening in the middle. Shinjini explores businesses in 30 cities between India's metros and rural areas, finding that understanding how women navigate constraints in these places unlocks entrepreneurial patterns.

### HOW WOMEN MOVE

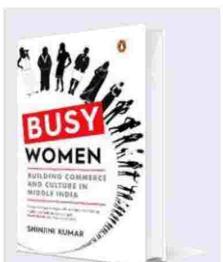
In her first chapter, "Women, Money, and Cities", she explains how women in tier-2 India participate differently. Men move for work, following job openings

and networks. Women move for marriage without connections, confined by the "tethered cow" phenomenon limiting independence within families.

I was really interested in the Amritsar chapter. Despite annual pilgrimages to this sacred city, the chapter revealed overlooked dynamics about why physical and social infrastructure matter more than we think. Wide roads and family-supported women entrepreneurs signal wealth, but digital and physical infrastructure has enabled women's economic participation in ways unimaginable a generation ago.

Shruti Khurana's journey is revealing. From an IAS aspirant, she went on to start a hospitality business. She got married young and turned the family farmhouse into a weekend café. Elgin Café's success in September 2020 turned a passion into a real business, and by 2023, she had expanded to four locations. Or take Himani Arora who pivoted from biochemistry to fashion design after returning from the US. Dr. Simarpreet Sandhu runs a gas station and a hospital with Punjab's first radiation machine. The environment actively encourages this kind of diversity. What makes Amritsar stand out is the obvious support from families and the wealthy base of educational institutions that churn out women professionals. The city doesn't have as many factories as nearby industrial hubs, but entrepreneurs may use networks like Phulkari, which is a platform for women business owners. This is a distinct kind of infrastructure—social capital that helps women who have lost professional networks post marriage.

Amritsar is just one stop on Shinjini's 30-city journey, where family businesses thrive. Manufacturing drives Coimbatore. Patna and Varanasi face different struggles entirely. What works in one place fails in another because



**Title:** Busy Women: Building Commerce and Culture in Middle India  
**Author:** Shinjini Kumar  
**Publisher:** Penguin Business  
**Price:** ₹473

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shinjini Kumar has three decades of experience in Indian financial services, with stints in RBI, being the first CEO of Paytm Payments Bank, leading Citibank's consumer business in India and co-founding @mysaltapp

history, industrial roots, and who-you-know networks shape everything—patterns GDP numbers completely miss.

Shinjini's in-depth, city-by-city documentation shows these differences that econometric models group into broad categories.

The book further reveals what

aggregate data conceals well. National data indicate that fewer women are working, but more tier-2 women are choosing to work for themselves instead of taking up traditional jobs.

Conversations on infrastructure usually revolve around roads and airports. They don't talk about how family structures, digital payments, and physical mobility come together to create commercial opportunities.

Shinjini writes that her late mother encouraged her to be "interesting, not boring", and the end of the book does precisely that. Her writing is a mix of data-driven analysis and humorous moments, which makes it easy to understand complicated economic patterns.

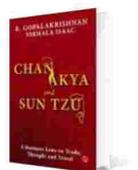
But the most essential thing is to show politicians how to look beyond the numbers. It is not just Bengaluru's IT parks or Mumbai's financial district that drive India's economic growth. Most economic studies don't look at these hundreds of stories from 30 towns.

The book asks important questions regarding how we measure success in the economy. GDP growth counts the money that happens make, but it doesn't count the social capital that makes these kinds of businesses possible. Statistics on employment count women who leave corporate positions as dropouts, not as entrepreneurs who create new jobs. Financial inclusion measures keep track of bank accounts, but they don't check to see if women really have influence over the money that goes through them.

Shinjini's documentation shows the need for improved frameworks to comprehend tier-2 economic dynamism. We'll keep overlooking how the middle is genuinely growing unless policymakers see this India.

The reviewer is a recognised global voice on how money moves digitally

## NEW READS.



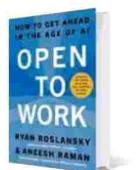
**Title:** Chanakya and Sun Tzu  
**Authors:** R Gopalakrishnan, Nirmala Isaac  
**Publisher:** Rupa Publications

An insightful guide for business leaders, policymakers on strategy and civilizational wisdom



**Title:** A Fire Over Mount Everest  
**Author:** Siddharth Kak  
**Publisher:** Penguin Random House

An extraordinary account of Bachendri Pal's historic 1984 Everest Expedition, alongside four other climbers



**Title:** Open to Work  
**Authors:** Ryan Roslansky, Aneesh Raman  
**Publisher:** HarperCollins India

Both a roadmap and a rallying cry, this book delivers an urgent truth: Change is coming. Will you harness it or let it overtake you?

## thehindu businessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 2, 2006

#### India, US to focus on bilateral trade

During the visit of the US President, Mr George W. Bush, India and the US are likely to announce several new initiatives aimed at boosting bilateral trade in the next three years. Ahead of Mr George Bush's visit, the two sides have also resolved the long-pending dispute over India getting entry into the US market.

#### GST may be set at 14-16 pc: Chidambaram

The Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, on Wednesday hinted that the resting point for the proposed national level Goods and Services Tax (GST) would be between 14 and 16 per cent.

#### No uranium supplies from Australia

Whether India is able to do a deal with the US this week during the Bush visit and get international sanctions lifted on its nuclear energy programme, Australia will not be supplying natural uranium to fuel Indian reactors. Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Alexander Downer, told visiting Indian journalists here today that as long as India did not sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, it would not be able to supply uranium.

## Short take

# Gender-intelligent care: A shift in women's health

Preetha Reddy

March 8, International Women's Day, is marked as a celebration, but at its heart it is something quieter and more meaningful. It is a moment to pause and truly see women in the fullness of their lives, to recognise not only what they achieve, but what they carry each day, often without pause or acknowledgement.

We must reflect on whether the systems around women respond with the same thoughtfulness that they extend to others.

This reflection feels especially relevant, as a gentle but meaningful shift is becoming visible across societies.

Women are beginning to speak more openly about their health, their bodies, and the transitions that shape their lives.

For a long time, especially in India, many women learned to be quiet about their health.

They adapted and endured, often placing their own wellbeing behind family, work, and responsibility.

Alongside, for decades now, women's health was addressed in fragments.

Pregnancy was treated as a defined chapter. Menopause was often left unexplored. Chronic illness was managed in isolation from the social context in which women live. When care is organised in silos, it struggles to meet women where they truly are. This moment calls for a more integrated and

compassionate approach. Encouragingly, the tools to enable such care are now within reach.

Advances in artificial intelligence and digital health allow us to anticipate risk and personalise care with greater sensitivity and precision.

Early engagement plays a vital role in this shift. Preventive screening becomes an act of self-respect rather than fear.

Regular health checks allow risks to be identified quietly, often long before symptoms appear, offering reassurance instead of anxiety.

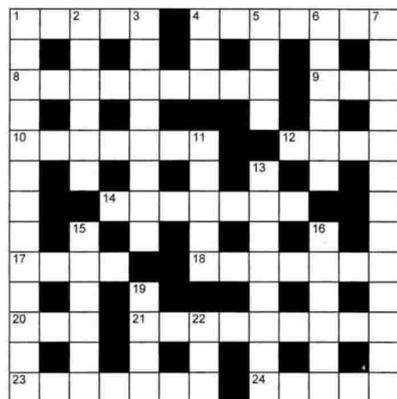
In India, this conversation carries special resonance. Women form the backbone of families, workplaces, and communities. When women are healthier, families are stronger and

societies more resilient. Recognising this is not simply an expression of empathy. It is an investment in our shared future.

At its core, gender-intelligent care begins with a shift in perspective. It asks us to see women not as a sequence of diagnoses or isolated life stages, but as whole individuals whose needs evolve over time. It calls for care that anticipates risk, preserves dignity, and offers continuity rather than episodic intervention. Gender-intelligent care is not a distant aspiration. It is the work of this moment, and it is how we must truly honour the women.

The writer is Executive Vice Chairperson, Apollo Hospitals Enterprise Ltd

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2627



### EASY

- ACROSS**
- Gambled; cut into cubes (5)
  - Wharf- or street-post (7)
  - A working party (4-5)
  - Repeat (mus) (3)
  - Depending on (7)
  - A stumble (4)
  - Of pottery art (7)
  - Malaria; a shivering fit (4)
  - Two-wheeled conveyance towed (7)
  - Writing, printing medium (3)
  - State in which things exist (9)
  - Saint's day, after whom one is named (4-3)
  - Prod with elbow (5)

- DOWN**
- Resoluteness (13)
  - Chess rook (6)
  - Reduced from blown-up state (8)
  - A pound, sovereign (3)
  - Welsh emblem (4)
  - Reddish brown (6)
  - Fact of vanishing (13)
  - A stroke, touch, a characteristic (5)
  - Official recognition of achievement (8)
  - Humbly, claptrap (6)
  - Joined in friendship (6)
  - Sour (4)
  - A denial, a vote against (3)

### NOT SO EASY

- ACROSS**
- Did some gambling on the chopping-board? (5)
  - Post in street of rod and ball construction (7)
  - Some of the soldiers have a special job made up of rackets (4-5)
  - Instruction to repeat first booking is to follow (3)
  - Has to depend on it: learn how to adapt (7)
  - Lose one's footing on the journey (4)
  - A crime involving first criticism of the potter's art (7)
  - The French keep such fever at a distance (4)
  - A taste of film to come in the caravan (7)
  - What printer uses in certain knowledge (3)
  - It's a prerequisite for the state (9)
  - When the Saint one is called for comes up in the calendar (4-3)
  - Prod dugout in the Northeast (5)

- DOWN**
- Resolution made me tired of turning to the country (13)
  - Chess man otherwise known as a bird (6)
  - Ineed an apartment may have one feeling low (8)
  - Don't allow one a place to get a drink (3)
  - Make elephant upset, swallowing vegetable (4)
  - To the French, a stream of hair colouring (6)
  - A paper dance is arranged at which one ceases to exist (13)
  - Characteristic of one in putting 19 up (5)
  - A mention in dispatches for action it carried out (8)
  - Sort of bed starts under mattress - that's claptrap (6)
  - Having kinship with fifty in ideal form (6)
  - It bites up some of the medication (4)
  - Vote against it making the sound a horse makes (3)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2626

**ACROSS** 2. Clamp 5. Tack 7. Wood 8. Pretence 9. Monsieur 11. When 12. Resuscitation 15. Flaw 17. Macerate 19. Constant 21. Bean 22. Used 23. Tarry  
**DOWN** 1. Provoke 2. Cud 3. Apple 4. Pierrot 5. Toe 6. Cache 10. Squaw 11. Water 13. Compact 14. Outrage 16. Lions 18. Cater 20. Sad 21. Bay



## A new beginning

New GDP series has improved the scope of estimation

The data from the much-awaited new series for gross domestic product (GDP), released last week by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (Mospi), shows that the Indian economy is projected to grow 7.6 per cent this financial year. The first advance estimate, based on the old series, had calculated the rate to be 7.4 per cent. The data also showed the economy expanded by 7.8 per cent in the September-December quarter. The new series has improved the growth estimate for FY25 to 7.1 per cent from 6.5 per cent in terms of the old series. However, the rate for FY24 has been lowered by a sharp 2 percentage points to 7.2 per cent. Further, the size of the economy in nominal terms has been calculated to be ₹345.47 trillion this financial year, compared to ₹357.13 trillion in the first advance estimate, which was also used for Budget calculations. This difference is a bit surprising. Given the improved methodology and expanded data sources, analysts expected an increase.

Besides changing the base year to 2022-23, several elements have been introduced in the new series. For instance, the functions of multi-activity enterprises have been segregated, which will provide a clearer picture. The coverage of the unincorporated sector has been expanded through the use of survey data. The ministry has also used double deflation in agriculture and manufacturing. This addresses a big criticism of India's national accounts. The data on goods and services tax is also being used extensively. To address the discrepancies, which were another weak point in India's national accounts, the ministry has adopted the supply-and-use table framework to minimise it.

However, despite the improvement in the overall framework, arguably, there is still work to be done. For instance, economists have long argued that India needs a producer price index, which would help provide a more accurate measure of the difference between nominal and real GDP. Furthermore, while the ministry is now using survey data for the unincorporated sector, the surveys themselves may have shortcomings due to dated economic census data. Other survey data may also have similar issues because the Census has been delayed. Be that as it may, it is worth noting that the new GDP series, together with the recently released consumer price index, will substantially improve data quality and enable stakeholders to make more informed decisions.

The launch of a new series also provides an opportunity to discuss some of the structural challenges India is facing. For instance, in the sectoral composition, the share of manufacturing has improved marginally to 13.3 per cent. If the Indian economy is to grow at higher rates in the medium to long term and create employment for its rising workforce, the contribution of manufacturing needs to substantially increase. The government has been aiming to push the share of manufacturing to 25 per cent of GDP for many years, but things are not moving in the desired way. On the fiscal front, the reduction in the size of GDP will marginally increase the fiscal deficit as a percentage of GDP to 4.5 per cent this year. However, as economists have underscored, this will make achieving the debt-to-GDP target of 50 (+/-) 1 per cent by FY31 more difficult.

## Prepare for impact

US-Israeli attack on Iran threatens global stability

The combat operations launched by the United States (US) and Israel on Iran have added multiple ominous imponderables to stability in West Asia. The ostensible cause, according to US President Donald Trump, was to end an "unending campaign of bloodshed" that threatened the US. Starting just two days after US-Israel talks over Tehran's nuclear programme ended inconclusively, the justification does not appear credible. The US is over 10,000 km away, out of the striking distance of Iran's arsenal of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. Second, the US claimed to have "obliterated" Iran's nuclear programme by bombing its three facilities in an operation called "Operation Midnight Hammer" in June last year, which raises questions about the need for another round of attacks.

Nor have immediate political objectives been met. The attempt to decapitate the regime by assassinating Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has not caused Tehran to capitulate. Instead, the regime has retaliated by firing drones and ballistic missiles at Israel and Arab neighbours that host US bases, such as Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The cycle of debilitating military strikes is unlikely to guarantee a quick victory without committing boots on the ground, a situation that has historically not favoured the US. Nuclear-armed Israel's constant quest for unquestioned superiority in the region may also rebound on it. The surprise attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, undermined the capabilities of weakened and disaffected enemies to wage prolonged asymmetric warfare. The near annihilation of Gaza and the destruction of Hamas' top leadership with overwhelming force, in line with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's objectives, has not brought peace and security for Israelis. Instead, there are credible signs that the Iran-sponsored group is reorganising itself. The threat of Iran activating sleeper cells around the world (including in the US) for retaliatory action cannot be ruled out. For the Arab states, which have condemned Iranian strikes on their countries, prolonged warfare threatens the entire economic model supporting the region's prosperity. Their ability to attract global capital and financial flows has long been predicated on the promise of political stability delivered by authoritarian regimes.

Iran moves to close the Strait of Hormuz, which carries roughly one-fourth of global oil shipments, and the world braces itself for a spike in oil prices, the wider geopolitical implications of Operation Epic Fury and Operation Lion's Roar are yet to play out. No European ally participated in the attacks, although several have called for Iran to show restraint. Alarm bells are sounding in Moscow, a defence ally, and China, a major buyer of Iranian oil. For India, which sources almost 40 per cent of its oil from West Asia and has nine million citizens in the region, the US-Israeli attack has complicated both the economic assumptions of the recent Budget and geopolitical equations in the region. Occurring less than two days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel, marked by a significant upgrade of the partnership, the optics and timing appear unfortunate. The need for the belligerents to return to the negotiating table, as New Delhi has urged, has never been more urgent.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

## Change, not death, for Indian IT/ITES

Big transformations are required in adapting to the AI revolution

The export of information technology (IT) and IT-enabled services (ITES) stands as a defining triumph of modern Indian economic history. It is the principal domain where India has achieved global competitiveness at scale. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has generated a narrative of decline. There is fear that AI will hollow out the Indian IT/ITES sector.

What has happened thus far in the data? In the September 2025 quarter, the gross inflow for "other business services" was \$29.5 billion, a strong increase from \$25 billion in the corresponding quarter a year earlier. For IT services, the gross inflow in the September 2025 quarter reached \$50.4 billion, a strong increase from \$44.7 billion a year earlier. Okay, but let's look into the future and wonder how things might change.

Much of the current anxiety stems from demonstrations of engineers rapidly building complex systems using AI tools. There is a tendency to extrapolate these localised successes into a macroeconomic upheaval. A distinction must be drawn between technology demonstrations and functional enterprise systems. Large organisations operate with immense friction. Enterprise users do not like to disrupt working systems and established contracts. When J.P. Morgan deploys AI, perhaps it will send more work to Tata Consultancy Services. At a deeper level, the construction of a software system is a process of knowledge creation. We learn how a system works through the toil of building it. When an AI system generates the code, the requisite knowledge creation in the mind of the human author is bypassed. This creates technical debt and cognitive

debt. Such systems become brittle. When they fail, the human operator lacks the mental model required to repair them. High volumes of effort are required to debug and modify these kinds of systems. The proliferation of an AI-generated code might actually generate a lot of maintenance and remediation work for Indian software engineers.

Indian IT firms are not uniform entities. Specialised companies, such as Persistent or KPIT, have constructed moats based on deep domain knowledge and long-standing customer relationships.

This embedded knowledge allows them to adapt AI technologies to specific verticals. A general purpose AI cannot easily replicate the specialised workflows of the global automotive industry that a firm like KPIT understands.

Consider the large incumbents like Infosys. These corporations are embedded deep in the operations of global enterprises. They manage the complex, hungry, and voracious plumbing of the Fort 500. A frontier AI company in California cannot easily dislodge this infrastructure. If anything, the market dynamics run in the opposite direction. Frontier AI firms require distribution. To achieve daily revenues from token sales, they need adoption at global enterprises, and the path to this could run through Indian IT giants, Indian ITES operations, and Indian global capability centres (GCCs), which actually run the enterprise IT of the global giants.

This industry has navigated numerous technological regime changes since the late 1980s. Through client-server architectures, the internet boom, and cloud computing, the underlying constant has re-



**SNAKES & LADDERS**  
AJAY SHAH

run in the opposite direction. Frontier AI firms require distribution. To achieve daily revenues from token sales, they need adoption at global enterprises, and the path to this could run through Indian IT giants, Indian ITES operations, and Indian global capability centres (GCCs), which actually run the enterprise IT of the global giants.

## Liveable cities need a new model

Cry for my Delhi. This is my city: My family records many generations who have lived here. It is also where I have spent most of my professional career advocating clean air, water, and everything else that we need for basic well-being.

We have garbage everywhere; potholes alongside no traffic discipline, with congestion, illegal buildings, and parking woes, which add to the chaos of road management. Our water supply is struggling to keep up with demand; the Yamuna is a forsaken river, and has become a receptacle of sewage instead; and of course, the now infamous unbreathable air. I could go on, but all residents of Delhi know what we are living through.

So, we need to ask the complete, visible, and much-discussed breakdown of urban services that we are witnessing today can be reversed, or if the blight has gone too far, I ask this not to crib about collapsed infrastructure but to ensure that we learn from this experience and do not create another Delhi in India. In other words, we ensure that middle-India cities do not become mega messes as they grow — even implode.

This is important. We know that urbanisation will drive the white-collar economy. Today, with the pressures of immigration in the Western world, there is a huge opportunity for young, skilled workers to flourish in India. But they need more than money — they need quality of life for themselves and their children. It is not just about malls, restaurants, and nightlife, but about the basics: Clean water, clean air, education, and housing intact and retain talent. It is about liveable cities. To make this work, we must understand what not

to do. The population data for cities is outdated, and planning still depends on the 2011 Census. Yet, we can see the implosion as cities expand into their peripheries. Over two decades ago, at the turn of the millennium, Gurugram sprang up on Delhi's outskirts. Today, urban extension spreads laterally for miles and grows every day. Smaller towns are becoming big but without planning or services. This is the challenge.

What should be done? First: Cities must plan for mobility, not just roads. This is the key as moving people is linked to affordable housing and livelihoods. As cities grow and land prices rise, many cannot afford to buy homes. This then means that the poor — critical to the city's services sector — look for living in what are euphemistically called "unauthorised" areas, or slums. The tragedy is that in many cases, these lands are the key for the city's environment, like green areas or catchments of waterbodies. The commute from the periphery, where housing may be cheaper, is either unavailable or just out of reach. The middle class also moves outwards, relying on private transport, which then adds to congestion. The city loses in every way.

As cities grow, the most important component of planning, its "spine", should be transportation — to connect the periphery and enable movement within the city. People should be able to walk, cycle, take buses or the Metro, and, only if necessary, use a car. A modern city should not resemble a gridlocked Delhi or Bengaluru. Then, there is a need for other basic services as well, from education to health care to clean water. These will drive the livability quotient.

remained unchanged: The global economy has a thirst for skilled, inexpensive intellectual capability. The AI revolution does not alter this fundamental arbitrage. Yes, of course, a lot will have to change in India, but this is a clever community that has ridden many a transformation before.

It is important to maintain perspective on the situation. Indian IT currently accounts for roughly 2 per cent of global IT market capitalisation. We must not overstate the size of the incumbent. In a turbulent global environment, there is ample headroom for expansion.

There is a genuine technological revolution afoot. We should not get crushed into gloom, thinking there is no future for Indian IT/ITES-enabled services/GCCs. We do need to think in rather new ways insofar as business strategy, the board, the top management, and the approach to finance are concerned.

For boards, the historical business model was straightforward. It relied on linear headcount expansion and long-term, annuity-style cash flows. That equilibrium is broken. The Indian IT industry that emerges over the next decade will look structurally different. It is the job of the board to engage in thinking out strategy that induces a successful transition out of the present comfortable ways.

The future is characterised by uncertainty. Firm leadership must vigorously explore a wide frontier of possibilities. Enterprise customers may demand small, private language models trained and operated by Indian vendors. Indian software firms may form joint ventures with AI laboratories to implement technology for enterprise clients. Specialised firms might partner deeply within their domains to create proprietary products. We may see a division of labour where Indian firms build the AI generators and also operate the human-in-the-loop checking mechanisms. Perhaps this technological shock may catalyse a new breed of global product companies emerging from India.

Coping with this uncertainty by developing a portfolio of bets and taking risk requires new kinds of corporate governance. The organisational DNA of traditional IT firms prioritises stability, process adherence, and reliability. The new environment requires innovation, experimentation, and an appetite for risk. Navigating this shift will require a cultural change in the board and in the senior management.

From the point of view of investment and corporate finance, big changes are required. Historically, Indian IT firms have exhibited the financial characteristics of stable utilities. There was a bias toward distributing cash to shareholders rather than reinvesting it in research and development. This strategy of capital allocation must change. The financial system must transition from pricing these firms as low-risk utilities to valuing them as complex, adaptive, technology integrators.

Management teams must alter how they communicate with capital markets. Boards must show their portfolio of technological bets to the financial system, outlining the risk of their AI investment and its potential return.

The world will always want intellectual capability. The constraint on growth is not the capability of algorithms but the availability of human ingenuity. The task for India is to double down on producing, owning, and growing intellectual capital, in the emergence of a firm culture of knowledge and innovation.

The author is a researcher at the XKDR Forum



**DOWN TO EARTH**  
SUNITA NARAIN

relying on private transport, which then adds to congestion. The city loses in every way. As cities grow, the most important component of planning, its "spine", should be transportation — to connect the periphery and enable movement within the city. People should be able to walk, cycle, take buses or the Metro, and, only if necessary, use a car. A modern city should not resemble a gridlocked Delhi or Bengaluru. Then, there is a need for other basic services as well, from education to health care to clean water. These will drive the livability quotient.

But nothing is as important as the enforcement of the master plan. Delhi's master plan is outdated and, worse, it is practised more in the breach. Most cities in India, and certainly the ones that are growing, do not even have the semblance of a land-use plan, which is then available publicly so that people know what is permitted and what is not. Transparency is the first step to deterrence. The chaos, deliberately born out of this confusion, is visible in Delhi, where illegal encroachments take over roads and public investment in infrastructure is lost.

The new-gen city needs management, not populism, which leads to anarchy. This is where the rubber meets the road. We need affordable models of urbanisation, but these will not emerge from permitting everything that is illegal in the name of protecting livelihoods. This will only guarantee chaos and poor services.

The bottom line is to focus on the nature of urban governance. We have completely discordant city-government systems, where representatives are elected and then disabled. They then play with everything that is lucrative, adding to disorder. It is ironic that New Delhi, where the power elite lives, has decided that democracy does not work for it — an authority of officials runs the city. This is fast becoming a model for other newly growing cities. What, then, is best?

This is the question that will determine our economic future — nothing less. The nature of urbanisation must be resource-efficient, inclusive, and capable of ensuring livelihood security and all that makes life worth living — from clean water and clean air to playgrounds and schools. Let's discard the Delhi-style city dreams of the past. Let's embrace the future.

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## Women journalists on the frontlines



JENNIFER SZALAI

World War II had ended, and Martha Gellhorn had changed. Not yet 40, she was already known as a formidable American journalist who had written dispatches from some of the world's most dangerous places: Madrid during the Spanish Civil War, Omaha Beach on D-Day. In 1945, she witnessed the liberation of Dachau, leaving just days before Germany's unconditional surrender.

What she saw in Dachau taught her the reality of war. "A darkness entered my spirit," Gellhorn told a friend. She moved to Mexico, where she found a house and paid for renovations with

her "literary whoring," as she put it. Her "bilgers" — short, delectable fiction about low-stakes dramas that sold easily to magazines — had her "laughing like a goat."

Gellhorn said she missed reporting but hated "writing journalism." She would later describe Dachau as the moment when she stopped being young — though growing older meant knowing not more, but arguably less. "It is as if I walked into Dachau and there fell over a cliff and suffered a lifelong concussion." Gellhorn's crisis is just one of many arresting moments in *Starry and Restless*, Julia Cooke's vibrant triple biography of Gellhorn, Rebecca West and Emily "Mickey" Hahn, who served as a China correspondent for *The New Yorker*.

West and Hahn became close; each crossed paths with Gellhorn. *Starry and Restless* traces their lives during the consequential period between the 1930s and the 1950s, when they flourished as journalists who habitually rejected the conventions of cold objectivity in favour of a memorable first-person point of view.

West, born in 1892, was the oldest of the bunch. Cooke introduces her in 1936 on her first trip to Yugoslavia. She intended to write a "snap book" about the place, something short and impressionistic. The project ballooned into a "wretched, complicated book that won't interest anybody," she told a friend. West submitted the final manuscript around the time that Germany's bombing of London had forced publishing companies to ration paper. But her editors pushed forward with the 1,100 pages of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. She went on to cover the Nuremberg trials for *The New Yorker* and *The Daily Telegraph*.

We meet Gellhorn in 1937, just after she made her way to Spain on her own dime by writing an article for *Vogue* titled "Beauty problems of the Middle-Aged Woman." (She was 28.) Cooke inevitably has to discuss Gellhorn's affair with Ernest Hemingway, whom she would later marry and divorce. But it's Gellhorn's relationship with her work and the world around her that interests

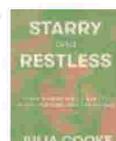
Cooke most. "Her articles hinged on the contrast of domesticity and war, sociability and war, safety and war, routine and war," Cooke writes. Against ideology and annihilation Gellhorn foregrounded the tangibility of human existence: "Martha's prose was populated with soldiers, wives and babies; decorated with wallpaper and shards of shattered soup tureens in wrecked buildings."

Hahn is the writer readers may know least about, and Cooke does a marvellous job of conveying her talent as well as her cunning. Hahn liked to say that she had an "unfashionably happy" childhood in the Midwest as the fifth of six children. By the time she moved to Shanghai, she was already the author of two novels and two nonfiction books. She cultivated a mystique, entering a long-running affair with a married Chinese man and swanning around town with a pet gibbon perched on her shoulder.

All three women wrote fiction in addition to their journalism, which

sometimes blurred the lines to the point of confusion. After Gellhorn wrote a short story about two travellers in the American South observing a lynching, a British magazine published it as fact — leading to an invitation to testify before the Senate. Hahn, for her part, wrote two dozen pieces about "Mr. Pan" for *The New Yorker*. This man was based on her Chinese beau, though whether the portraits were fact or fiction "was left alluringly unclear."

Fiction offered a freedom to explore a range of circumstances and emotions. Cooke, whose previous book was about the stewardesses of Pan Am, writes with a similar verve and expansiveness, immersing herself in her characters' perspectives, even as she sticks responsibly to the biographical record. She presents each complicated life with such moving specificity — West's ruthlessness, Hahn's opium addiction, all three women's difficult relationships with



**STARRY AND RESTLESS: Three Women Who Changed World**  
by Julia Cooke  
Published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux  
433 pages \$32

their children — that it's curious to see her end the book by plucking out a few prosaic themes: "the caliber of their writing," "the persistence of their travels," "their acquaintance with one another."

Apparently the cultural imperative to wrest salutory lessons, even from the most audacious and defiant women, is strong: "Maybe they offer a new compass by which a person may orient herself within her own choices." Maybe, or maybe the idiosyncratic lives of these preening writers invite a simpler, but no less significant, proposal: Read this book and be enthralled. As West said of her own approach to telling a story, "Again and again I broke sentences and relaxed tension to get the lethargic attention of the ordinary reader along the road."

The reviewer is the nonfiction book critic for *The Times*.  
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OUR VIEW



# Our reset GDP statistics pack in some good news

The most heartening takeaway from India's new GDP estimates is a shift they reveal in the structural composition of growth. Manufacturing-sector output now leads from the front

Revised estimates of India's gross domestic product (GDP) released on Friday by the statistics ministry show a slightly smaller output pie than previously estimated, but testify to the Indian economy's resilience. The new GDP series with 2022-23 as its base year pegs growth in 2025-26 at 7.6%, higher than 7.4% estimated under the old series with base year 2011-12. The slowdown of 2024-25 also turns out far milder, with GDP expansion slowing to 7.1% from 9.2% the year before, instead of 6.5% from 9.2%. As for this fiscal year, growth in the third quarter ended December is now placed at 7.8%, a robust rate given how US tariffs began to kick in harder. Our growth impulses have been intact—and impressive. The most heartening takeaway, though, is a shift revealed in the structural composition of this momentum. The manufacturing sector now leads from the front. It has long been a laggard, but recorded a double-digit pace in 2023-24 and is seen on course to do so again this year. Some of this, doubtless, is the effect of reduced proxy use to estimate the informal sector's output, as the ministry now has a tracker in its Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises for a relatively direct data feed for estimation. But some of it can plausibly be explained by the improved use of deflators to adjust for inflation and get a closer fix on value added in the factory sector.

As a note with this new data series makes clear, changes wrought by a base-year update differ significantly from regular revisions in National Accounts. Globally, the latter "are made only on the basis of updated data becoming available without making any changes in the conceptual framework or using

any new data source, to ensure strict comparison over years." In contrast, base-year resets include an overhaul of the country's output gauge to "capture structural changes in the economy, incorporate latest data sources, improve estimation methodologies and enhance coverage and accuracy." A proper analysis of trends over a longer haul awaits the release of 'back-series' data on earlier years, rather than just the three starting with 2023-24 released by the ministry. But with average GDP growth marking three dots on a trot at clips above 7%, the latest *Economic Survey's* conjecture on India's potential growth rate having risen half a percentage point from 6.5% earlier does not seem misplaced.

The note lists several key improvements in the New GDP Series, two of which stand out. First, sharper coverage of our vast informal sector, thanks to survey inputs, is a clear plus; especially in the context of a statistical haze over how K-shaped our covid recovery may or may not have been. Second, to adjust for inflation, 'double deflation' of current values has been deployed in the farm and factory sectors (while other estimation methods are used elsewhere). The use of separate 'deflators' for output and inputs helps us avoid distortions of value addition caused by price volatility in such raw materials as oil or metals. However, the absence of a proper producer price index forces us to fall back on data from an outdated wholesale price index (base 2011-12), an anomaly that should be fixed once this index is rebased (as our retail price index recently was). Even so, together with increased items in the deflator basket, we can expect greater stability in India's growth numbers—with less 'statistical noise'—to pave the way for better-informed policy.

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

The fear of artificial intelligence (AI) is rampant now that it appears to be a matter of decorum to admit to his fear. People keep telling me AI is coming and that I should be scared. I'm very open to being scared, which I've always thought is a reasonable way of surviving life, but somehow I am not, and I have tried to understand why.

Also, I don't know what exactly I should be scared of, because there are two distinct fears. One is of the end of the world. Earlier, people used to speak of lethal smart machines, but now they say that dumb machines can destroy the world—and not only through weapons, as a collection of tech luminaries feared just a few years ago in a signed petition. It is also what AI can do in terms of havoc in day-to-day life. The other fear is of professional obsolescence. I'm not scared of this either. My indifference to the AI mania is rooted in where manias come from and how they spread, a theory about influence.

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The second force that spreads fear is anxiety. Excessive anxiety is a common mental ailment. It doesn't seem like a disorder, because anxious people are often functional and even accomplished, which is exactly why anxiety spreads so fast in society. Some of the most influential people have it and transmit it efficiently. In the spread of the fear of AI, there is that seed of anxiety. People have short memories, so they don't remember that when OpenAI was first gathering hype, people feared it was having random conversations with them to influence them. The *New York Times* even ran a report where the writer feared a chatbot was trying to end his marriage. With the convenience of hind-

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THEIR VIEW

# Act in favour of homebuyers left in the lurch by property builders

India's Supreme Court has laid out the principle of protecting home investments. Follow it through



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hire financial and legal experts in addition to the company's existing management team under insolvency.

The RP is a key person in the insolvency process with a mandate to resolve a housing project. The current practice of institutional financial creditors proposing the appointment of RP can create conflicts of interest and distortions if there is collusion with the corporate debtor. Hence, the authority to appoint an RP should rest with the IBB, which may also receive recommendations from financial creditors.

Further, an RP should not be allowed to handle more than two projects at a time. According to data published on the website of one state Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA) that we reviewed, as of 22 February, only four RPs were handling 66% (86 out of 282) of all projects under litigation at the National Company Law Tribunal. They each had 90, 41, 31 and 24 projects, respectively. The question is whether one RP can effectively handle so many projects. IBB, which regulates RPs, including their authorization, should prevent concentration.

Currently, an RP remains in charge of a project even after that authorization is suspended. This is so even in cases of misconduct: the IBB should be empowered to initiate their removal from existing projects in such cases. Finally, since RPs discharge important public functions, insolvency regulations should designate them as public servants to promote accountability. As of now, their status is unclear. The Madras high court has held that an RP is a public servant, while the Delhi high court has held a contrary view.

While publication of accounts is mandatory for publicly-listed companies, private limited companies need not do so, enabling private real estate companies to avoid disclosure and transparency. Further, unlike shareholders, flat aspirants who fund the project do not even receive an electronic copy of the builder's financial statements. Thus,

homebuyers are in the dark about the firm's operational effectiveness and efficacy until insolvency is declared.

Therefore, real estate companies (RECs) should also be declared as 'public interest entities' (PIEs) under the Companies Act, given the public interest involved, and RERA should track their disclosures. This will ensure transparency of their operations.

The Supreme Court has already underscored the importance of red flags as a preventive measure. Analysis of the MCA-21 database, which is a repository of corporate information maintained by the ministry of corporate affairs, can raise red flags for preventive action. The data should be analysed in real time, using advanced analytical tools and artificial intelligence. An institutional mechanism for identifying red flags can be an important measure to prevent corporate malfeasance and enable swift course correction.

Following a spate of frauds and insolvencies, in August 2020 China adopted a Three Red Lines Policy to prevent excessive debt accumulation in the real estate sector and reduce financial risks. India should develop its own policy based on domestic and international experience and harness the MCA-21 database for identifying red flags.

The law applies strict 'fit and proper' criteria for the appointment of directors of deposit-taking institutions such as banks. As housing projects are akin to collective investment schemes, agencies like RERA should review the 'fit and proper' status of the boards of insolvent builders to determine whether they remain fit and proper to oversee public interest entities in the future.

The development of real estate, especially housing, is essential for a prospering society. It also contributes significantly to economic growth. This broad sector, related industries included, can contribute up to 20% to India's GDP annually. And we cannot be a developed nation without an adequate housing stock.

10 YEARS AGO

JUST A THOUGHT

Technology is neither good nor bad. Nor is it neutral.

MELVIN KRANZBERG

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

# Why one should not be afraid of artificial intelligence

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

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THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# India's innovation gap shows up in the financial data of our firms

Corporate India must recognize R&D as the foundation of long-term competitiveness before we can hope for breakthroughs



**SAUMITRA BHADURI**  
is professor, Madras School of Economics



ISTOCKPHOTO

**T**echnological innovation in all quarters is critical for accelerated economic growth. However, India's research and development (R&D) debate often focuses on public spending, how much the government allocates, which missions are launched and what headline targets are announced. The data, however, suggests that India's innovation shortfall is fundamentally an industry story. What distinguishes India from global technology leaders is not an absence of policy intent, but the reluctance of corporates to invest meaningfully in research.

The recent CITER *Handbook on Technology and Innovation in India 2025* brings out a few critical aspects of India's innovation landscape. First, India's R&D expenditure remains structurally low. In 2023, it stood at 0.6% of GDP, the lowest among major innovation economies, and has been stuck in a narrow 0.6-0.9% band for more than three decades. Over the same period, peer economies have steadily intensified their commitment by gradually scaling up R&D investments. Israel and South Korea consistently spend over 4% of GDP on R&D, the US exceeds 3.5% and China has raised its R&D intensity to around 2.6%, reflecting sustained policy and industry commitment to tech leadership.

Second, India's R&D ecosystem is heavily dependent on the government. In 2023, the public sector accounted for 53% of total R&D expenditure, while industry contributed just 36% and higher education 9%. This contrasts sharply with global patterns. Industry finances roughly 75-80% of R&D in the US and China, over 70% in South Korea and Germany, and close to 80% in Israel, underscoring the centrality of corporates in advanced innovation.

Third, recent trends are particularly concerning. Industry's share of India's R&D has fallen from 41% in 2018 to 36% in 2023, even as higher education's share rose modestly from 7% to 9%. India's industrial R&D expenditure in 2023 was under \$7.4 billion. As a stark contrast, Nvidia, which is ranked 26th among the world's top 2,500 R&D spenders, spends nearly as much as all of India's industry on R&D, while Alphabet, the top global R&D spender, spends almost five times that sum. Thus, at a time when corporate-driven R&D is driving frontier innovation globally, India's weakening industrial research effort signals a growing risk to long-term competitiveness.

The pattern of industrial R&D spending in India points to a strong concentration rather than broad-based technological diversification. Corporate research investment is largely confined to a limited set of sectors such as pharmaceuticals, automobiles, oil and gas, and software services. The first two of those together account for more than half our total industrial R&D expenditure, reflecting

areas where firms benefit from established production strengths, regulatory familiarity and incremental innovation. By contrast, Indian industry invests relatively little in sectors that anchor global R&D activity, including electronic and electrical equipment, healthcare technologies, advanced manufacturing and industrial engineering.

This narrow focus has consequences. In 2023, as the handbook reports, 827 US and 679 Chinese corporates featured among the world's top 2,500 R&D spenders. India had just 22 corporates in that list. More telling is the sectoral absence. Strikingly, Indian corporates are missing from six of the ten most R&D-intensive global sectors, including electronic equipment and healthcare technology. Even where Indian corporates are present globally, such as in pharma, their R&D intensity remains below that of their international peers.

The behaviour of large Indian corporates further underscores this pattern. The top 100 R&D spenders account for nearly 78% of all industrial R&D in India, indicating a highly concentrated research landscape. Beyond a small group of conglomerates and established manufacturers, R&D spending drops off sharply. Many profitable Indian corporates with global revenues invest little in in-house research, relying instead on imported technology, licensing or incremental process improvements.

The handbook also highlights that India's innovation constraints are evident across the talent, research and intellectual property pipeline. In 2022, India had just 260 full-time researchers per million people, far below China's 1,849 and the US's 4,825, and trailing all comparable economies, with South Korea (9,435) and Taiwan (9,200) at the global frontier. While India performs better in doctoral output, producing 21,232 science and engineering PhDs in 2023, the third highest globally, this scale has not translated into high-impact

research. India ranked fifth globally in publications, contributing 714,016 papers (5% of global output) during 2019-23, yet records among the lowest citation impact scores across peers. Weak industry linkages compound this gap as only 1% of publications involve industry collaboration, compared with over 6% in Japan and Germany, while international collaboration remains modest at around 30%. Patent data shows some progress. Resident filings exceeded non-resident applications at the Indian Patent Office in 2023, reversing earlier trends, but the scale remains well below China's local innovation system.

India's innovation gap is visible in corporate balance sheets, sectoral choices, the global absence of our firms from frontier technologies and quality research. India generates a large number of startups, but relatively few are built on proprietary hardware, advanced materials or complex engineering capabilities. Recent initiatives such as the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, India AI Mission, and the \$12 billion Research, Development and Innovation fund reflect a recognition of this imbalance. Their success, however, will depend on whether they can reshape corporate behaviour rather than merely add incremental funding.

India's binding constraint is not capital availability, but risk appetite. Closing this R&D gap will require a decisive change in how Indian industry approaches research. Until R&D is recognized as the foundation of long-term competitiveness, this equilibrium is unlikely to shift. That, in turn, requires far deeper and more systematic collaboration between industry and academia to generate commercially relevant, patentable innovations. Unless R&D is internalized as the bedrock of long-term competitiveness rather than an optional adjunct to growth, this deficit will persist.

# Is New York under Mamdani bent on overtaxing residents?

Expanded city services come at a cost voters may not understand



**ALLISON SCHRAGER**  
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering economics.



New York's mayor wants the city to provide free child-care starting at six weeks.

**F**rance is great. I visit a few times a year, and the food is fantastic, the museums are amazing, and day care is free (or heavily subsidized) for toddlers aged 3 months or more. New York City, where I live, is also great, with pretty good food and architecture. The day care, not so much.

Of course that French day care comes at a steep price. The French—even the middle class—pay much more in taxes. According to the OECD, the average single earner pays 28% of their income in taxes, compared to 24% in the US. And that does not include the large consumption taxes that Europeans pay.

Now New York's mayor wants the city to provide free child-care starting at six weeks, among other free services. He has also promised New Yorkers that someone else would pay for it: the rich. Last week, reality caught up with these plans. If Mayor Zohran Mamdani cannot get the tax increases he wants on high earners and corporations, all New Yorkers will need to pay—in the form of higher property taxes now and, later, a bailout of the pension and health-care funds he plans to raise.

There is a lot to criticize here. The tax on high earners is poorly structured and raises the rate to such a level that it may cause serious economic damage. New York City already spends a fortune on its residents and provides superb services. With its existing obligations and variable tax revenue, increasing the budget another 9% is certainly imprudent, to put it mildly.

And yet—even though I am a property owner in New York City, wouldn't be subject to the millionaire tax and am kept up at night by underfunded pensions—part of me hopes this tax comes to pass. Voters elected someone who promised to expand the services the city offers. If they want that, we should all pay for it.

It is not just New York that is flirting with fiscal nihilism. Polls reveal US voters want two things: higher taxes on the wealthy and more entitlements. In other words, free stuff someone else pays for.

To a degree, this is understandable; this is the richest society in the world. America should provide people with a minimum standard of living. And wealthier people are better positioned to pay a higher tax, even if they already pay a very large share of taxes, and there is only so much more you can tax them. A large welfare state can be justified because it reflects how much we, as a society, value security over growth, the collective good over individual flourishing.

Personally, I would prefer a smaller gov-

ernment, but reasonable people can disagree. Striking the right balance, however, requires that the costs and benefits be widely understood and broadly felt. Europe made its choice, opting for higher taxes for all and a lower standard of living in exchange for more security.

My concern is that Americans do not internalize these trade-offs. I have always used three criteria when judging how good a tax is: efficiency (does not create distortions), progressivity (collects more from those who have more) and feasibility (relatively easy to collect). Now I am adding salience to my list: that is, whether people understand the taxes they are paying and what they get for them.

Franklin D. Roosevelt had the same idea when he created Social Security, which is why the programme is funded through payroll taxes on everyone. People would feel more connected, he reasoned, to a programme they paid into.

Today salience is the last thing any politician wants from a tax. Almost everyone (except maybe billionaire investor Warren Buffett and US politician Mitt Romney) already thinks they pay too much in taxes.

Directly increasing taxes on anyone who makes less than \$100,000 annually has become a political non-starter. Politicians have become addicted to promising more benefits—tax credits, health-care subsidies, now child care—that someone else pays for. Often the middle class ends up paying anyway. The cost of corporate taxes, for example, are largely borne by workers, but most people don't realize why their wages are lower.

As long as the taxes Americans pay are disconnected, there is no scope for fiscal discipline, let alone accountability for what we are already spending.

Older, people should be paying more. We all should—if we want our government to make good on its promises to pensioners, bondholders and the new and ever-growing population of beneficiaries.

New Yorkers are starting to have productive discussions about how much the city is already spending on schools, health benefits and all sorts of other things, and the impetus was the threat of higher property taxes in the city. Now imagine what the conversation would be like if we actually had to pay them. **©BLOOMBERG**

THEIR VIEW

# The Russia-Ukraine war: Why peace is proving elusive

HARSH V. PANT & RAJOLI SIDDHARTH JAYAPRAKASH



are, respectively, professor of international relations, King's College London, and vice president for studies at Observer Research Foundation (ORF), and junior fellow, Eurasia, at ORF.

**O**n 24 February 2022, Russian forces crossed into Ukraine with the objective of demilitarizing the country and deterring Kyiv from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Russian strategic planners expected a Ukrainian collapse within a fortnight. Four years on, Moscow has yet to achieve its core wartime objectives of gaining complete control over the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. The conflict has already surpassed the length of the Soviet military campaign against Nazi Germany, making it Russia's longest in Europe in over a century.

Despite Russian forces controlling the tempo across multiple axes, they have struggled to achieve a breakthrough, as Ukrainian resistance has slowed their advance, with high losses on both sides. Meanwhile, efforts to find a negotiated settlement have gained momentum, with Russian, Ukrainian and American interlocutors meeting at various levels and formats. The recent trilateral talks

in Abu Dhabi have hinted at a more pragmatic approach, reflected in the participation of high-ranking political and military representatives from Russia and Ukraine, with deliberations on the implementation and modalities of monitoring a ceasefire. Yet, deep divergences in negotiating positions suggest that any peace without addressing these would be fragile.

**State of the battlefield:** Russia's military strategy seeks to exploit Ukraine's acute manpower shortage by deploying a swarm of troops across fronts in an attempt to spread the Ukrainian defence thin. As a result, Russian forces last year recaptured the Kursk region and opened a new front in Sumy, northeastern Ukraine. New gains were made in Donetsk with the capture of Pokrovsk, Myrnohrad and Stivers, as well as Huliaipole in the Zaporizhzhia region. However, these gains are largely tactical rather than strategic, with Russia controlling only about one-fifth of Ukrainian territory. Domestically, Moscow faces mounting pressure from the high costs of financing the war, high interest rates, tightening sanctions and sustained Ukrainian strikes on energy infrastructure, all of which have resulted in the Russian economy overheating. Despite severe manpower shortages, war

fatigue and reduced overt US support compared to the Joe Biden US presidency, Kyiv has constrained the Russian advance thanks to European partners scaling up military aid. It has intensified strikes on Russian energy and military infrastructure and developed a comparative advantage in limited-arms warfare, particularly through AI-enabled drones and precision-guided tools. Also, changes in key appointments, including the introduction of a popular wartime figure and Russia hawk Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov, as Zelensky's chief of staff, have renewed confidence in Ukraine's negotiating position. Budanov is said to be in close contact with his Western counterparts.

Taken together, Ukraine remains far from capitulation despite incremental Russian advances. **Peace talks on shaky ground:** Last February, negotiations resumed after the failure of early-2022 talks in Istanbul. They began in a bilateral US-Russia format, with Ukraine brought in later. By the end of 2025, after multiple

rounds of negotiations, a 28-point framework was outlined and later condensed to 20 points by the US and Ukraine (redacting clauses that ran counter to Ukraine's sovereignty). But Moscow rejected the plan. Core divergences include the war-torn country's irrevocable position on territory, security guarantees and ceasefire terms.

**The great-power prestige of one side must be balanced with the sovereignty of the other for its resolution**  
Kyiv has vehemently opposed any attempt at salami-slicing its sovereignty territory, calling for the restoration of its 1991 borders. But Russia is firm that a ceasefire will be contingent on Ukraine's withdrawal from Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia; it also wants Crimea recognized as Russian territory. On security guarantees for Ukraine, it rejects the Western understanding of

it and argues that a Russian withdrawal must not enable Kyiv to regroup and launch a counteroffensive. Any peace agreement that does not address these issues is likely to be fragile and vulnerable to fresh escalation. **The way ahead:** What's increasingly evident is that neither the ritualistic expansion

of Western sanctions on Russia nor coercive pressure on Ukraine to accept a suboptimal settlement will in itself deliver sustainable peace. The limits of punitive maximalism and forced compromise are now stark. While the latest round of talks has stopped short of a breakthrough, it has kept the diplomatic channel ajar. The granular, technical negotiations that follow are likely to be more consequential.

These discussions could focus on areas where convergence, however modest, is possible: an exchange of prisoners of war, mutual restraint on targeting energy infrastructure, a halt to strikes on densely populated urban centres and the construction of structured pathways to address thorny questions of territory, security guarantees and the sequencing of a ceasefire. Such incrementalism may lack drama, but is often the precondition for strategic stabilization.

At its core, the dilemma is political as much as military. Crafting an arrangement that affords Moscow a face-saving exit, without eviscerating Kyiv's sovereignty agency, is the central balancing act. Reconciling these competing imperatives—great power prestige and national self-determination—will determine whether diplomacy can move from managing conflict to resolving it.

## The Indian Express

FOUNDED BY -  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**

BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

### US, Israel kill Iran's leader, unleash new ghosts

OVER THE weekend, the US and Israel launched a sweeping joint military operation—codenamed "Operation Epic Fury" by Washington and "Roaring Lion" by Tel Aviv—striking targets across Tehran, Isfahan, Qom, Karaj, and several other Iranian cities. Iran has confirmed that its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has been killed. The attacks came barely two days after US-Iran nuclear negotiations in Geneva, mediated by Oman, that had seemed on the verge of a breakthrough. In retrospect, these talks seem to be a cover for the mobilisation of military power around Iran. Statements from President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made clear that the goal was not a diplomatic settlement of the nuclear dispute but the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. Regime change in Tehran—long discussed in Washington and Tel Aviv—gained renewed intensity after the anti-regime protests that swept Iran at the turn of the year. Although Trump had promised the protestors that "help was on the way", he had refrained from intervention then.

The latest attacks signal a decisive shift. The combination of aerial strikes and internal sabotage targeted the system's core pillars. Eighty-six-year-old Khamenei has dominated the Islamic Republic's hierarchy—first as president from 1981 and, since 1989, as the successor to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He steered the regime through multiple crises, relying on repression internally and activist policies across the region. Few tears will be shed for Khamenei but his killing does not automatically mean the fall of the regime. The Islamic Republic is deeply entrenched. Historical experience shows that regime change is far simpler to declare than to achieve. US interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya were disastrous, and offer little confidence that a rapid or orderly transition in Iran can be engineered from the outside.

The entire region, with America's Gulf allies as well as Iranian missile attack, is at a perilous moment. Much will depend on developments within Iran—whether large numbers take to the streets, whether elements of the establishment defect, and whether a viable alternative leadership emerges, either from within the current system or among exiles such as Reza Pahlavi, son of the deposed Shah. Failure to produce a coherent successor authority could open the door to prolonged strife or even fragmentation along ethnic lines. For India, the implications are immediate and serious: The safety of nearly 10 million members of the diaspora, potential disruption of air links, and the possibility of a sharp spike in oil prices. For now, Delhi, which has good ties with most of the Gulf countries under attack today, can only watch closely. India's foreign-policy establishment must urgently reflect on the long-term consequences. Just as the violent birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979 transformed India's regional environment, its potential collapse could be equally consequential. Trump and Netanyahu have wielded a sledgehammer. Do they have the patience—or inclination—for repair that has to follow the shattering? The evidence from Gaza and Ukraine is dispiriting.

### Sharper data, clearer signals for the economy

LAST WEEK, the National Statistics Office released the new GDP series, taking another step towards plugging gaps in the country's data architecture. The series incorporates richer data sources spanning both the formal and informal sectors, revises estimation methodologies, and responds to criticisms of the earlier series. It is better equipped to reflect the evolving structure of the Indian economy and capture its many shifting facets. The new series follows several recent initiatives aimed at improving the accuracy and availability of economic data, including the new inflation series, surveys on household consumption and unincorporated enterprises, and more frequent labour market surveys. This is a welcome development.

Among the new sources incorporated are GST figures, which help in estimating the quarterly data. The informal sector is being captured more accurately through annual surveys of unincorporated enterprises. The contentious issue of double deflation has also been addressed in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors, while several key ratios have been updated using more recent studies. The underlying message is that momentum in the Indian economy remains healthy. As per the latest estimates, the economy is expected to grow at 7.6 per cent in 2025-26, marginally higher than the earlier estimate of 7.4 per cent. Growth in the third quarter is now pegged at a robust 7.8 per cent. Following the release of these estimates, the chief economic adviser has revised next year's growth projection to 7.7 per cent, higher than the Economic Survey's forecast of 6.8-7.2 per cent. However, in nominal terms, the size of the economy is now estimated to be 3.8 per cent lower in 2024-25. This could have some implications for meeting fiscal deficit and debt reduction targets.

For now, the data under the new series is available from 2022-23 onwards. The next step will involve the release of the back series—the data for the years prior to 2022-23. The government expects to release this information by the end of this year. This will be a challenging exercise given that many of the new data sources will not be available. A careful approach will, therefore, be essential.

# Supreme Leader gone, Revolutionary Guards hold key to Iran's future

THE ATTACK on Iran by the US and Israel, killing the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, begins a new chapter in the future of Iranian politics and the power dynamics of West Asia. Several leaders have been killed. They include Sayyid Abdolrahim Mousavi, the chief of staff of Iran's armed forces and the country's defence minister, Aziz Nasirzadeh. The strikes claimed the lives of high-level military officials, including Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Defence Council, and Mohammad Pakpour, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The fact that multiple Arab states in the Persian Gulf, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, were targeted by the Iranian missiles shows that the Iranian regime views the situation as a fight for survival. However, it is practically impossible to determine the course events will take.

Israel has used the word "preemptive" to justify its attack, but US President Donald Trump has called on the Iranian people to rise and overthrow the country's Islamic regime. To many in Washington and in the European capitals, it seems that what the US President intends to achieve is something similar to what happened in Venezuela in January—get rid of the unpopular leadership and invite reformists in the country to cooperate with Washington. However, this will not

work the way it did in Venezuela for the simple reason that any regime change in Iran should necessarily include opposition figures in exile, and the most popular among them, Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's Shah who was deposed after the Islamic Revolution.

Analysts know well that Iran is a much more complicated country than Venezuela. Its leadership structure is not only theocratic but also military. Khamenei can easily be replaced by another ayatollah (as he himself succeeded his predecessor, Ruhollah Khomeini) but the US and Israel will have to deal with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Praetorian Guard of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a military, political, and economic organisation established in 1979. The IRGC is considered to be one of the strongest standing political structures born out of the Islamic Revolution. It was initially charged with protecting the ideological achievements of the Iranian Revolution. However, the IRGC has used its constitutionally mandated role to legitimise its power and extend its political influence. When it comes to its roles and responsibilities, the lines have become blurred in recent times.

Former IRGC commanders have increasingly dominated top positions in Iran, including the presidency (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) and the speakership of the parliament (Mohammad



RAMTIN JAHANBEGLOO

The IRGC has used its constitutionally mandated role to legitimise its power and extend its political influence. When it comes to its roles and responsibilities, the lines have become blurred

Bagher Qalibaf), particularly in the past two decades. This has provided an avenue for the further accumulation of power and influence and the expansion of the IRGC's roles and responsibilities within and outside Iran. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards are the true decision-makers of the Islamic Republic—their activities appear to go unchallenged, free from any clerical oversight.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards control the three major areas of the Iranian regime. First is the economic sector, as they have gained what appears to be absolute control over all state contracts and investments. Second, the Revolutionary Guards have entrenched themselves in the internal political affairs of the state. And lastly, the military capabilities of the Guards are so extensive that challenging them could be disastrous for the clerics. Their military capabilities also pose a serious threat to any future political leadership in Iran. There is not a shadow of a doubt that the massacre of numerous Iranian protestors during the January 8-9 crackdown was ordered by Khamenei and organised by the IRGC. Also, until now, members of the IRGC have pursued a foreign policy that was not designed primarily to benefit the Iranian people, but rather to intensify their domination of the country's economic and political spheres.

Trump has said that he will

offer immunity to members of the IRGC if they put down their guns and stop fighting. But the truth is that the forces of the IRGC have long supported terrorism across West Asia, undermined regional stability and continued to advance their ideology against any effort of democratisation. They have also brutally repressed their own citizens and embezzled billions of dollars in oil revenue that rightfully belonged to the Iranian people and was never fully recovered.

If by any chance there is a non-bloodily regime change in Iran, what the Iranian people will need in the future is a third way—one between the extremes of vengeance and national amnesia, which consists of judicial mechanisms that would allow the victims of state crimes and abuses to tell their stories in their own words. All things considered, victim involvement in the future process of transitional justice would be a positive action for national healing in Iran. National healing speaks to something larger than any particular political offence and works its magic by a kind of therapeutic power that cannot be understood merely in terms of transition to democracy.

After all, what is important for Iran is not only to attain victory for democracy, but also to be mindful of the terrible past from which this democracy will come one day.

The writer is Director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Nonviolence and Peace Studies, OP Jindal Global University

### Give borderlands their rightful place in national story



VINAY SAHASRABUDHDE

THIS IS the silver jubilee year of the creation of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER). Then-PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee established it to deal with the apathy and ignorance towards Northeast India. Sadly, in the decade after that, this ministry became a victim of government apathy. Thankfully, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there has been a 152 per cent increase in the ministry's budget allocation, from Rs 2,332 crore in 2014-15 to Rs 5,892 crore in 2023-24.

However, the development of any region is also linked to aspects such as recognising the identity of the people. This is true not just for people from the Northeast but also for other border areas. Efforts are needed on the societal front because measures taken by governments will always have limitations. People from border areas, including the Northeast, continue to face much ignorance and insensitivity. To correct that, we need to transform the DONER Ministry into the OWNER Ministry. "Our Wonderful North East Region". Recent incidents, such as racial abuse and threats being hurled at young women from Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi, are a stark reminder of the responsibility of all our compatriots in this respect.

Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta has done well in stating that "There is absolutely no place for hatred, discrimination, intimidation or racial abuse in Delhi", adding that "such behaviour will not be tolerated". The broader solution is beyond the domain of law and order. Mere legal measures cannot bring about true national integration. What is needed is the cultivation of a deeper understanding of the people of the Northeast. A well-thought-out policy backed by a plan of action can help fill the knowledge gap. The idea of "one people" demands shared identity and shared ethos.

For the Northeast as well as border areas like Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Andaman-Nicobar and Lakshadweep, we need a comprehensive policy and plan to ensure the emotional integration of the

people. Such efforts need to be oriented towards the next generation. Here is an agenda for that:

Revise school textbooks to have lessons on border areas: Directives could be issued to all states to ensure that in classes V to X, students have at least one lesson pertaining to the Northeast—these should cover History, Geography, Social Studies, and English, as well as the regional language.

Establish university departments of border area studies, on the lines of Latin American Studies, African Studies, and Eurasian Studies departments. This will also boost knowledge creation in an academic sense. Border area studies could be a mandatory subject for students appearing for competitive examinations of the UPSC.

Mandatory service in border regions for IAS/IPS: Spending at least two years in any of the border areas should be made mandatory for all IAS/IPS officers from other states. This will provide them an opportunity for experiential learning about these regions.

Mandatory sister-school/college linkage: School-level learning leaves a deep impact on people's lives. Let one school from every district in non-border areas enter into a sister-institution relationship with a school from a border area. Let the two then collaborate on a variety of projects.

Celebrating freedom fighters and other heroes from border areas: Our border areas, especially from the Northeast, have produced many heroes who were freedom fighters, literateurs, artists and thinkers. From Lachit Borpuhuk to Bhupen Hazarika, from freedom fighters like Moji Riba of Arunachal Pradesh and Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi of Assam to Rani Gaidinliu of Nagaland, there are many whose biographies could inspire people from all parts of the country. Celebrating anniversaries of such heroes nationally would help weave a common national ethos.

The writer is a national executive committee member of the BJP

### Behind success of 'Heated Rivalry', a fantasy of reciprocity



ANUSREE K C

LATE LAST YEAR, my Instagram feed was flooded with content about Heated Rivalry. I was curious why a Canadian gay hockey romance had the internet in a chokehold. So when *Heated Rivalry* made it to India last week, I started the show on a whim.

*Heated Rivalry* follows Hollander and Rozanov, two professional hockey stars who begin a secret relationship that spans nearly a decade, while playing for rival teams. A gay sports romance adapted from Rachel Reid's *Game Changer* series, it has become one of the biggest television events of the year.

The question everyone keeps asking and the one in my own head, is: Why are women—straight women—so obsessed with this show? The answer is one word, Yearning. There is something about watching two people who clearly belong together refuse to admit it for as long as humanly possible. The push and pull. The almost-moments. The things left unsaid. It is the engine of romantic fiction.

What the show does is take that engine and put it in a body that few, if any, imagined containing it. Hollander and Rozanov are not meant to be tender. They are athletes trained by an industry that celebrates toughness. Hockey, as the setting, turns out to be a genius container, if you think about it structurally. The rink is a closed world. It has its own rules, hierarchy and language. Rozanov and Hollander cannot simply be who they are. They have to be what the game expects of them. And that gap between the public performance and the private reality is where the story lives.

Their love story is free from certain heteronormative tropes that usually burden the male-male romances on screen. There is no easy fallback into gendered expectations. Both men must articulate their feelings, both must risk defeat. The emotional labour is shared. The desire is mutual, non-hierarchical.

For many straight women, it is cathartic to watch two men painstakingly learn the language of feeling. They make mistakes, they work on honesty. Emotional vulnerability never goes out of style. It is about witnessing masculinity unarmoured. The show offers a fantasy of reciprocity that many straight women desire and want from their partners.

In the Indian context, this deepens the resonance. We are a culture where love is still most often negotiated through family structures, where public displays of affection invite scrutiny, and where queerness, despite being legally decriminalised, remains fraught. The recent wave of mainstream web series or movies in India featuring queer characters has often oscillated between caricature and caution. *Heated Rivalry* treats the romance not as a "social issue" but as an efficient emotional saga.

What straight women are responding to, ultimately, is not the fact that this is a "gay" love story. It is the fact that this is a love story about two people who have been told, in myriad ways, that who they are is inconvenient. Watching them choose each other anyway is not a niche experience. That is the oldest story there is.

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### FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



### 40 YEARS AGO

March 02, 1986



### Swedish PM shot dead

THE SWEDISH prime minister, Olof Palme, 59, was assassinated. A national alert was declared following the killing. As crowds of shocked bystanders openly wept in the city centre street where Palme was gunned down after leaving a cinema with his wife, Lisbet, the police cordoned off parts of the city and mounted stringent checks on every one leaving ports and airports. The police said they had no immediate clues as to the identity of the killer or his motive, although there was no indication so far that it might have been politically motivated. The police have mounted the largest manhunt ever seen in the country in search of the gunman.

### V P Singh on deficit

THE DEFICIT of Rs 3,650 crore in the budget for 1986-87 will not aggravate inflation in the country, the Union Finance Minister, V P Singh, said in New Delhi. He said that the buoyancy in revenues and the increase in

production all round would keep the inflationary pressures within manageable limits. In the last few years, when the deficit was large, inflation had been under control. "The budget pulsates with the aspirations of the people and we have committed ourselves to their service," Singh said. During the current session of Parliament, the government will come forward with a policy paper on administered prices.

### Currency on Marcos's plane

TWENTY-TWO crates of undeclared new Philippine currency valued at \$1,179,000 were discovered by US customs in one of the planes carrying the former president, Ferdinand Marcos's, party into Hawaii. Bringing in more than \$10,000 in cash into the US without declaration is a felony. Just a few hours earlier, Larry Speakes, White House spokesperson, had stated that as a gesture of courtesy, the White House had decided that the former president and 20

members of his party would not be subjected to thorough checks by US Customs. There was no explanation offered for such an allowance.

### Doordarshan pulls film

DOORDARSHAN HAS done it again. After giving much publicity to the telecasting of *New Delhi Times*, a movie acclaimed for its exposure of the nexus between politicians and criminals, Doordarshan seems to have suddenly developed cold feet. Much to the disappointment of viewers, Doordarshan announced a change in its plans and telecasting of a regular box-office hit, *Sharmilee*, instead of *New Delhi Times*. Though no reason for the sudden cancellation of the all-India premiere was given, it is believed that "high officials" in the government and Doordarshan felt that the movie was too controversial. The director of the film, Ramesh Sharma, told *Indian Express* that he was taken by surprise.



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**WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**  
Humanity stands on the brink of a conflict that could unravel the global order into chaos and anarchy.  
— Sri Lanka Guardian

## AI anxiety can turn into an advantage for Atmanirbhar India

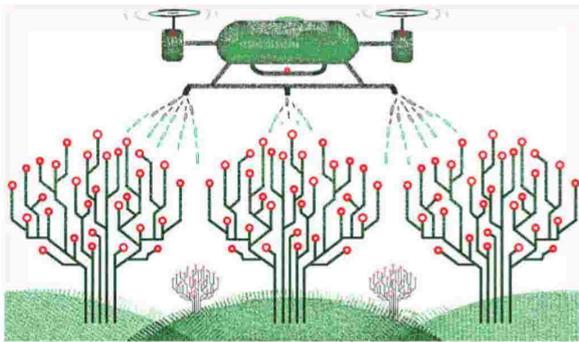


**N**OTWITHSTANDING THE "robotic" goof-up by Galgotias University in AI Impact Summit or the "shirless" demonstration by some misguided youths, the conference was successful in raising awareness of AI amongst young Indians. The fact that 91 countries and international organisations have endorsed the Delhi Declaration for the use of AI for the global good, *sarvajana hitaya* and *sarvajana sukhyaya* (welfare for all and happiness for all), speaks to its success.

Three fundamental issues were discussed with much interest and concern: Will AI lead to faster growth? Will it create more jobs or take away jobs? Will its benefits be equally distributed?

The majority of answers to the first question were positive — there is no doubt that it will accelerate overall development. Many have said that humanity is likely to leapfrog in its evolution of knowledge, efficiency and growth. It is a moment in history with an inflection point, a hockey stick situation. Over the next decade, there is likely to be explosive growth in AI, which will disrupt the functioning of nearly all sectors. Call it the "process of creative destruction", based on the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1942). Those who want to remain in the business-as-usual mode risk being left far behind. Very soon, AI will be used across the globe, the way the internet is being used today, raising productivity and saving time.

But the biggest debate about AI is if the "process of creative destruction" will lead to massive job losses. Opinions are divided. IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva has highlighted the risk of job losses and likened



the arrival of AI in the job market to a tsunami. She estimates that 40 per cent of jobs are likely to be hit in emerging economies, while this figure can touch 60 per cent in advanced economies. That's scary. But Mukesh Ambani, chairman and managing director of Reliance Industries, has said that there will not be job losses in the Indian industry as a result of the induction of AI. My take on this is that similar fears were expressed in India when, in the late 1980s, the then prime minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, introduced computers. Employees in banks, railways, and many other sectors went on strike, fearing that they would lose their jobs, and they opposed and resisted the introduction of computers. It is hard to even think today of banks running without the use of computers. This is where Schumpeter's "process of creative destruction" is salient. Every new technology demolishes the old one and creates massive disruption, but gives higher efficiency and growth. As a result, the size of the economy ex-

**Every new technology demolishes the old one and creates massive disruption, but gives higher efficiency and growth. As a result, the size of the economy expands, creating new jobs that demand higher skills; these jobs also pay more**

pands, creating new jobs that demand higher skills; these jobs also pay more. Most are better off as a result. There are always some losers, especially in the short term, who cannot ride the wave of new technology. Ways need to be found to upgrade their skills, or the state needs to minimise the pain of those who stand to lose out.

The next question is that of equity. Who will gain and who will lose? The early starters will gain first, and that may increase inequality in the short run. This could also be because only very few countries can afford the massive investments

that are needed to develop AI as well as meet its energy requirements. But as with many other technologies, cheaper options are likely to be available soon, and their use will expand exponentially, benefiting most people in turn. India's comparative advantage is in finding low-cost solutions that the Global South can afford and use at a mass scale. Be it the case of vac-

cines during the Covid pandemic, the innovative technology of UPI, or the landing of ISRO's Chandrayaan-3 on the Moon's South Pole, India has demonstrated an ability to derive the maximum out of technology. It can emerge as the third global power in AI, after the US and China, and use the technology for global good.

There is no doubt that the development of AI at scale requires massive investments, and top industrialists in India have promoted to pitch in. My reading is that India is at least five years behind the US and China, which are already in the race to develop AI in humanoid. Will India catch up with them and co-lead this race? One cannot affirm that today. But the AI Impact Summit definitely aroused a lot of curiosity and thinking, and led to a re-chalking of investment plans. Now is the time to create a conducive policy environment. Regulatory issues, data ownership and equity are all important. But we need to ensure that India is not left behind to remain a mere user of Chinese or American AI. It must aim for its own models, its own apps, and only then can it claim to be "atmanirbhar" (self-reliant) in this brave new world of AI.

I must thank the CEO of the AI Summit, Abhishek Singh, for releasing the report "AI for All", prepared by BCG and supported by Prasad under the stewardship of R Chandrashekar. I had the privilege to co-chair the agriculture segment. It tried to engage with a critical question: What will Indian farmers and the country's agriculture gain from AI? Since agriculture employs 46 per cent of India's workforce, there is always a concern that AI applications will displace a lot of labour. Let me say very briefly that AI will be used in India's agri-food system, not just in precision agriculture at the production stage, but also at the logistics/marketing/processing stage too. Already, many players are using it, and the government is also developing agriStack, where it will be used. The dawn of a new era in agriculture is near.

*The writer is distinguished professor at ICRIER. Views are personal*

## Something is amiss in India's debt market & it's yet to take stock



**I**S THE Indian debt market pricing risk accurately? Consider the scenario. Over the past year, while short-term interest rates have fallen, long-term central government bond yields have been almost flat. In contrast, borrowing costs for states have risen sharply. State governments are now, in fact, paying as much as AAA rated corporate rates. This, however, isn't the only quirk. Home-loan borrowers are barely paying a higher rate than governments. Something seems amiss.

Let's take a step back. In February 2025, the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee began to cut interest rates. By the end of the year, the repo rate had fallen by 125 basis points — from 6.5 per cent to 5.25 per cent. This reflects in the shorter-term borrowing rates. In January 2025, just before the MPC cut rates, the 91-day Tbill yield was hovering around 6.54 per cent. By February this year, it had fallen to 5.28 per cent.

Long-term rates have, however, remained elevated. The 10-year Gsec yield, which was around 6.7 per cent in January last year, and had declined to 6.16 per cent in May, rose thereafter. In February this year, yields have been hovering just shy of 6.7 per cent. This period has also seen the central bank actively intervening in the market through open-market operations to boost liquidity and prevent yields from hardening further.

There are several possible explanations for why the yield curve has steepened. The huge supply of government paper — the Centre has already budgeted to borrow Rs 172 lakh crore in 2026-27 — is putting upward pressure on yields. There may also be concerns over the government's revenues which could have raised expectations of higher borrowings. Investors are thus demanding higher rates as compensation.

In comparison, yields on state bonds, which are considered quasi-sovereign, have hardened considerably. For instance, between January 2025 and February 2026, the yield on 10-year Gujarat government bonds has risen from 7.02 per cent to 7.38 per cent, while that on Tamil Nadu bonds has risen from 7.13 per cent to 7.52 per cent.



This surge — which raises the spread over Gsecs — could be due to many reasons. One, the sharp increase in state bond yields are now comparable to corporate bonds. In January 2025, the AAA 10-year corporate bond yield was hovering around 7.44 per cent. A year later, in February, it is averaging roughly 7.48 per cent (data source: ICRA). This raises the question: Has the credit risk premium — the additional yield that investors demand for holding non-sovereign bonds where there is the possibility of default — disappeared? To put it differently, is the market now considering corporate bonds as safe as state debt?

That is not all. The interest rate on home loans for high-quality borrowers is only slightly higher than that of government bonds — the yield on a 20-year UP bond is just under 7.70 per cent. What this essentially means is that banks are not charging a sizeable spread for lending to individual borrowers. In other words, they are not demanding higher returns for holding a less liquid security — although with collateral — but one which should have a higher probability of default.

So what is the market signalling? Has the risk perception of state bonds increased while that of private entities declined? Or, is it a matter of liquidity and differentiated markets? Or, is risk being mispriced at the long end of the yield curve and/or at the credit level?

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### War in West Asia

THE REPORTED killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei marks a dangerous rupture that could harden positions rather than resolve grievances ("War widens US and Israel strike Iran which hits nations across Middle East", E, March 1). Leadership decapitation is often framed as decisive, yet history shows it can unleash unpredictable retaliation, factional struggles and wider regional spillover. With missiles crossing borders and airspace shutting down, the costs are already being paid in disrupted energy flows, shaken markets and anxious shapera communities. For India, prudence demands active backchannel diplomacy, contingency planning for evacuations and fuel supplies, and co-ordination with partners to press for deescalation.

*K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru*

THE ESCALATION of conflict between the US, Israel, and Iran ("War widens US and Israel strike Iran which hits nations across Middle East", E, March 1) is deeply unsettling. The shift from localised skirmishes to broad regional strikes marks a dangerous "widening" of the war that threatens global stability and countless civilian lives. What is particularly concerning is the disruption to international corridors, evidenced by the grounding of Indian flights and the tightening of Delhi's "diplomatic tightrope".

*Ansh Dubey, Indore*

### Kejriwal verdict

THE COURT has no hesitation in holding that the material placed on record does not disclose even a prima facie case, much less any grave suspicion, against any of the accused persons ("Verdict vindicates Kejriwal, and due process", E, February 28). Finding "no overarching conspiracy or criminal intent" behind the excise policy, the CBI attempted to construct a narrative of conspiracy "based on conjecture rather than concrete evidence". The discharge of AAP leader and former Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and 22 others has lent credence to charges of government-run campaigns against opposition leaders.

*S S Paul, Nadia*



LANGUAGE. We are told, reflects reality. This is one of those statements that sounds profound until you spend five minutes on LinkedIn. Language does not reflect reality. It edits it. Sometimes gently, sometimes with the enthusiasm of a PR team armed with adjectives. Words are social agreements about what we will name honestly and what we will dress up before letting it step outside. Invented words are the most revealing of all. They miss reality exactly when older words begin to feel rude. Or morally awkward. When saying the thing plainly threatens to make everyone in the room uncomfortable.

Take the word humbling. In its earlier incarnation, to be humbled meant to be brought down a notch or three. History did it. Failure did it. Occasionally, reality did it. Today, humbling has found a more glamorous calling. It now appears reliably at moments of triumph, usually under photographs featuring awards, stages and a carefully practised expression of accidental success. "Feeling humbled to receive this honour", the caption reads. The photograph, meanwhile, tells a more detailed story. Professional lighting. Strategic angling. Rivals discreetly cropped out. The genius of humbling lies in its efficiency. It allows achievement to announce itself while pretending to apologise for the inconvenience. Success becomes something that happened to you. You didn't chase it, plan it, or want it very badly. It arrived. Like grace. Or good weather.

This is not humility. It is reputa-

## You say it best when you say nothing at all

tionally hygiene. A term emptied of its original meaning and refilled with moral comfort. Ambition, once naked and vaguely embarrassing, is now desecrated. Corporate language has been running this playbook for decades. Consider the disappearance of the "back office". The phrase carried too much anthropology. It suggested hierarchy. Invisibility. Labour without applause. So it had to go. In its place arrived the global capability centre, a term so optimistic it sounds like a Davos breakout session. A GCC does not exist because labour is cheaper. It exists because "capability is global". It does not process payroll. It "builds value". It does not support the business. It "partners" it. The work remains exactly the same, but the language performs a small miracle. Dignity is redistributed without touching the balance sheet.

Layoffs follow the same script. Companies no longer fire people. They "right-size". Or worse, they undertake "workforce optimisation". No one loses a job. Roles are "impacted". This is language doing emotional damage control.

Start-ups, meanwhile, have elevated invented words to an art form. Failure is not failure. It is pivoting. A word borrowed from sport to suggest athletic agility. Losses are called burn, a term that sounds energetic, almost heroic. A company without revenue is not broken. It is pre-revenue. Even precarity has learned to speak fluently. Gig workers are not em-

ployees. They are partners. Their lack of security becomes flexibility. Their exposure to risks is reframed as freedom. What would once have been called exploitation is redefined as lifestyle. Language aesthetics is the imbalance.

Culture mirrors the same instinct. Adulthood is a word that pretends to celebrate responsibility while lowering expectations. It treats basic competence as an occasional performance rather than a social baseline. Self-care, once a language of repair, has also expanded its brief. It now frequently functions as a language of exemption. Sometimes this is necessary. Often it is simply convenient.

What unites all these invented words is not dishonesty in the crude sense. It is something more collaborative. A shared agreement to soften reality so modern life remains tolerable. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure told us that the relationship between words and meaning is arbitrary. Our age has taken that insight and turned it into a lifestyle choice. We invent words not because reality has changed, but because our tolerance for naming it plainly has thinned. Invented words allow ambition to coexist with virtue, inequality with optimism, and anxiety with aesthetics. They are the linguistic equivalent of soft lighting and flattering angles.

Their real power is not that they fool others. It is that they allow us to recognise ourselves in the mirror without flinching. Which is why we keep inventing them. Reality, after all, has terrible manners.

*The writer is a senior advisory professional*



HAVING SPENT the first 15 years of my life in a tea estate, I never quite knew what a neighbour was. We lived in a cosy, tin-roofed cottage with a huge compound surrounded by rows of lush green tea bushes, which were shaded by the comforting branches of sprawling siris trees. The serenity of the ambience was broken only by the muffled, rhythmic thumping and churning of the CTC machines in the tea factory. There were people around — the gardeners, watchmen, tea leaf pluckers, but no neighbours. Anyone familiar with the hierarchical social structure of a tea garden will understand.

## Strangers to neighbours, thanks to WhatsApp

In the early 1980s, we settled into our new house in Siliguri. It was a small, comfortable town with a mixed population of a lakh, maybe a little more, thriving on the three Ts: Tea, Timber, and Tourists. The neighbourhood (or *para* in Bengali) had a sleepy ambience. Almost everyone knew everyone. Every house had a patch of land in front where brightly coloured flowers encircled the grassy patches, often with a tiny kitchen garden in the middle. The walls were low, and neighbours shouted warm greetings to each other, sometimes sharing news of the weather or cricket scores from radio commentaries. There was no TV, only a modestly laid out local Bengali newspaper. Landline phones were seen only as a

necessity, and All India Radio, Siliguri, was our only connection to the world.

Every evening, people took their evening strolls in the neighbourhood lanes, sometimes pushing a perambulator with a toddler whose curious eyes looked around. People nodded at each other, laughed and talked unguardedly, not withholding personal banter, even at the time for people to talk without speaking.

Come the 1990s, 24-hour TV sent lifestyles haywire. Life seemed indoors from the world outside. Neighbours seldom visited each other, and nearly a decade later, the internet and social media led to the ultimate demise of the para-life. Neighbours now became ac-

quaintances. Loud and friendly chatter turned into polite exchanges. Meanwhile, circumstances led us to a gated complex.

We prepared ourselves for a different life in this community, assumedly cold and indifferent, with daily life reduced to procedural routines. This apprehension led to a sense of companionship with our neighbours, driven more by circumstances than choice.

Six months later, one of our new neighbours, a 54-year-old teacher, suffered a stroke. In a rare show of solidarity, all apartment owners rushed to help. Everyone did whatever they could to extend their support. This incident changed our lives, and what followed was nothing we remotely expected.

Now, we socialise daily, chatting, playing badminton, while the kids cycle in the driveways. Some take an interest in

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

## Iran agreed to unprecedented terms. But Trump had to save face



**EXPERT EXPLAINS**  
BY BASHIR ALI ABBAS

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NOTE: MINIMUM RANGE ESTIMATES FOR SOME OF IRAN'S MISSILES ARE SHOWN. SOURCE: CDS MISSILE DEFENSE PROJECT, THE NEW YORK TIMES

JOINT ISRAELI and US air and missile strikes on Tehran have killed Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader of 37 years. These strikes were part of a larger aerial attack across Iran's centres of military and political power, which have also killed its other top defence officials. Despite this, Iran has targeted US bases in every Gulf country as part of a sustained region-wide retaliation. Why couldn't this expanding conflict be prevented?

### Commitment trap

Unlike in June 2025, the key difference is that the current war has arguably broken out due to a breakthrough in US-Iran talks — not a breakdown.

This was evident in that Oman, which holds discretion in high regard as a serious mediator, broke all precedent on February 28 by making public the details of the US-Iran negotiations. This included Iran agreeing to zero stockpiling of nuclear material, down-blending its existing 60% enriched stockpile to irreversible fuel, and allowing US inspectors access to its nuclear sites. It said that the Barack Obama-era Iran nuclear deal (which US President Donald Trump has sought to undo) did not contain such extensive Iranian commitments, making it a significantly better deal for the US.

Muscat was evidently aware of Washington's plan to attack Iran, reflecting that the White House was operating as if in a commitment trap. For Trump, even a deal with such unprecedented terms would not allow him to save face. This led to an attack without guarantees of meeting the strategic objective of "regime change".

In June 2025, Washington wanted the destruction of Iran's nuclear programme. Despite evidence of Iran continuing to retain 60% enriched uranium, the US could still use the significant damage at Fordow to maintain that the Iranian nuclear programme was "obliterated". Now, the US cited the need to aid regime change, saying that the latest round of negotiations did not yield an agreement.

While Trump can still claim victory with Khamenei's death, the regime surviving with new — though transitional — leadership will be evidence of its resilience. It will represent change within the system, not of the system. Rather, Tehran has signalled fewer reasons to show restraint and more to follow through with its threat of massive retaliation.

### Punishment as strategy

The Iranian threat was intended to deter the US attack. It could not afford to replicate its strategy from June 2025, when it retaliated symbolically to US strikes on its nuclear sites by targeting an air base in Qatar. Washington was likely aware of this predicament. Given Trump's fresh need for a decisive win, besides the military build-up, the US strike could no longer be symbolic.

Now, the US would need to attempt to draw maximum gains through airpower alone, since boots on the ground remained a non-option. So, Washington began preparing for Iran's massive retaliation: the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group parked itself next to Israel — not Iran — since Washington knew that Tehran would strike Israel in response. However, Iran's retaliation has incorporated both the use of missile/drone barrages to cause significant damage to a set of targets across the Gulf region, targeting both military and civilian sites.

The IRGC announced a halt to oil tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz, affecting 20% of global oil trade. This reflects Iran's desire to impose costs not only on the US and Israel, but also on Washington's regional allies.

The US-Israeli attacks have also not brought forth organised coherent Iranian opposition, which can fight and replace the well-entrenched regime. This is in line with past precedent. Moreover, striking civilian areas in Iran complicates the prospects of Trump's call for systemic change. The war's continuation increases the costs significantly for the US and tests Iran's capacities. But given only Iran is fighting for survival, it has far greater stakes and thus more incentive to continue attacks until Washington backs down.

## WAR IN WEST ASIA

# Navigating uncharted waters: What next for Iran



SHUBHAJIT ROY

FOR 45 of the Islamic Republic of Iran's 47 years in existence, Ali Khamenei held near-absolute power over the arc of its internal and external politics. On Sunday, as news of the Supreme Leader's death in an airstrike trickled in, the Iranian regime found itself facing an unprecedented situation.

In geopolitics, there are decades when weeks happen and weeks when decades happen. The seismic killing shows that there are also hours when decades happen.

As fighting continues between Iranian forces and the US-Israeli alliance, what's next for Tehran, the region, the world and India?

### The rise of Khamenei

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who led the Iranian Revolution that ousted the Pahlavis, founded the Islamic Republic in 1979. Two years later, Ali Khamenei became Iran's President. He succeeded Khomeini as Supreme Leader in 1989.

Externally, Ayatollah Khamenei turned the theocratic state into a powerful player and an arch foe of US and Israel, setting up a network of proxies across the region — The Axis of Resistance.

Under his watch, the Iranian regime became more powerful than ever, with indigenous technology and a muscle-flexing military in the form of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The US responded with sanctions that triggered widespread economic distress.

Internally, Khamenei ruthlessly crushed dissent, be it from the political opposition, civil society or the common people. The most recent example of this was in December 2025, in January, during some of Iran's biggest protests.

A month later, as Khamenei lay dead, Iranian streets reflected contrasting images. Social media posts showed celebrations on the streets in Isfahan, Tehran and Shiraz. And state-run TV displayed images of people mourning and weeping.

### What happens now in Iran?

Besides Khamenei and some members of his family, including his daughter, son-in-law and grandson, senior members of the Iranian regime have also been killed.

The state-run IRNA news agency announced the death of Maj Gen Mohammad Pakpour, who took over as the IRGC's top commander after Israel killed its previous commander in the 12-day war last June. Also killed was Ali Shamkhani, who has long been a top security adviser to Khamenei, IRNA said.

But replacing Khamenei is something the regime has been preparing for years, amid reports of the leader's frail health.

For Iran, there are three possible scenarios — continuity in the regime, a military takeover and a collapse of the regime, wrote Suzanne Maney of Brookings in a *Council on Foreign Relations* report.



The regime is already taking steps to ensure the first scenario goes through.

An 88-member body of clerics, the Assembly of Experts, will pick Khamenei's successor (see box for the frontrunners). Until it chooses a name, the regime has announced a temporary council including the President that will oversee the transition.

### A military takeover

In the three scenarios outlined before, the second one is a possible military takeover. The IRGC has emerged as the lynchpin for protecting the interests of the regime. The Revolutionary Guard, along with the Basij paramilitary, has been instrumental in putting down protests. Appointing a figure associated with the Iranian military could be a compelling option to keep the house in order and ensure the regime's survival.

In that case, former speaker Ali Larijani is a possible contender (see box).

An IRGC takeover would be a formal shakeout of the arrangement that had existed since the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. But its failure to shield its assets and leadership has hit its credibility.

### Is a regime change possible?

The third scenario, a regime collapse, is a key objective for the Donald Trump administration, one gleefully anticipated by the Israeli leadership.

But while bombing targets from 30,000 feet is easy, toppling a regime is not — especially in a country with a huge landmass. Iran is almost half of India's size but has 1/15th of its population.

For the common people to overpower the Iranian military, the IRGC and the Basij, they will need arms as well as logistical support. That would also mean deploying boots on the ground. This is a strategic call that Trump has to take while balancing the demands of his MAGA base.

Even if the regime collapses, the US will have to come up with a plan to have someone to lead the new regime. For that, they would need someone who is acceptable to the regime — either a breakaway faction

Mourners gather in Tehran on Sunday after state TV announced the death of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

from the Iranian military or clergy or a mix of both. An exiled player, like the exiled Prince Reza Pahlavi, is an unlikely choice and will lack legitimacy.

### The tensions in the region

Iran has attacked US bases in at least six countries — Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The Iranians are also targeting some civilian areas in the UAE where they believe American soldiers and officials live and work.

The widening of the theatre of conflict has plunged the Gulf and the Middle East into uncertainty. So high have tensions been that even Saudi Arabia and the UAE appear to be putting aside months of strain. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Saturday pledged support to UAE's ruler Mohamed bin Zayed.

There are also reports suggesting that Trump was persuaded to target Iran's regime and the top brass, by two unlikely allies — Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The fact that the Iranian Supreme Leader's whereabouts and confirmation of his death came in quickly couldn't have happened without on-ground complicity from Tehran. That could mean that the regional players have had some role or moles in the Iranian system.

So far, Iran has carefully targeted military bases and civilian areas to intimidate regional partners who have given space to American military equipment and personnel. Tehran's best bet is dragging out the war for weeks, and hoping that regional players come together for a ceasefire. The regional rivals would not want to jeopardise the security of their own population.

### The consequences for the world

Iran's most effective weapon is not even a weapon. It is the Strait of Hormuz, a 21-km wide chokepoint through which about 20% of the global oil supply passes. It is not clear if Iran has indeed shut it down, but any such move would jeopardise the energy security of many countries across the world.

Now, American fleets may find them-

Khamenei's killing by US and Israel has left Iran facing an uncertain future, and the world holding its breath over the expanding conflict

### The succession race

#### Three-member transitional council

- Ayatollah Alireza Arafai, member of a powerful constitutional watchdog
- President Masoud Peshkikian
- Supreme Court Chief Justice Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejeli

#### Assembly of Experts

- 88-member body of clerics to pick Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's successor

#### The contenders

**Hojjat-ol-Eslam Mohsen Qomi**, a key adviser in Khamenei's office

**Ayatollah Mohsen Arafai**, a long-time member of the Assembly of Experts

**Ayatollah Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeli**, the head of Iran's judiciary

**Ayatollah Hashem Hosseini Bushehri**, the Qom Friday prayer leader

**Hassan Khomeini**, the grandson of the Islamic Republic's founder, as he had stepped in for Khamenei at an important event

**Mojtaba Khamenei**, the son of Khamenei. The slain leader had, however, ruled him out earlier

**Ali Larijani**, former Speaker of the Parliament, Secretary of National Security Council, and a key confidante of Khamenei. The dark horse

selfes forced to unblock the strait. This conflict has been brewing for decades, but a full-scale war and an unstable Iran is a situation no country in the world is prepared for. Europe has been at war for more than four years now, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre has also been active with attacks and counter-attacks. In such a scenario, the war in the Middle East has consequences for the world, as countries like the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain have more foreign nationals and expats than their local population.

### Impact on India

India has about nine million diaspora spread across the Gulf and Middle East. Their safety has been the cornerstone of India's diaspora diplomacy in the last three decades, when the population of the Indian community in these countries has grown.

These blue-collar workers are the sole breadwinners for many families in Kerala, UP, Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha — and are the biggest remittance senders to India. Estimates suggest that over a third of India's remittances comes from the Middle East and the Gulf countries — the number is somewhere around 38% of India's remittances.

The other strategic impact is the blow to India's energy security that can be the casualty of a prolonged conflict — as almost 60% of India's energy imports come from the region, which include about 50% of oil imports and 70% of LNG imports.

Any disruption in the energy supply chain would be catastrophic for India's economy, especially at a time when India has been barred from buying oil from Russia, under threat of Trump tariffs. This puts India in a diplomatically and economically difficult, if not precarious, situation.

# Disruption at Strait of Hormuz: India covered, for now



SUKAL SHARMA

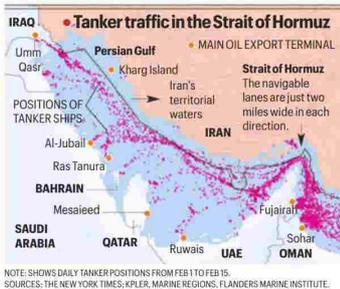
THE EVER-WIDENING conflict involving Iran, US and Israel has severely disrupted oil and gas flows through the Strait of Hormuz — a critical artery for global energy supply. After Israel and the US launched military strikes in Iran, Tehran retaliated by targeting other Gulf countries that house American military interests.

Late Saturday, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) transmitted messages to vessels saying that the strait had been closed. There was no official declaration to this effect from Tehran.

Whether or not Iran is blocking the Strait, a large number of trading houses, insurers and vessels have suspended shipments through the maritime passage. According to reports, hundreds of tankers have dropped anchor in open Gulf waters. Suspension or heavy curtailment of oil and gas flows through the Strait is bound to have implications for the global energy markets, including India, which depends on the waterway for receiving a bulk of its oil and gas imports.

The impact will worsen with the duration of the disruption, though experts believe it won't be a protracted one.

According to industry insiders and experts, India is well positioned to stave off a major short-term supply shock when it comes to oil imports as it has alternative sources. It will, however, have to pay higher energy prices as a result of the conflict. In the case of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, where



NOTE: SHOWS DAILY TANKER POSITIONS FROM FEB TO FEB 2025. SOURCES: THE NEW YORK TIMES; KPLR, MARINE REGIONS; FLANDERS MARINE INSTITUTE.

India's dependence on the Strait of Hormuz is relatively higher than oil, the challenge could be greater — securing supplies while also paying a higher price for imports.

### India's near-term options

The Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important oil transit chokepoint, is a narrow waterway between Iran and Oman that connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

It handles approximately one-fifth of global liquid petroleum consumption and global LNG trade.

Around 15 million barrels of crude pass through the strait every day. While some pipelines exist in the Gulf states to bypass the waterway, their capacity is limited. Even at full utilisation, nine million barrels per day (bpd) — or 9% of global demand — would remain structurally at risk if the strait is closed, according to industry experts.

Around half of India's total oil imports

### Disruption unlikely to last long

- Analysts believe a full, prolonged blockade of the strait would carry severe geopolitical consequences and provoke a rapid international response that could alienate Iran's key allies like China.
- A blockade would also infringe upon Oman's territorial waters, souring ties with a neighbour that serves as a key back-channel for talks.

— roughly 2.5-2.7 million barrels per day (bpd) — pass through the strait from countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait.

India is the world's third largest consumer of crude oil with an import dependency level of over 88%. The majority of the country's gas consumption is also met through imports, and oil and gas supplies from West Asia are critical for India.

Indian refiners already have crude inventories of over 10 days, along with around a week's worth of fuel stocks. To cover any potential shortfall in import volumes, India could draw on its strategic petroleum reserves, accelerate spot procurement from non-Hormuz regions, and deepen supply contracts with alternative suppliers.

Diversification options include increased sourcing from Russia, the US, West Africa, and Latin America. Moreover, there is continued availability of Russian cargoes in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea region, including volumes in floating storage. This volume build-up was a result of Indian refiners substantially reducing their intake of Russian crude.

In a scenario where Middle Eastern imports become constrained or show signs of disruption, Indian refiners — potentially with policy backing — could pivot back to Russian cargoes relatively quickly. From a national energy security standpoint, this flexibility provides India with an additional buffer against short-term geopolitical shocks. Overall, while a Strait of Hormuz disruption would create immediate volatility, India's diversified sourcing strategy and the presence of alternative barrels in nearby waters reduce the risk of a sustained supply crisis," said Sumit Ritola, Lead Research Analyst, Refining & Modeling at commodity market analytics firm Kpler.

According to him, LPG imports are the "bigger vulnerability" for India, as the

## NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

### WHY SACHIN PILOT

Sachin Pilot, former union minister and a prominent face of the Congress party, has recently been appointed senior observer for the Kerala assembly elections, one of the most crucial states for the main Opposition party. He will be monitoring the seat-sharing discussions with the Congress's allies, the selection of the candidates for the party and the campaign of the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). Former Deputy Chief Minister of Rajasthan, Pilot has often come out as the voice and face of the Congress, explaining the party's stance on crucial issues at the national level

# 'Economic security is sacrosanct. US deal is a mandate, where India is being told what it can and cannot do'

Sachin Pilot, Congress leader and former Deputy Chief Minister of Rajasthan, on his role as senior observer for the upcoming Kerala elections, issues with US-India trade deal and how MGNREGA has been significantly diluted. The conversation was moderated by Liz Mathew, Deputy Editor, *The Indian Express*

**Liz Mathew:** After 2024, the Congress has won 99 seats and lost Delhi and Bihar besides facing a series of debacles over the past two years. With another crucial round of elections approaching, what is your party's expectation? What is the plan for Kerala?

Like every election this is an important election for the Congress Party. Yes, we did not win the elections in Delhi and Bihar recently. The vote share difference was absolutely minimal. But these elections are important because the southern states form a large chunk of the India Alliance. The recent local body elections in Kerala (where Congress-led UDF won) have indicated which way the people of Kerala are thinking. It was big for the Congress. So I believe the elections are important. The Congress Party is fully geared up for these polls. We have alliance partners and the INDIA Alliance, overall, will be able to win most of the elections taking place in April.

**Liz Mathew:** A recent key issue in the national political scenario is the US-India trade deal. You had criticised it, calling it "compromised" and something that "mortgaged India's interest and sovereignty". Why do you think the government has compromised with the interests of India and its sovereignty?

First of all, it's a deal, it's not an agreement. What happened with the European Union did not create much furore because it was a consideration that both sides were able to present. Here, there have been many governments in this country — even non-Congress governments led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, HD Deve Gowda, and Inder Kumar Gujral — but no government has ever opened up access to India at a zero per cent tariff while we were paying 18 per cent. The interests of the farming community have always been protected.

Mainly because we simply cannot compete with the billions and trillions of dollars in subsidies that the US and European farmers receive. That was a red line, which was never crossed. Unfortunately, now we have given full access at a higher tariff. Let's not forget that we were earlier paying a three per cent tariff, which became 50 per cent, and now it is 18 per cent.

What has India actually got? We have agreed to buy \$500 billion worth of American goods. In India, cotton farmers and the textile industry are extremely vulnerable because margins are so thin. The US deal is essentially a mandate on the Indian government, telling us what we can and cannot do. This economic security has always been treated as sacrosanct, regardless of which government has been in power in Delhi. For the first time, India is being told where it can and cannot purchase oil and gas. That is unacceptable. The Americans did not impose such conditions on China. The concern here is Indian farmers' market access and the reduction of non-tariff barriers. Who knows whether we will now see genetically modified seeds entering and disturbing our ecosystem? Like we did during the Land Acquisition Act, which they were forced to withdraw or the three laws against the farming community, which they had to repeal after sustained agitation, the Congress party will ensure that the government is forced to go back on this.

**Liz Mathew:** In the first part of the budget session, the proceedings were quite acrimonious, to the extent that the Opposition gave a notice of no-confidence resolution against the Speaker (Om Birla). The government is using this to suggest that the INDIA Bloc is divided. What does the Opposition stand to gain from this?

In a democracy, it is our right, duty and privilege to ask questions. In this government, no one is giving answers. Everything is so opaque, everything is so centralised. There is no discussion. You ask the commerce minister whether we will buy oil from Russia, he says ask the foreign minister. You ask the foreign minister and he says ask the commerce minister. Parliament is the only place where you can put the government on the dock and ask tough questions. When the government is not willing to answer outside Parliament and when you stop the leader of the Opposition to ask as well, it shows that the intention is to hide behind a facade. During the Manmohan Singh government, the Indo-US nuclear deal with the US was opposed tooth and nail by the BJP. When we started the Aadhaar card, the direct benefit transfer, FDI in retail, FDI opposed, FDI in defence opposed. The US nuclear deal with India: severely opposed. And today, they are not even doing what the nation expects them to do. We are fully committed to mak-

### ON UPCOMING ELECTION IN KERALA

*'I see no Left party opposing anything that the BJP is doing. They have zero MLAs but want to help the LDF remain in power. It suits the CM that the PM remains. It suits the PM that the CM remains'*

ing the government accountable. The Speaker and the government cannot act in a way which muzzles the voice of the Opposition. The issue is not about a technical point of order in the rule book of Parliament procedures but about the intention of the government. The Opposition should be united. We will have to see what happens when the session begins.

**Liz Mathew:** You are overseeing the election in Kerala, a state where the Congress party is flooded with leaders. Who do you think can be projected as a chief ministerial candidate by Congress in a state where the main opponent also has a very strong face as CM?

I don't agree. Why is that strong face giving zero MPs for the LDF in Kerala two terms in a row? Why is that strong face shrouded with so many allegations of corruption and so on? Why is that face not able to win elections in municipalities and panchayats? I don't think that's the case. Congress has a very deep talent pool in Kerala. Our leaders in Kerala have been K Karunakaran, Commen Chandny and AK Antony. But now we have a plethora of leaders who really have the depth, talent and are distinguished. We are fighting as a team within the UDF itself and within the Congress. I think there is a lot of cohesion. We are working purposefully because 10 years is a long time. The LDF has actually, in public mind, become the B-Team of the BJP. We talked about the US trade deal. Why has there not been any sustained opposition? When they were supporting the UPA government, they

were talking about India being pro-US and opposing. Today, they are in the Opposition. And I see no Left party opposing anything that the PM or the BJP is doing. In Kerala, BJP has no significant base at all. They have zero MLAs. But they want to help the LDF remain in power. It suits the CM that the PM remains. It suits the PM that the CM remains. So behind the scenes, the Left party is losing credibility as the BJP is doing its best to help the LDF prospects.

**Harikishan Sharma:** There have been two major decisions regarding rural areas: first, the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025 which will replace MGNREGA (a key UPA programme), and second, the trade deal's impact on farming. Although your party announced an elaborate programme to oppose the 'G RAM G' law, that protest is not visible. How will you oppose the Indo-US trade deal?

Over the last several years, the Opposition, including our party and allies, has conducted protests, dharnas, and demonstrations within a democratic framework, but these are rarely published in mainstream media. I have personally participated in *padayats*, *gheranos*, *lathi* charges, and 'jail *bhara'* movements. Regarding MGNREGA, the law has been significantly diluted. Previously, village Panchayats decided on projects like where to build roads and schools or install hand pumps but now the process

is centralised and work can only be done in restricted areas. While it was once demand-driven with an unlimited budget, there is now a cap on spending. Furthermore, the funding structure has shifted. Previously, the Central Government provided 90 per cent of the funds and the State provided 10 per cent but they have now essentially reversed this, forcing states to provide the majority of the money. They cannot abolish the scheme entirely because it is popular, so they are intentionally making it ineffective. It will eventually end. For 11 years, this government has worked to weaken the economic and social status of farmers by weakening the Land Acquisition Bill and introducing 'three black laws'. They did not waive farmer debt, providing small amounts in accounts while taking more away through other means.

The US trade deal will be fatal, specifically because it restricts Bangladesh from buying Indian cotton, forcing them to take it from America instead. This will cause significant damage to the farming of cotton, dry fruits, soybean and corn. Rahul Gandhi recently held a meeting in Bhopal and is to visit Punjab, followed by a programme in Chhattisgarh. We are working with all our strength in every state to ensure the government yields to public demand.

**Asad Rehman:** Rahul Gandhi held a sustained campaign on 'Vote Chori' but this wasn't raised in the ongoing Parliament session. Is it a strategic decision to put the issue on the back

burner? Does the party feel that it was not resonating with the masses?

This issue is not a mass issue, it's political and Mr Gandhi has made it very clear with hard, tangible data and evidence. The Election Commission has failed in its duties to reply to the important questions that he raised. The SIR has gone on in many states and the facts are before us. There are some manipulations going on. The Election Commission should be more transparent and honest. But Mr Gandhi has not gone back on what he's doing. But as the session went on, the US deal happened. So as the Opposition, you have to bring up the most important, immediate thing. They are all important issues and we are taking them as we can.

**Jatin Anand:** Since the Indian youth workers' protest at the AI summit, there seems to be a sustained attempt by the BJP to talk of a split within the INDIA alliance. How do you see the lack of support from your allies?

The INDIA alliance is almost equal to the NDA. And BJP, I think, has lost more allies. They have lost Shiroman Akali Dal in Punjab, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, lost Nitish Kumar and got him back multiple times. So, allies not sticking with the BJP is much more of a reality than the Congress and the other INDIA alliance partners.

If protests were comfortable, why would anybody do it? You can have a view on it — you may like it or dislike it but it is one's right to protest. You see any G20, G8 meeting on climate change, International WTO meets: protests on all these issues happen on the streets. And yes, if you have broken some

law, you can arrest. But to detain people, to arrest the Youth Congress president who was not even there. Under what charge are they holding a man in the Indian Congress who was not present at the site? These are all draconian ways of showing that you cannot protest. The way, the police handled it by threatening allegations of conspiracy. With six t-shirts, what sort of conspiracy against a sovereign country can one do? There may be some difference of opinions, but the INDIA alliance stands strong.

**Jatin Anand:** BJP has often levelled the allegation of dynasticism against Congress as well as you individually. How do you view the appointment of Nitin Nabin, the son of a prominent leader, as the president of the BJP?

People have different standards. If someone is competent and acceptable, that person's heritage should not be seen as a disqualification. But it can't be a qualification too. But the BJP's double standards are fully exposed. There are so many BJP leaders whose families are in public life. There are so many allies who have 'dynastic lineage'. As for the new BJP president, he was selected. I don't think the election really happens in BJP. I don't know who decides to nominate, who decides to vote. Mr Mallikarjun Kharge's family had never been in public life when he started off. So he's an elected Congress president and Dr Shashi Tharoor fought against him. And all of us voted. I don't know how many voters or BJP leaders were consulted for the new BJP president. We just heard an announcement.

### ON MGNREGA BECOMING 'VB-G RAM G'

*'The law has been significantly diluted. They cannot abolish the scheme entirely because it is popular, so they are intentionally making it ineffective. It will eventually end'*

**Parul Kulshreshtha:** What is the Congress' view on officials arrested for a scam under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) scheme in Rajasthan?

Any corruption must be thoroughly investigated. But with the view of finding facts and punishing the culprits, not with an agenda to tarnish someone. If there is enough evidence, no matter the party, or the individual, one must investigate. But it should be done in a transparent manner. If 98 per cent ED raids are only on Opposition leaders and the conviction rate is 1 per cent, people understand it's not credible. The law should be equal for everybody.

**Liz Mathew:** How are the discussions in the UDF in Kerala for seat sharing, policy and the manifesto? Would there be a new ally?

*Ourayra* is going on in Kerala. The discussions on seat sharing and a combined blueprint for the future are happening as we speak. Our allies are absolutely confident, and seat sharing should not be an issue at all. As for the ally, I can't say as of now. If things work out there are quite a few partners that are ready.

**Liz Mathew:** With so much hate speech against the minorities, what can your party do in the states where it is in power?

These things are often said to gain cheap popularity. It is incumbent upon senior leadership to stop restraint and lead by example. The Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiran Rijji says Mr Gandhi is a "big threat to national security". Look at the meaning. Immediately after that one BJP worker makes an online threat to harm Mr Gandhi. There's an ecosystem that collaborates. The leadership at the top must show dignity. This foul language and threatening language is one thing but it will only happen if the higher ups are allowing it to happen.

**Jatin Anand:** Regarding 'imposed' leadership in Rajasthan — a mood that the BJP followed in other states too — has this caused internal opposition?

In the BJP, everyone has to silently accept things. But when you push people into positions of power, like the CM's post, without them having actually duly earned it, or command the kind of political heft that is required to run administrations, the people lose out and policymaking becomes aggressive. Then the bureaucrats become much more important and the legislators don't support the CM. The policymaking becomes very fragile and ultimately people suffer. The law and order suffers and so does the execution on the ground. So when BJP pushes people who are just picked up and made something, it is probably to have better control from Delhi. That may be the agenda. But the BJP workers and the middle-rung leaders wouldn't be happy with this imposed leadership because there are many deserving people who may have worked for years and have been overlooked. I'm sure there is a lot of disenchantment but obviously no one will talk about it. But it is a common discussion in the state.



ILLUSTRATION: SUJAIT DEY



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# Opinion

MONDAY, MARCH 2, 2026



## ESCALATION FEARS

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres  
The use of force by the United States and Israel against Iran, and the subsequent retaliation by Iran across the region, undermine international peace and security

## Strait of shock

Oil prices are bound to spike with a full-blown conflict in West Asia

**B**RENT PRICES SPIKED to a seven-month high of \$73 a barrel on Friday ahead of massive US and Israeli air strikes on Iran over the weekend which has killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the nation's supreme leader, besides top officials of the defence establishment. Hundreds of civilians, including children, have been killed and wounded in these ongoing major combat operations targeting Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) command centres, missile launch sites, air defence systems, and nuclear facilities. US President Donald Trump has vowed to eliminate Iran's nuclear programme and bring about regime change. To Iran's threat that the US has to pay the price for "crossing the red line", Trump retorted "if they do, we will hit them with a force that has never been seen before". Iran's president, the head of the judiciary, and a jurist of the Guardian Council are now in charge during this transition period. Tehran has retaliated with a barrage of medium-range ballistic missile strikes targeting US bases in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and of course Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, triggering a full-blown conflict in West Asia. Iran will be also aided in its retaliatory drive by its various regional militant proxies.

Oil markets are bound to be jittery on Monday, especially after messages were reportedly transmitted by the IRGC saying "no ship is allowed to pass the Strait of Hormuz", through which a fifth of global seaborne traded oil flows daily. Prices would zoom upwards if this chokepoint is indeed blocked. Last year, the 12-day war between Israel and Iran saw Brent spot prices jump more than 20% to \$80 a barrel before retreating as tensions eased. Oil prices have been on the boil this year, climbing 17% since December to \$73 a barrel initially on concerns in Venezuela and more recently due to the massive build-up of US forces in the region, the highest since 2003, due to tensions with Iran. The outlook on global oil prices could be much worse if US and Israeli strikes also disrupt Iran's oil production as it is the fourth-largest Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) producer, generating 3.37 million barrels per day in 2025.

Disruption would straightaway take out 4.2% of global crude supplies. OPEC+ agreed to a modest oil output boost of 206,000 barrels per day on Sunday. Analysts, however, said OPEC+ has a history of raising oil output to cushion disruptions but the group currently has little spare capacity to add to supply, except for its leader Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates which will also struggle to export oil until navigation in the Gulf returns to normal. The likelihood of a spike in oil prices amid a broader regional conflict is bad news for India which depends massively on energy imports. India is also concerned about the safety of its 10-million strong diaspora in the region and has urged dialogue and diplomacy to de-escalate tensions.

India is also seriously impacted if the Strait of Hormuz closes as more than 52% of its monthly crude imports passes through this artery. Crude volumes jumped to 2.911 thousand barrels per day in February (month till date), up from 1,860 thousand barrels per day in September 2025, according to *IE*. Due to the strikes on Iran, oil refiners are naturally putting in place contingency sourcing strategies, including the possibility of turning back to higher volumes of deeply discounted Russian crude if West Asian supplies are seriously disrupted. The prospect of costlier oil only underscores the imperative of making determined efforts to step up relative self-sufficiency in domestic oil production over the medium term to bolster our energy security.

## Trump's Iran ambitions are clear: He wants everything

US PRESIDENT DONALD Trump never did explain to Congress or anyone else what his justifications and goals would be for attacking Iran. Now, with "Operation Epic Fury" underway, we know. The answer was "everything", making this a gamble on a scale way beyond anything even this former casino owner has done before.

Setting out goals for military action determines what is needed, how it will be done and what is the measure of success. In the eight-minute address Trump posted on *Truth Social*, he laid out at least half a dozen reasons for going to war, starting with the prevention of an imminent threat to the US, of which—with nuclear negotiations due to resume next week—there was none.

He followed up with a string of other motives for this attack. It would eliminate for good Iran's nuclear programme; destroy its missiles and the production lines to make them; crush its military and ability to support proxies abroad; annihilate its navy; avenge Iranian attacks on US servicemen over 47 years; and halt the Islamic Republic's further slaughter of its own people.

Yet the most ambitious goal, and the one that must be achieved to make sense of all the others, was regime change. Without that, the Republic and its activities can be weakened, interrupted, or delayed, but not stopped. Its missiles, nuclear programme, domestic repression, and military activities abroad would revive, only now with lessons learned and in a state of war.

Without change at the top, many of the problems Trump and Israel set out to resolve would only be made more difficult. Iran's leadership would, for example, almost certainly kick out international nuclear inspectors, radically reducing the ability of the US and others to track Iran's uranium enrichment.

Of course, if Trump succeeds in forcing the regime's downfall, all will be forgiven and his triumph would be indisputable. That outcome came a step closer with Iranian state television's confirmation on Sunday of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's death. He and the aging revolution he embodied had little support at home and still less abroad.

His regime has nothing to recommend it and the world would—without question—be a better place with it gone. The risks involved in this operation are, nonetheless, all too real. The moment he launched such a large attack with unlimited goals, Trump intensified the regime in Tehran to use every means at its disposal to strike back in what it must now treat as a fight for survival.

It will take a little time before we know how much of the Iranian leadership the initial US strikes killed. Likewise, we can't say whether US and Israeli jets and missiles were able to destroy enough of Iran's ballistic missile launchers to remove any significant threat to US military bases and personnel abroad.

Also unknown is what Iranian capabilities will remain to carry out its threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, to sink oil tankers or strike the lightly defended oil infrastructure of US Gulf allies. These explain the reticence of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Sunni Arab states with no love for Tehran to support the US-Israeli assault.

If air strikes alone can achieve regime change anywhere, Iran is a good candidate. Khamenei, his ruling elite, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps that protect them have exhausted their competence to deliver even basic solutions to the state's economic failures, and have lost touch with the country. Only weeks ago the IRGC killed thousands, if not tens of thousands, of their own people to cling onto power.

And yet, there are no precedents for toppling a regime using solely air power. Hence Trump's appeal to the Iranian people to rise up and take control. It all now depends on them. Even then, should the Islamic Republic fall, the impact on Iran and its neighbouring states might only have begun. This is a country of 92 million people, with a long and proud history, but also no organised domestic opposition ready to take charge and large minorities that may well wish to take advantage of the chaos.

The US has been here before: in Afghanistan for 20 years, in Iraq from 2003, and in Libya in 2011, to name just a few instances where its military interventions in West Asia failed. That does not mean it can't work this time, but one thing is certain: There is nobody in Washington who can be sure of where this war of choice leads.

Over the last five decades, the US has repeatedly intervened across West and Southeast Asia, often promising order, only to leave fractured states behind. The invasion of Vietnam scarred a generation and destabilised Indochina. The 2003 war in Iraq dismantled institutions, unleashed sectarianism, and created space for the

INDIA MUST AGAIN WALK DIPLOMATIC TIGHTROPE; CALIBRATED RESPONSE REFLECTS SIMULTANEOUS PARTNERSHIPS

# A void and its reverberations

**T**HE ASSASSINATION OF Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on February 28 in a coordinated US-Israeli strike represents the gravest rupture in Iran's political order since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. For a system that has prided itself on ideological continuity and institutional resilience, the sudden removal of its supreme arbiter has exposed deep structural fault lines. Iranian state media's confirmation of the 86-year-old Supreme Leader's death, followed by 40 days of mourning, cannot mask the stark reality: the Islamic Republic has lost the one figure who, for 37 years, balanced clerical authority, military power, and ideological orthodoxy.

President Donald Trump's characterisation of the strike as "justice for the people of Iran", coupled with explicit calls for regime change, has ensured that this is not merely a leadership crisis but a strategic inflection point. Tehran's retaliatory missile strikes on US bases across Iraq and the Gulf, as well as Israeli military installations, signal that escalation—not restraint—will define the immediate horizon.

### A system without its anchor

Iran's constitution provides for a temporary three-member council—President Masoud Pezeshkian, judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, and a Guardian Council jurist—to assume authority until the Assembly of Experts selects a successor. On paper, the transition may appear orderly but in practice, it will be anything but.

Names circulating as potential successors reflect the system's internal tensions: Ayatollah Alireza Arafai, Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, Ayatollah Hashem Hosseini Bushehr, and Mohseni-Ejei himself represent clerical continuity. More controversial possibilities include Mojtaba Khamenei, whose elevation would invite charges of dynastic succession, and Hassan Khomeini, whose relative pragmatism could unsettle hardline factions.

Three broad trajectories are possible. The first is managed continuity—"Khamenei-ism without Khamenei"—where a vetted cleric preserves ideolog-

**HARSH V PANT**  
Vice President for Studies and Foreign Policy, Observer Research Foundation



ical orthodoxy while the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) consolidates operational control. The second is overt militarisation, formalising the IRGC's dominance and reducing clerical institutions to ceremonial relevance. The third is systemic fracture: elite infighting, popular unrest, or defections leading to regime destabilisation. None of these scenarios offers a straightforward pathway to democratisation. The IRGC remains the regime's spine, and the opposition remains fragmented and externally dispersed.

### Regional shockwaves

The regional reverberations have been immediate and violent. Iranian missile retaliation struck multiple US facilities, while Israel activated nationwide sirens despite intercepting most projectiles. Iran-backed militias in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon have pledged escalation, though the simultaneous decapitation of senior IRGC commanders has degraded command coherence.

The so-called "Axis of Resistance" faces its sternest test. Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi militias have lost not merely a patron but a strategic coordinator. Opportunistic attacks may continue, but sustained proxy warfare requires centralised direction and financing—both now uncertain. Israel, meanwhile, may see an opportunity to further degrade Iranian nuclear infrastructure, though any perceived Iranian nuclear breakthrough during this transitional phase would almost certainly trigger renewed strikes.

Gulf monarchies confront a paradox. While many may privately welcome con-

straints on Iranian adventurism, they now face direct exposure—missile overflight, energy disruptions, sectarian tensions, and the spectre of uncontrolled escalation.

### Energy and global order

Energy securitisation is the most immediate global challenge. Disruptions to Gulf shipping lanes and fears of closure of the Strait of Hormuz have sent oil markets upward. History offers cautionary lessons: regime decapitation does not equate to strategic stabilisation. Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 remain sobering precedents. A militarised Iran could emerge more aggressively externally and more repressive internally. A clerical successor might pursue tactical de-escalation to ensure regime survival. A collapse scenario risks something even more destabilising—loose nuclear material, ethnic insurgencies, and a fractured state at the crossroads of West Asia.

The next few weeks will turn on three variables: the speed and cohesion with which the Assembly of Experts acts; whether the IRGC consolidates or splinters; and whether simmering public unrest overwhelms security structures. The Islamic Republic has weathered crises before—but never without its longest-serving helmsman and never under direct great-power assault.

Implications for India  
For India, the assassination injects acute uncertainty into an already volatile western neighbourhood. Energy security is the immediate concern. As the world's third-largest oil

importer, India is deeply exposed to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. Sustained instability could drive crude prices sharply upward, exacerbating inflationary pressures, straining subsidies, weakening the rupee, and complicating macroeconomic management at a time of elevated domestic demand.

The future of Chabahar Port—India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia and a critical node in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)—hangs in the balance. Leadership transition in Tehran, factional competition between clerical and military elites, potential collateral damage, and renewed US sanctions pressure could stall or derail India's investments. The project is not merely commercial; it is central to India's efforts to bypass Pakistan and counter expanding Chinese influence in the region.

Diplomatically, New Delhi must once again walk a tightrope. India's calibrated response—expressing concern while avoiding explicit condemnation—reflects its simultaneous partnerships with the United States, Israel, and Iran. Domestic sensitivities add another layer, as Shia communities across parts of India have expressed grief and anger, raising the risk of localised tensions if the regional conflict deepens.

In the near term, India is likely to intensify quiet diplomacy—seeking sanctions flexibility, engaging any new Iranian leadership to safeguard Chabahar, diversifying energy imports, and strengthening alternative connectivity corridors. Over the longer term, the nature of Iran's succession—clerical continuity, military consolidation, or systemic breakdown—will determine whether India confronts a hardened theocracy, a praetorian state, or a zone of chronic instability on its western flank.

Khamenei's death does not merely mark the end of an era in Tehran. It ushers in a period of profound strategic flux across West Asia. For regional and external powers alike, the challenge will be to navigate this dangerous fluidity without precipitating a wider conflagration whose consequences would extend far beyond the Gulf.

## FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

# Recognising AI's arrival in India



## ASHOK GULATI

Distinguished professor, ICRIER

**NOTWITHSTANDING THE ROBODOG** gootup with Galgotias University and the "shirtsless" demonstration by some misguided youths, the AI Impact Summit was hugely successful in raising artificial intelligence (AI) awareness, amongst young Indians. The fact that 91 countries and international organisations have endorsed the Delhi Declaration for the use of AI for global good—"Sarajon hitayon and sarajon sukhaya" (Welfare for all, and happiness for all)—speaks for its success.

However, three fundamental issues discussed at the summit: Will AI lead to faster growth? Will it create or take away jobs? And will its benefits be equally distributed?

A majority of the answers to the first question were affirmative—undoubtedly, it will accelerate overall development. Many opined that humanity is likely to leap-frog in its evolution of knowledge, efficiency, and growth. Within the next decade, explosive growth in AI is likely, which will disrupt the functioning of almost all sectors, and those who want to remain in a business-as-usual mode will be left far behind. However, the biggest debate about AI is whether this process of creative destruction would lead to massive job losses. Opinions are currently divided. The managing director of the Interna-

tional Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, has highlighted the risk of job losses and likened the arrival of AI hitting the job market to a tsunami—40% and 60% of jobs in emerging and advanced economies will likely be affected. However, Mukesh Ambani, chairman and managing director of Reliance Industries Limited, has said they will ensure there are no job losses in the Indian industry as a result of AI induction. Only time will tell who will be right. My own take is that similar fears were expressed in the late 1980s, when then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced computers. Employees in banks, railways, and many other sectors went on strike fearing they would lose their jobs. Today, it is impossible to think about our banks running without computers.

This is where creative destruction needs to be remembered. Every new technology demolishes the old one and creates massive disruption but enables higher efficiency and growth. As a result, the economy expands, creating new jobs of higher skills and pay. But there are always some losses, especially in the short term, and some mechanism to upskill and/or com-

pensate them must be in place to minimise the pain and maximise the gains.

The next question is about equity. Who will gain and who will lose? Obviously, early starters will gain first and that may accentuate inequality in the short term. It may also be because few countries can afford to make massive investments—AI development needs money. But as has happened in many other technologies, very soon cheaper options emerge and usage expands exponentially, benefiting most of the populace. India's comparative advantage is its vast, low-cost software talent that the Global South can afford and use at a mass scale. Be it the vaccines during Covid-19, the innovative United Payments Interface, or the Indian Space

Research Organisation landing Chandrayaan-3 on the south pole of the moon, India can do wonders and emerge as the third-strongest global AI power.

There is no doubt that developing AI at scale requires massive investments, and top Indian industrialists have promised to pitch in. Also, my reading is that India is at least five years behind the US and China, who are already in the race to develop AI

AI will be used in India's agri-food system, not just in precision agriculture at the production stage but also at the logistics/marketing/processing stage

in humanoids. One cannot say with much confidence right now whether India can catch up and co-lead this race. However, the AI Impact Summit definitely sparked curiosity and led to the re-chalking of investment plans. The policy environment must be conducive for that to flourish. Regulatory issues, data ownership, equity, etc. are all important, but we need to ensure that India is not left behind as a user of Chinese or American AI. It must aim for its own models and apps—only then it can claim to be "atmanirbhar" (self-reliant) in this new world of AI.

I had the privilege to co-chair the agriculture segment in the BCG-Prosus AI for All' whitepaper released for this summit, and it speaks about whether Indian farmers and agriculture will gain from AI. Since agriculture employs 46% of our workforce, there is always a concern about whether AI applications will displace labour. Very briefly, AI will be used in India's agri-food system, not just in precision agriculture at the production stage but also at the logistics/marketing/processing stage. Many players are using it already, and the government is also developing AgriStack which will utilise it. The dawn of a new era in agriculture is soon approaching.

Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### US misadventures

Over the last five decades, the US has repeatedly intervened across West and Southeast Asia, often promising order, only to leave fractured states behind. The invasion of Vietnam scarred a generation and destabilised Indochina. The 2003 war in Iraq dismantled institutions, unleashed sectarianism, and created space for the

Islamic State. Libya was no better. The long occupation of Afghanistan ended with the return of the Taliban. In Syria and Yemen, proxy entanglements deepened humanitarian ruin. For Iran, the confrontation must ignite a wider war, from the Gulf to the Levant. The region needs de-escalation and security compacts, not another crusade draped in liberation. —N. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

### Catastrophic breach

The killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by US and Israeli forces represents a catastrophic breach of international norms. Regardless of one's geopolitical stance, the extrajudicial assassination of a sovereign head of state is a reckless departure from civilised diplomacy that invites global anarchy. Such a blatant assault on sovereignty

sets a dangerous precedent, replacing established legal frameworks with raw military force. The escalation guarantees a cycle of retaliatory violence and massive regional instability. One must demand an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to dialogue before this ignites a conflagration. —Vijaykumar HK, Raichur

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

# America Intervenes, Hold On to the Rails

### Instability as policy just got more unstable

So, one thing has been cleared up: Trump is not the isolationist he is often made to be. Saturday's attack on Iran with 'faith accomplices' Israel is a logical follow-up on an arc that dates back to Trump 1.0, when he ordered a drone attack that killed Iran's Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. The June 2025 attack on Iranian nuclear facilities — that Trump declared to have "completely and totally obliterated" — was a shove to test the negotiation table. The latest act of war is a cessation of negotiations.

An intervention on this scale doesn't have a single cause but multiple, layered ones. The cited one — Iran's nuclear development capabilities — is the least convincing. But Trump hasn't been big on 'need to convince for action' at home or abroad. So, his purported bid to act as catalyst for 'regime change', and appeal to the Iranian people 'to take over their country' — even as the attack has killed civilians, including almost 150 in a primary school in Minab in southern Iran — is as waffling as it seems. Whether the 'preventive' war — a war started to stop a war that hasn't started — declared by Benjamin Netanyahu will convince Israeli voters to repossess their electoral faith in him after charges of fraud and bribery will be known in a few months' time. In the US, mid-term elections also can find a MAGA-neocon narrative.

With the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in the strikes, the Islamic regime will find itself weakened — and therefore more liable to take a leaf out of Israel's 'Samson doctrine': perceiving existential defeat, 'take everyone down' with it. This isn't just bad news for Iranians, many of whom who have endured decades of suffrance of a despotic regime, but for the region and beyond. For all its closeness to Tehran, Beijing is unlikely to take a detour from its 'China First' project to take on the US and its Gulf 'bases' and come to Iran's help beyond providing 'market-testable' armaments. India, on its part, can be silently thankful that its latest show of friendship in the form of a prime ministerial visit to Israel was with the belligerent side, and not with its other, 'more dependable' ally that appears to be badly hit — and will, on its part, cause further hits across the region.

# Should Be a Short Sputter in Pipelines

The fallout of US-Israeli strikes on Iran on energy markets is likely to increase short-term volatility rather than long-term fundamentals of the energy market. Iran has limited capability to sustain a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, which the US military presence in the Persian Gulf, and Tehran will isolate itself further by missile strikes on its energy-exporting neighbours. Disruption to Iran's oil exports will have a marginal impact on global crude prices, which may be magnified by the closure of the shipping lanes. Natural gas faces greater volatility due to low stockpiles in importing nations.

India is particularly susceptible to diversion of the energy trade through the Persian Gulf because of its dependence on imports from the region. It is also affected by rising shipping costs on account of its maritime energy imports. Retail prices have, however, remained frozen for an extended period as India has purposefully diversified its energy sources to lower concentration risk. Glut in the global energy market should cushion the impact of escalating tensions in West Asia.

Iran's ability to escalate the conflict is limited by behavioural changes in its regime that the US is hoping to achieve. A further degradation of its military capabilities would challenge its national integrity. Pressure is mounting in Iran over economic hardships brought on by sanctions. A successor regime may find its options for dealing with restive ethnic minorities shrinking if it significantly loses air power. Trump should have support at home so long as he does not commit troops on the ground in Iran. After Venezuela, Iran may provide him with another success in strategically choking China's energy sources.

# JUST IN JEST

Military strategists and West Asia experts have suddenly sprouted

# Everyone's Playing War Fantasy League

The moment the US declared war against Iran, something interesting happened: everyone became a West Asia strategy expert. Overnight, the world is awash in maps of the Strait of Hormuz, diagrams of missile ranges and solemn pronouncements about 'Shia-Sunni dynamics' and Likud politics. People who, till last Friday, thought that Qom was a new brand of kombucha, have already sent us mails pointing out the 'utter naivete' of our two editorials above. The phrase 'geopolitical chessboard' is being deployed as many times in the last 48 hours as 'six-seven'. Meanwhile, hashtags like #PersianPivot and #OilWars trend as if foreign policy were a Marvel franchise.

This war is being treated especially like a fantasy league, with armchair generals tallying 'points' for drone strikes and missile hits, and then keeping 'score' via social media shares. Everyone is suddenly finding a new set of acronyms — IRGC, CENTCOM, JCPOA, ICBM — though most may not be used to find Tehran on a map without Google. 'Operation Roaring Lion', 'Operation Epic Fury' and 'Operation True Promise' are being cited as potential franchise titles for a spin-off of Aditya Dhar's Durrandhar movies. Frankly, the only thing more dangerous than war itself seems to be the spectacle of civilians cosplaying Clausewitz. In the theatre of war, the loudest voices are those farthest away.

Contradictions in Trump's war on Iran are glaring, and unlikely to end the way he thinks it will

# America in a Tehran Hurry



Manoj Joshi

here is something inherently uncomfortable about the targeted killing of a foreign leader. Even so, the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is unlikely to change things very much. The Iranian theory has long prepared for the passing of the 85-year-old. On Sunday, pressured by his MAGA base, Donald Trump is again floating off-ramp that could allow the Iranian clerical system to survive, Venezuela-style, if Tehran accepts fresh US ultimatums.

But the issue is trust. In June 2025, Israel struck Iran derailing Iran-US negotiations. Last Friday, Oman's foreign minister Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi had stated that a peace deal was within reach and Iran had agreed it would 'never, ever' possess nuclear material for a bomb and would accept full verification by IAEA. He said he had conveyed this directly to US vesp. In Vance. So, diplomacy could have worked, but the Americans chose war.

Within hours — citing the nuclear issue — Israel and the US launched attacks on Iran. Trump claimed negotiation had failed and he invoked Iran's long record of hostility, stretching back to the 1979 hostage crisis. His public statements framed the action as essential to US security, regional stability clearly being secondary. The sequence suggests that war was the objective from the outset, and that diplomacy served as a pretext for seeking Iran's strategic capitulation.

For a president openly lobbying



Reply to all: An Iranian missile strike on Tel Aviv on Saturday

for the Nobel Peace Prize, Trump's record is striking. In less than a year, he struck Iran in June 2025, attacked Venezuela and abdicated its president in January 2026, and has now returned to war with Tehran. He has threatened Cuba and carried out sporadic bombing in Nigeria. This is not the profile of a peacemaker but a warmonger.

After withdrawing from 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a European-led agreement endorsed by UNSC that constrained Iran's nuclear programme, Trump now asserts that Iran continued nuclear development and sought missile capabilities of reaching the US. This comes just eight months after he declared that the earlier US bombing had effectively destroyed Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

The contradictions are glaring. Washington's maximalist approach has ensured that the clerical establishment, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Basji militia will fight on. The larger question is whether ordinary Iranians will rise against the regime whose record of economic mismanagement and suppression of dissent is well-known. The US is highly

unlikely to commit ground forces to engineer regime change. But without them, external pressure alone rarely topples entrenched systems.

Moreover, Iran isn't a simple hierarchical state that collapses if a single node is removed. Its hybrid structure — combining clerical oversight, republican institutions, security organs and patronage networks — has proved resilient during repeated waves of protest. Leadership transitions may alter internal balances, but they don't automatically produce systemic change.

'Regime change' is a potent slogan, but vague strategy. In Iran's case, it could mean elimination of one generation of clerical leaders, only to be replaced by another. It could mean IRGC consolidating power into a more overt military dictatorship. Neither outcome necessarily means a more peaceful or democratic Iran.

It also isn't clear whether airpower alone can deliver such sweeping political objectives. Even in contexts of overwhelming asymmetry, sustained bombing has rarely eradicated deeply embedded movements. Israel's struggle against Hamas underscores the limits. In the US, there is scant appetite for another large-scale ground war in West Asia — a restraint that is wise, given the costly and inconclusive US experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The conflict has already assumed a regional dimension. Israel struck

targets across Iran over the weekend, and Iran retaliated with missiles aimed at Israel and US bases in the region, which has the effect of closing down one of the busiest aviation hubs in the world.

States such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which had hoped to avoid direct entanglement, have now lined up more firmly behind Washington. China and Russia have condemned the joint Israel-US action but have sought limited concessions to their own interests.

Consequences of escalation extend far beyond Iran. Tehran has now closed the Strait of Hormuz. Roughly 20% of global oil supplies transit this narrow waterway, including about half of India's and China's oil and substantial shares of LNG. Any sustained disruption would send global energy prices soaring, with cascading effects on inflation and growth worldwide.

Washington's maximalist approach has ensured that the clerical establishment, Revolutionary Guards and Basji militia will fight on. But will it be enough to reshape politics. Even disaffected people are unlikely to align with foreign attackers. Especially in West Asia where the aftermath of US-led interventions has meant chaos and civil war in Iraq, Libya, Syria and further east in Afghanistan.

As for the US, it had hoped after last June's Iran bombing and the Venezuela experience, that the war would be a low-cost enterprise. But that does not look like being the case. The US and Israel started this war. But it may require Iran's vote to end it. When, how and why that will happen is not easy to foresee.

The writer is distinguished fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.



# THE SPEAKING TREE

# Learned Ignorance

PRITHWIS DATTA

There is an interesting discussion between Narendra, Swami Vivekananda in later life, and Ramakrishna at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple near Kolkata. Ramakrishna overheard Narendra saying to other devotees that he had read William Hamilton, a Scottish philosopher, say: 'A learned ignorance is the end of philosophy and the beginning of religion.'

Ramakrishna, who had very little formal education, asked Narendra what this meant. Narendra explained that true wisdom involves recognising the limits of human reason to grasp ultimate truths, leading to a state of divine understanding beyond pure intellect. It highlights that while philosophy questions, learned ignorance admits what can't be known, showing the way to faith and spiritual experience, where theoretical knowledge gives way to direct awareness of the Divine.

Docta Ignorantia, learned ignorance, is a concept where acknowledging the vastness of what remains unknown becomes the highest form of knowledge, freeing the mind from dogmatic certainty, fostering spiritual quest and a direct personal relationship with the Divine, moving beyond intellectual constraints.

# MELODY FOR MONDAY

# Sixteen Tons

Tennessee Ernie Ford

'Tennessee' Ernie Ford's 1955 rendition of Merle Travis' 1947 original 'Sixteen Tons' is one of those covers that eclipses his source. It transforms a coal miner's lament into a cultural thunderclap. Ford's bell-towered baritone carries the weight of the lyrics with biblical authority — deep, resonant, unyielding.

When he intones, 'You load sixteen tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt,' it feels less like a lyric than a judgment handed down from the coal-dark heavens. With nothing but song as a pickaxe, the narrator drills into his listeners' minds a timeless humour wrapped as an HR complaint.

What makes Ford's version unforgettable is not just the voice, but also the arrangement. The finger-snapping rhythm creates a pulse that mirrors the endless drudgery of labour and not makes a jiving tune of it.

Layered atop this is the charmer-driven accompaniment, shrewd and smoky, marking the track dry with swing-era coolness that's the exact opposite of the Faustian line: 'Saint Peter, don't you call me, 'cause I can't go / I owe my soul to the company store.' This is a marvellous, ringing union of grit and polish, despair and style.

# Chat Room

# A Waste of Resources

Appropos 'US, Israel Strike Iran in Joint Op, Tehran Retains Denial' (Mar 1), Every nation must respect the sovereignty of other nations. Issues of concern must be resolved without breaching sovereignty. Military strikes on Iran by US and Israel, followed by retaliation by Iran and then counter-retaliatory strikes have plunged the world into a state of uncertainty and anxiety. All we have to show for it is disruption, lost lives and absolute waste of material — natural and human resources. Let nations discern that war is no solution to any crisis. Animated conversation between nations can avoid wars and ensure world peace. S Ramakrishnaswamy, Chennai

### ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

**They tallied the bombs like a score, As if bloodshed were games to adore, But the 'points' that they claim Are just lives lost in vain — Idiots cheering for carnage and more.**

# Opportunities for Women...

Only 4% of women live in countries close to full legal equality, according to the World Bank report that assesses the enabling environment for women's economic opportunity across 190 economies. The assessment covers three pillars: legal frameworks, supportive frameworks, and enforcement and perceptions...

Region	Legal frameworks	Supportive frameworks	Enforcement Perceptions
East Asia & Pacific (25)	59.77	42.32	44.08
Europe & Central Asia (23)	80.62	55.61	64.87
High Income OECD (34)	87.93	73.04	75.86
Latin America & Caribbean (32)	72.15	64.10	55.28
W. Asia & N. Africa (20)	43.24	36.25	37.32
South Asia (8)	44.26	36.61	35.32
SSA (48)	59.55	32.99	45.02
Global (190)	66.97	46.83	53.31
Bangladesh	34.38	34.73	27.92
China	70.00	69.30	62.64
India	57.93	54.75	43.17
Pakistan	46.68	50.68	27.25
US	87.58	69.93	68.13

Max score: 100; \*pillar or main index; each of the pillars covers 10 areas: (women's) safety, mobility, work, pay, marriage, parenthood, childcare, entrepreneurship, assets, pension

Latin Am & Carib. Latin America and the Caribbean; SSA: Sub-Saharan Africa

# MEME'S THE WORD

**We're at war with Iran because they've been developing nuclear weapons**

**So you'll declare war against Russia next, right?**

**Are you crazy? They ALREADY HAVE nuclear weapons!**

# Mythili Bhushnurmah

Last week, Gov received a shot in the arm following the release of GDP figures under the revised series. Nirmala Sitharaman is not given to hyperbole. But she could, perhaps, borrow from Donald Trump's State of the Union address in February: 'The roaring economy is roaring like never before.'

Not only are we the fastest-growing major economy for the 4th year running, but growth in FY26 is estimated at 7.6%, up from 7.4% in the first AP (under the old series) released in January. Even better, the higher growth comes on the back of an upwardly revised number of 7.1% in FY25, against 6.5% in the old series. Best of all, the structural component of growth has shifted. From a scenario where growth was led by (wasteful?) public administration, it is now led by three employment-intensive sectors — manufacturing, trade, hotels, communications and construction.

The most remarkable turnaround story is in the manufacturing sector. Long considered a laggard, it recorded double-digit growth rates in FY24 and FY26, with average growth in value-added terms topping 11% in the last 5 years. Some of this is, possibly, explained by improved use of deflators (double deflation, where both output and input prices are available) to get a better assessment of the value added in the sector.

But some of this is also because of

# Data Muscle Can Shape Policy

the reduced use of proxies to estimate the contribution of the informal sector, as MOSPI now has access to (better) primary sources of information like Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE). This is good news. It suggests the informal sector is better shape than widely believed earlier and the erstwhile K-shaped recovery is becoming more broad-based.

The only nagging worry is the relatively poor showing of the primary sector, and within that, of agriculture, where the contribution in value-added terms is estimated to fall to a 3-year low of 2.4% in FY26. In current prices, the fall is even more marked — from 9.2% in FY25 to 0.3% in FY26.

'We are data dependent' is a phrase dear to all central banks, including RBI. Fiscal authorities, in contrast, don't make much of a fetish about data dependency, especially because fiscal decisions are, essentially, in the political economy domain and, hence, are coloured more by political considerations and less by cold numbers. Nonetheless,

data is the bedrock on which all fiscal policies — spending and tax policies — must be based.

The problem is when a new series replaces the old, the scale of revisions is magnified manifold. As with the last revision a decade ago, the new series will, doubtless, give rise to endless debate. What is indisputable, however, is that the revised series is a significant step toward a more accurate and credible measurement of the economy.

Prior to the revision, India's economic data was benchmarked to the US economy as it existed in 2011-12. Since then, the economy has changed dramatically, with the emergence of new industries such as RE and digital services and changes in consumption patterns and investment behaviour.

Unfortunately, as far as the fiscal is concerned, numbers have come too late — almost a month after the budget was presented. So, not only is the absolute FY26 GDP number under the new series (₹5.45 lakh cr) short of the ₹5.57 lakh cr assumed

# Power ahead

in the budget, it's well below the FY27 estimate of ₹5.90 lakh cr; and the revised GoI might have to tighten its purse strings to reach its fiscal deficit target of 4.3% next fiscal. Members of MPC are better served with an uncertain. Decision go before the next meeting of MPC, there is enough time to digest the numbers and tweak policy accordingly.

Macroeconomic numbers hold a mirror to the economy even if, as former YV Reddy once said, 'In India, not only the future but even the past is uncertain.' Decision makers rely on economic statistics to provide a picture of the health of the economy — more importantly, to frame appropriate policy.

Revisions are not new to India. The bigger problem is that our numbers come with a long lag; in the case of GDP numbers, the final numbers are known only after 2 years. Hopefully, the lag will be less going forward, and base revisions will happen every 3 years instead of the present 10. The latest GDP series, with a new base (2022-23), revised methodology for better measurement of the informal and services sectors, and expanded coverage, is bound to reflect the health of the economy better.

In November 2025, India's national accounts data received a 'C' grade from IMF, citing coverage gaps, but also highlighting the need for a limited recent benchmark data, gaps in measurement of the informal sector and continued reliance on single deflation methods for estimating real GDP. With the latest revised series, MOSPI has largely addressed these gaps, paving the way for more evidence-based policy. But as the events of the past two days have shown, the past is no guide to the future.

CONTRAPUNTO

The good Lord didn't see fit to put oil and gas only where there are democratically elected regimes friendly to US

-DICK CHENEY

Questions For Don, Bibi

US & Israel's attack may not free Iranians and, worst case, produce a West Asian crisis

In attacking Iran, Trump and Netanyahu may have crossed a line from confrontation into open defiance of what remains of international law. There is no credible legal framework that justifies a sweeping military campaign of this scale. No one with an ounce of sense will mourn the death of a brutal dictator like Khamenei. But that doesn't put a legal pink ribbon on the war.

Khamenei savagely crushed dissent whenever it surfaced. From the Iranian Green Movement to the 2022 uprising sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, the state's answer was consistent: force, fear, and fatalities. Many Iranians feel terrified of and estranged from the leadership - brute authority grafted onto a society yearning to breathe. Sanctions, fuelled in part by Tehran's incendiary rhetoric and regional adventurism, have punished citizens far more than the elite. Till now, the regime survived; the public paid the price.

But is that regime now ending? That's the tricky question. Popular revulsion towards authoritarianism does not translate into tactical wisdom. Removing a regime by foreign force is a perilous gamble. Even if the clerical order collapses, what rises in its place is uncertain. Iran's opposition is fragmented. Exiled figures such as Reza Pahlavi command diaspora sympathy but not much support inside Iran. Groups like Mojahedin-e-Khalq are a basket case themselves. Ethnic groups like Kurds and Balochs have their own agendas.

Let's not forget the Ayatollah regime cultivated a web of armed actors: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, its Quds Force, Basij militia, and regional proxies such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Ansar Allah. In a protracted conflict, these networks can ignite flashpoints across West Asia, turning a bilateral clash into regional chaos. In the first 36 hours of the conflict, Iran targeted Israel, put US military assets in the region in its crosshairs, and hit some installations in Bahrain, Qatar and UAE. The impact seemed limited. But what if Tehran's warning of a great retaliation is borne out?

Of course, for Washington and Jerusalem the ideal outcome would be an internal recalibration - a pragmatic figure emerging from within the system to negotiate a reset. But that hinges on whether the Revolutionary Guard chooses survival through compromise or resistance through escalation. No one knows the answer to that right now. So, there's a chance this confrontation could spiral fast - and ugly. That's terrible news for the world and for India. Oil (the focus of our next comment) apart, there are 8mn Indians in Gulf. GOI has a tough job going forward.

Oil At \$100?

Not if war is short, or China and US use their oil reserves to ease pressure on market

Oil prices were rising before Iran war started Saturday. Question now is, how high will they go? Analysts say it depends on how long war lasts. When Israel attacked Iran last June, oil briefly jumped from less than \$70 a barrel to around \$80, which was far below the \$100-\$120 analysts had predicted. But that was a 12-day war. This time, amid US buildup, oil had already touched \$72.5 by Friday. It's expected to nudge \$75 today, and rise to \$100 eventually if war drags on.

A prolonged war will impact W Asian oil supplies to big buyers like India and China in three ways. One, tankers can't sail through Strait of Hormuz under Iranian fire; two, Iran targets neighbours' wells and refineries, and three, its proxies in Yemen once again close Red Sea route to ships. If tankers reroute around S Africa, freight costs alone could rise up to 60%.

Some 20mn barrels of oil flows through Strait of Hormuz daily - roughly equal to India-China combined daily demand. There's no easy way to replace it. After India scaled back Russian supplies under US pressure, its dependence on oil from Iraq and Saudi Arabia has increased. With Venezuela producing less than 1mn barrels a day, it's not an alternative. Brazil and US supplies won't be available immediately either.

Oil at \$100 is bad news beyond pump prices because it will stoke inflation. By some estimates, a 0.4-0.7 percentage point increase is possible. That will slow down economic growth. If dollar strengthens - it likely will - the hit will be even harder. But how bad things get will also depend on how US and China use their strategic petroleum reserves. Mid-Feb, US had around 415mn barrels in stock, and China possibly 1.3bn - enough to cover four months' demand. If both draw from their reserves - China probably will while prices are high - and buy less oil over the next few weeks, global price pressure might ease.

Yalla Dubai

As war debris falls on the city, it does not panic

Bikram Vohra

While attacks on a city known globally for its glitz and glamour are undeniably stressful, the public reaction in Dubai reveals an awesome side to our psyche. As I write, life, for most of us, is normal. All we are doing is heeding the advice of staying indoors to avoid the debris of intercepted missiles.

And we are a pretty handy lot, all 2.9mn of us. We know what makes this city hum. There's concern in huge, big dollups, for sure, but no panic. That is Dubai for you and pretty much proud we are of this resilience under fire. We are not just bling and bells and whistles, we own this place and only when the chips are down do we realise there is gravel in the rug.

Oops there were two huge right now, windows are rattling. But the authorities lead from the front and their mind-blowing efficiency makes us feel we belong, that we are being taken care of - which makes it all the more annoying that this city is being targeted. Yet, the metro is running, the buses are on time, the cabbies are in full force and delivery mobiley posses are creating their normal roar. It is this community spirit that has got us through Day One. Even the ATP 500 finals were not cancelled Saturday evening. This is the unseemly of not knowing where it's all going in the future is real and tangible.

But we are assuring friends and family in the home countries as much as they are calling us. Truly telling friends and neighbours to be concerned but not be stupid. No point rushing off to the desert and getting stuck. The rescue teams have bigger fish to fry. No point being in towering apartment buildings, neighbours who had only ever exchanged polite nods in the elevator are suddenly checking in on each other, sharing snacks, and forming impromptu support pods. It is a masterclass in trust between a govt and its people. Both ways. Our city isn't just big buildings and glitz. It's the people, who, when the sky lights up for the wrong reasons, choose to stand closer together.

AFRICA ATOLLAN...

Does US have a blueprint? Will Iran, stretched to the limits, descend into Syria-like chaos?

Jane Kinninmont



West Asia expert based in London

Khamenei dead, Iran's ruling establishment has entered what can only be described as a survival mode. Faced with a threat it views not merely as strategic but existential, Tehran is responding with instincts of a system in direst diplomatic straits. Yet political elites have found themselves in the crosshairs. Objective is regime preservation - and willingness to raise costs across the region reflects precisely that.

Even Oman - long positioned as a discreet diplomatic bridge and recently at the forefront of efforts to revive a nuclear deal - reported missiles heading towards its economically vital port of Duqm. The symbolism is stark: no state is insulated, not even those pursuing de-escalation. Images of fires near Gulf economic hubs reverberate far beyond the battlefield, unsettling markets and rattling investor confidence. Should Iran's govt survive this crisis, it will likely find itself more regionally isolated than at any point in recent memory. Yet from Tehran's vantage point, if survival is at stake, isolation is a secondary concern.

Transition in Tehran appears structured enough to ensure continuity. Yet political systems under pressure rarely move without friction. In the coming weeks, tensions within the Iranian elite are likely to surface - disagreements over whether the Islamic Republic must adapt to survive or whether defiance remains its only viable doctrine. Earlier, Tehran could rely on its network of non-state allies - Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis. That deterrent web has now been significantly degraded by Israeli operations. So, Iran faces the uncomfortable reality that its layered deterrence no longer carries the same credibility.

From Washington and Tel Aviv's perspective, a weakened Iran, rebuilding its deterrence while ending nuclear threshold status, was deemed a risk worth pre-empting. What happens next hinges on several volatile variables. Will the Iranian state remain centralised, or begin to fragment under pressure? Will the discontent coalesce around opposition figures capable of mobilising sustained resistance? And if it does, will the security apparatus - battle-hardened and uncompromising - revert to decisive repression?

The strategic path forward is equally stark. Does the leadership double down on confrontation with US and Israel, framing compromise as capitulation? Or does it explore accommodation, seeking to preserve the system through recalibration rather than escalation? Washington's posture adds another layer of uncertainty: Will US actively pursue regime collapse? Or would "regime decapitation" suffice - a symbolic victory following Khamenei's death, allowing President Trump to declare success and step back?

One conceivable pathway resembles what some in Washington have termed a "Venezuela scenario": encouraging the rise of a more pragmatic figure within the system, someone capable of striking a limited deal. Yet such an outcome may leave IRGC dominant - effectively producing a paramilitary state with trappings of religion. Whether IRGC, born of ideological resistance to US influence, would entertain such a pivot is deeply uncertain.

Then there is the possibility of systemic collapse - partial or total. History offers sobering lessons. Collapse can transition into civil war, or it can also unleash civil war. Syria's trajectory - prolonged devastation followed by uncertain political shift - is a cautionary example. A purely domestic political reset, led by pragmatists capable of rebuilding trust with the country's orthodox, would arguably be the least destabilising outcome. It is also, perhaps, the least probable.

The other problem is that the perceived operational success of previous pressure campaigns may have recalibrated Washington's risk tolerance - so, rather than entering with a detailed blueprint for post-conflict Iran, the approach feels opportunistic. US invasion of Iraq stands as a warning: unintended consequences often emerge not from the opening salvo, but from what follows. Remember, Iran played a decisive role in complicating the US position in Iraq.

The final question may not concern Iran alone. Other powers, wary of an unpredictable American president, might calculate that drawing Washington deeper into an Iranian quagmire serves their interests. The strategic landscape, and opportunistic strategy, destabilisation can become a tool of deterrence.

Attila Somfalvi



Political analyst based in Tel Aviv

The war surprised almost no one in Israel. For weeks, the slow-motion collapse of US-Iran negotiations had been visible. It was widely understood Netanyahu had been pressing Trump to use force.

Against that backdrop and amid intensifying unrest within Iran - the belief took root in Tel Aviv that rhetoric alone would not bend Tehran's course. The regime's violent repression of its own citizens reinforced a broader perception that it felt it yielded only to pressure. Thus, the elimination of Khamenei marks a pivotal and deeply symbolic rupture.

But what follows? Will this moment galvanise Iranians to mount a decisive challenge from within? Or will the system disintegrate into chaos, restoring equilibrium, and project continuity in the face of shock? Khamenei's rule was defined by ideological rigidity paired with institutional entrenchment. Power radiated not only from the supreme leader's office but through a dense network of security bodies and patronage structures.

Chief among them was IRGC, a hybrid force that is at once military, economic conglomerate, and guardian of revolutionary orthodoxy. Its reach extends beyond Iran's borders through allied militias and proxies that provide Tehran with strategic depth and asymmetric leverage.

That infra does not dissolve overnight. Those who now compete to shape Iran's future will prioritise survival - personal, institutional, and ideological. A weakened regime may seek to consolidate internally before recalibrating externally. It may gamble on escalation to restore deterrence. Or it may quietly explore accommodation to preserve the core of its power. None of these paths guarantees the emergence of a freer Iran, nor do they ensure regional calm.

From a broader West Asian perspective, the present confrontation is not an isolated eruption but a continuation of the conflict that ignited on Oct 7, 2023. That watershed moment reshaped the strategic landscape. Hezbollah was battered and stripped of much of its aura of invincibility. Hamas

are less visible than war, but no less transformative. And then there is the question of public psychology inside Iran. Historically, foreign intervention has triggered nationalist consolidation. Yet today, fatigue and disillusionment complicate that reflex. Some may resist, others may warily silence, and some may herald catastrophe or opportunity.

If Tehran were to emerge from isolation and enter the Western system, the result would not simply be sanctions relief. It would be a structural reordering of West Asia. An Israel-Gulf/Iran axis - once unimaginable - could anchor a pragmatic commercial zone under a renewed American umbrella. Iranian gas flowing to Europe would squeeze Moscow's room for manoeuvre. Beijing's Eurasian corridor would require recalibration. Global capital would find one of the region's largest untapped markets suddenly accessible.

Remember, though, tectonic shifts rarely unfold cleanly. Power transitions in ideologically anchored systems tend towards turbulence. The question is not whether Iran changes - all states do. The question is how violent the passage becomes, and who shapes its direction.

In the end, the struggle over Iran is not only about centrifuges or missiles. It is about who writes the geopolitical code of West Asia for the next generation - and whether that code is drafted through negotiation, implosion, or confrontation.

Trump's Real Goals: Get Iran's Energy, Geopolitically Hobble China, Russia. But Big Shifts Rarely Happen Smoothly

Aydin Zezer



Ex-Turkish diplomat based in Ankara

Why Israel is attacking Iran is clear. Why Trump is, is a much more complicated answer. And it has nothing to do with 'freedom for Iran' people.

First, energy. Iran is the world's second-largest natural gas reserves and one of the largest oil reserves. Sanctions have kept those hydrocarbons largely outside Western markets. A re-integrated Iran would not merely sell oil; it would redraw the global energy map, Iran's energy supply, once politically unthinkable, now sits in the realm of strategic possibility. Opening Iran's fields to Western capital would not simply be commercial - it would be geopolitical.

Second, China. Beijing's Tehran's primary oil customer and a key partner in sanctions-era trade. Iran is a critical corridor in the Belt and Road Initiative, serving as a connective bridge between East Asia and Europe. Any shift that brings Iranian exports under US regulatory control weakens China's energy security. Control does not require overtly Western financial and logistical system. In the age of great-power competition, pipelines can matter as much as aircraft carriers.

Third, Russia. Moscow and Tehran have grown closer in recent years. And when Iran's energy re-enters Western markets at scale, Moscow's leverage over Europe narrows dramatically. Integrating the South Caucasus and Central Asia into Western energy

corridors would further dilute Russian influence. In that sense, Iran is not just a regional file - it is a hinge in the wider Eurasian contest. But geopolitics is never purely external. Iran's internal dynamics matter just as much. Years of economic strain, currency collapse, and social unrest have eroded the social contract between state and citizen. Brutal crackdowns following protest waves have damaged trust in ways that may not be easily repaired. The opposition remains fragmented and leaderless, yet dissatisfaction is widespread and generational.

Regime change, however, need not resemble revolution. It may not mean the fall of the Islamic Republic in dramatic fashion, nor the restoration of monarchy. Transformation could emerge through elite realignment - new actors within the system repositioning Iran towards gradual normalisation. Unless, US and Israel decide to exploit Iran's subregional flashpoints. The most volatile variable lies along Iran's periphery: Kurdish regions in the west (Rojhilat), Azeri-majority areas in the northwest, and Baluch communities in the southeast have long existed at sensitive fault lines.

External encouragement of ethnic dissent - even subtle - can magnify local grievances into national crises. Pressure could materialise through managed instability: intelligence support, calibrated strikes, and political backing of sub-state actors. Such strategies

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space



All war propaganda, all screaming and lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting.

George Orwell

Unheeded Wisdom And A Materialistic Superpower

Jwalaant Svaroop

When Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, Osho, and AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada arrived in US, they carried with them not merely Eastern teachings, but a corrective wisdom meant for a civilisation rising rapidly in external power yet lacking inner anchorage. From the Indic perspective, such arrivals are never accidental. They appear when imbalance reaches a critical threshold. America listened - but only partially. The teachings of these masters were admired, commodified, and selectively adopted, yet rarely integrated at the civilisational or institutional level. Meditation became a productivity tool rather than a path to self-transcendence. Yog became physical fitness rather than inner discipline. Devotion was aestheticised, but its demand for surrender and restraint was largely resisted. The deeper challenge - to re-order values - remained unanswered.

Instead, US continued its relentless pursuit of material expansion: economic dominance, technological acceleration, military reach, and cultural influence. The trajectory produced unparalleled wealth and innovation, but it also pushed materialism to its limits. Indic philosophy would describe this as rajava - unchecked by sattva - can magnify local grievances into national crises. Pressure could materialise through managed instability: intelligence support, calibrated strikes, and political backing of sub-state actors. Such strategies resisted. The deeper challenge - to re-order values - remained unanswered. Instead, US continued its relentless pursuit of material expansion: economic dominance, technological acceleration, military reach, and cultural influence. The trajectory produced unparalleled wealth and innovation, but it also pushed materialism to its limits. Indic philosophy would describe this as rajava - unchecked by sattva - can magnify local grievances into national crises. Pressure could materialise through managed instability: intelligence support, calibrated strikes, and political backing of sub-state actors. Such strategies resisted. The deeper challenge - to re-order values - remained unanswered.



THE SPEAKING TREE



### Editor's TAKE

## Gulf on the brink after Khamenei killing

As Iran weighs retaliation and Gulf states brace for fallout, the region stands at a dangerous crossroads between containment and full-scale war

Yet another war has started, this time predictably in the Middle East, the region which has been on tenterhooks for quite some time now. Despite the negotiations and peace parleys, the US attacked Iran on February 28 with a flurry of missiles which landed in Iran, causing heavy damage and reported killing its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei along with his family members. In a retaliatory action, Iran targeted various US military bases in the Gulf region. This is not going to be an easy or quick war, as presumed by the US, as Iran is not showing any signs of surrendering to the will of the US and, in fact, has become more resilient and is reportedly contemplating collateral damage on a massive scale. With this situation, the Middle East has entered one of the most perilous chapters in its contemporary history.

The killing of Ali Khamenei is not merely the elimination of a leader; it is the decapitation of a political system built around a clerical authority. For over three decades, Khamenei stood at the apex of Iran's theocratic state, shaping its nuclear ambitions and directing its regional proxies to take on the West and its sympathisers. His sudden death leaves not just a vacuum in Tehran, but a tremor across the Gulf.

Washington has legitimised an attack with failed nuclear negotiations and mounting regional instability. President Trump has openly urged Iranians to "take over" their government. Yet regime change is easier said than done. The Islamic Republic of Iran was never merely Khamenei though he was central to it. The Revolutionary Guards, the clerical establishment, and a vast patronage network remain intact - and potentially primed for retaliation. Above all, it is also suspected to hold a sizable nuclear arsenal.

As stated above, it is not an easy war as some analysts in the Pentagon might be thinking. The immediate danger is that this might spread in the region and beyond. The US attack has made Israel vulnerable with the looming danger of a nuclear attack if Iran plays suicidal. The US war room wrongly assumed that the people of Iran would come out to rebel against Iran's regime.

Iran's "axis of resistance" - Hezbollah, Hamas, and militias in Iraq and Yemen - may now become galvanised and launch localised attacks on some of them have already started doing. Missile strikes on Gulf infrastructure, shipping disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, or attacks on US bases are plausible.

This would indeed adversely impact the world economy, already going under strenuous period. Oil markets are already jittery; insurers are recalculating risk. Inside Iran, the picture is equally volatile. Years of economic collapse, sanctions, and brutal crackdowns have eroded the regime's legitimacy. Khamenei's death could embolden reformists and dissidents.

But it could just as easily empower hardliners within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who may consolidate power under emergency rule. Moreover, the covert involvement of Russia and China could further intensify the conflict, making it more violent, protracted, and reminiscent of a drawn-out war like the situation in Ukraine.

## The forgotten power of philosophy

From Arthashastra to the teachings of Socrates, philosophy has long been described as the lamp that illuminates all sciences and the pillar that sustains dharma. Far from being abstract or impractical, philosophical thought has shaped leaders, guided nations, and nurtured human dignity.



RAJIB RAY

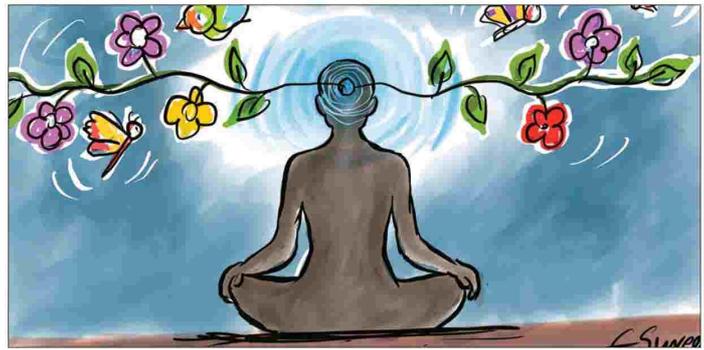
SATYENDRA SRIVASTAVA

"Philosophy is the lamp that illuminates all sciences; it provides the techniques for all action; and it is the pillar which supports dharma." - Preface of the Arthashastra by Kautilya

Philosophy occupies a special place in academia because of its distinctive style. While in other subjects there is an answer to every question, in philosophy there is a question for every answer, so it is said that philosophy is the mother of all academic disciplines and is also the climax. The most striking speciality of philosophy is that it makes us wiser rather than the problems of ordinary people in society. This allegation reflects a very superficial understanding of Philosophy. To realise how profound the role of the philosopher is, it is necessary to cite a few instances. Few of us know that on March 21, 1977, the then Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, declared the end of the Emergency on the suggestion of Jiddu Krishnamurti (as accounted in the biography of J. Krishnamurti, written by R Jayakar), a renowned humanist and philosopher; whose book "Freedom from the Known" is considered a revolutionary work in academia. Similarly, on November 8, 2010, when the then US President Barack Obama addressed both Houses of the Indian Parliament, he cited the influence of four Indians - Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar. This acknowledgement underlines the global contribution of philosophers, and that of Indian philosophers.

A philosopher influences our inner self more than the external environment, which is why Socrates used to refer philosopher as a "doctor of the soul" who prescribes proper attitudes and practices to nurture our mental health and happiness. In a world where high economic growth rates, intellectual skills, and advancement of technology are considered as criteria of a prosperous society, philosophers administer some new thought process to understand human life in a deeper sense.

John Dewey, whose ideas on philosophy of education work as a trailblazer, once said, "Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself." There is hardly anyone who can ignore its significance in the present rat-race competitive world. In the era of artificial intelligence and Chat GPT, teachings like "Appo Deepo Bhava"- Be your own lamp of Gautama Buddha, Socrates' proposition "An unexamined life is not worth living", or Swami Vivekananda's call "Strength is life, weakness is death" are the core values of our existence. No sensible society should neglect these insightful ideas. If most of us had been philosophical thinkers, we would not have been misled by scheming politicians and fake godmen all these years.



ONE MUST KEEP IN MIND THAT PHILOSOPHY IS NOT JUST AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT RATHER ALSO CONCERNED WITH THE UPLIFTMENT OF HUMANITY. ITS ROLE IS VERY INTENSE AND WIDE.

Both authors are professors in the Department of Philosophy, Kirti Mal College, University of Delhi.

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Philosophical ideas can play a very significant role in addressing these types of socio-political and ethical malaise in society. We evaluate Mahatma Gandhi as a champion of truth and non-violence, but his most impactful teaching is his unmatched emphasis on human dignity. As he writes in his autobiography - "It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow beings". Unfortunately, we failed to understand this fundamental truth that our mind is the silent architect of our life.

So, if there is restlessness in our mind and shrewdness in our behaviour, then there will be complete chaos in our lives as well as in society. One can say that Philosophy unites a world which is deeply shattered in the name of religion, caste, race and ideology. A major challenge for philosophy is its decline in academia because of fewer enrolments of students in this subject.

It is beyond comprehension why a subject which is considered the mother of all other subjects is losing its importance amongst students. Universities across the country face this dismal

condition, and the lack of opportunities in this field is one of the most important reasons. Our policymakers should take note of this. Even though the National Education Policy-2020 makes several references to the Indian Knowledge System and Philosophy, our lawmakers and educationists must make more efforts to address the problem of the dwindling popularity of this subject. One may suggest that

this subject be introduced in the class 11th and 12th of the CBSE and ICSE boards, as it's been done at the school level in some state boards.

One must keep in mind that Philosophy is not just an academic subject rather also concerned with the upliftment of humanity. Its role is very intense and wide.

As a mother of all subjects, it is indispensable for the intellectual and ethical growth of human beings. The value of philosophy should not be evaluated in getting final answers but in the very process of seeking them, which elevates human life and understanding. It helps individuals navigate life by fostering an unselfish, open-minded approach that reduces anxiety and increases the ability to understand, justice, and love.

As Nobel Laureate Bertrand Russell wrote in his well-known essay "The Value of Philosophy" in 1912 - "If all men were well off, if poverty and disease had been reduced to their lowest possible point, there would remain much to be done to produce a valuable society; and even in the existing world the goods of the mind are at least as important as the goods of the body."

It is exclusively among the goods of the mind that the value of philosophy is to be found; and only those who are not indifferent to these goods can be persuaded that the study of philosophy is not a waste of time."

### PICTALK



An artisan gives finishing touches to an idol of Lord Krishna ahead of the Holi festival, in Nadia, West Bengal. PHOTO: PTI

### DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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### A CALL TO CONDEMN ESCALATING WAR AND DEFEND HUMANITY

The world is witnessing a troubling escalation of violence that is devastating entire communities. This period may well be remembered as one defined by cycles of retaliation, with diminishing regard for culture, civilisation, and shared humanity. The recent joint military strikes by the United States and Israel against Iran raise serious concerns about respect for national sovereignty. The people of any country alone have the right to determine their system of governance and political future. Critics argue that U.S. foreign policy often reflects broader geopolitical and economic objectives. Past interventions in countries such as Venezuela, Iraq, and Libya are frequently cited as examples where internal political structures were deeply affected. In the Middle East, Israel is widely viewed as a key strategic ally

advancing American interests in a volatile region. The United States remains a leading global arms exporter, with a significant portion of its defence trade linked to the Middle East. This reality has prompted debate over whether military engagements align with economic priorities tied to the defence sector. Questions have also been raised about inconsistencies in addressing nuclear proliferation among different nations. At a time like this, many believe that countries capable of doing so should speak clearly against unilateral military actions. India, which aspires to global leadership, faces expectations to articulate its position firmly. Silence may be interpreted as acquiescence. The examples where internal political structures were deeply affected. In the Middle East, Israel is widely viewed as a key strategic ally

A. G. RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

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## The faceoff: Success & failure in the corporate world



APS MALHOTRA

### 2ND OPINION

A couple of days ago, a childhood friend dropped in to meet me. Otherwise quite a jovial person, with a cutting-edge sense of humour and repartee, that day he looked dejected and worn down. Lines of stress and anxiety hovered on his brow like dark monsoon clouds. Immediately, I discerned that something was amiss. After some prodding, he broke down, and sobbing like a child, told me that he had been sidelined—once again—for progression in the corporation for which he had worked for close to four decades.

On hearing his plight, I found myself returning to an old, unsettling question: What is success, and what is failure? Are they merely opposite sides of the same coin, or are they far more complex than we admit? For centuries, sages and philosophers have wrestled

with this paradox, leaving behind a vast treasury of thought. While their reflections offer frameworks and metaphors, none can give a definitive answer. My own understanding of success has not been static. Rather, it has evolved with time—sometimes subtly, sometimes painfully.

At different stages, I have measured success against different yardsticks, in the process creating an edifice that rests on four core pillars: family, health, finances, and professional standing. Together, they form a balanced architecture of a well-lived life. Measured against these visible metrics of the corporate superstructure, my friend's journey seems grossly underwhelming.

The foremost reason is that institutions, by their very nature, lack warmth, compassion and transparency, leading to a cascading toxic downturn, where outcomes are declared without sufficient explanation and where, sadly, when progression stalls, clarity is rarely offered. This opacity makes self-assessment extremely challenging—as one is forced to ponder whether this is because of a shortfall in one's capability, or the unpredictable dynamics of a complex system? Amid all this, the metaphor that comes to mind is a race—perhaps, a rat race. In any race, performance matters, but so does the referee, so does the track, so do the

unseen rules that govern who advances and who remains sidelined, because when systems harbour unfairness—subtle or overt—careers can be quietly impacted, sometimes permanently, often ominously, leaving no scope for reclamation.

As for my friend, the story does not end here, because outside the narrow corridor of hierarchy, his life tells a different tale—he has fared well in education, his finances are stable, his family life is fulfilling and his health, for the most part, has been kind to him. To call him content and meaningful, I explained that these are not minor footnotes, but that they are foundational achievements.

If success is viewed through this wider lens, the narrative shifts significantly, and success becomes less about podium finishes and more about the integrity of participation. It is about having run the race without compromising one's core ethics. It is about building a life that, when viewed in totality, feels coherent and meaningful.

And that the saga of success and failure is not epic because of victory or defeat. It is epic because of the lifelong effort to understand what truly counts.

The writer is a Delhi based author, corporate coach and social activist

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### India needs real gender parity

International Women's Day, observed every year on March 8, is a tribute to the strength, talent and achievements of women across the globe. Yet, it must remain more than a symbolic celebration. It should continue to remind us of the urgent need to improve the condition of women everywhere. In our country, serious issues such as rape, domestic violence, lack of education and limited economic opportunities still affect millions of women. Empowerment means enabling women to make their own decisions and stand up not only for themselves but for others as well. Despite scientific and technological progress worldwide, no nation has achieved full gender equality. Millions of women still face legal and professional barriers. Women remain underrepresented in parliaments, experience wage gaps, and continue to endure gender-based violence.

The 2026 theme, "Give To Gain," reminds us that supporting women's rights benefits society as a whole. Women are the backbone of families and communities, contributing to social and economic development. International Women's Day should be a moment to reflect on progress, and celebrate the courage of ordinary women who create extraordinary impact.

JUEL D'CRUZ | MUMBAI

### Judicial fatigue and a system in distress

The near-dysfunctional state of our judicial system is an open secret. Allegations of corruption, staggering case backlogs, inadequate infrastructure, procedural delays, and concerns about efficiency in lower courts continue to erode public trust. Reports of a nexus between sections of the judiciary, political influence, and powerful interests only deepen this crisis. Recently, a judge of the Allahabad High Court, Justice Subhash Vidyarthi, candidly admitted to being "hungry, tired and incapacitated" after hearing nearly thirty cases in a single day, forcing him to reserve judgment. His statement was not merely personal exhaustion; it symbolised a system stretched beyond capacity.

Decades ago, Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer of the Supreme Court of India warned that India's justice delivery mechanism was nearing collapse under delays, inefficiency, and corruption. Nearly fifty years later, that warning appears prophetic. Strengthening infrastructure, increasing judicial appointments, improving accountability, and modernising procedures must become national priorities. A robust judiciary is the backbone of democracy. When courts falter, constitutional guarantees weaken. The health of our republic depends on restoring credibility and efficiency to this crucial pillar of governance.

AVINASH GODBOLEY | DEWAS

### Federal norms & the imperative of due process

A recent controversy erupted after the Delhi Police detained two activists in Himachal Pradesh without formally informing the state authorities. Reports suggest that the Himachal Pradesh Police was taken into confidence prior to the operation, prompting the Chief Minister to invoke established guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court of India on inter-state arrests. These guidelines require prior intimation and coordination between states to uphold federal principles, maintain administrative harmony, and prevent jurisdictional conflicts. The incident appears to have arisen either from a communication breakdown between police units or from external pressures influencing procedural decisions. Regardless of the cause, such lapses risk undermining cooperative federalism and eroding public confidence in law enforcement agencies. To prevent similar episodes, structured training at police academies and institutionalised inter-state coordination mechanisms must be strengthened. Clear protocols, regular communication channels, and strict adherence to due process are essential to ensure constitutionalism, transparency, and respect for constitutional norms across jurisdictions.

RS NARULA | PATIALA



## Lessons from India's Maritime Footprint

At a time when shifting geopolitics and initiatives like the Maritime Silk Route are redefining influence in the Indian Ocean Region, India must reclaim its historical narrative through a coordinated transnational maritime heritage project that blends culture, connectivity and contemporary strategy.

**FIRST Column**



**RAGHVENDRA SINGH**

India and the Indian Ocean have been inseparably connected by geography and history. This region has been a cradle of civilisations. Major religions and faiths of the world are all represented in the littoral and island nations of the Indian Ocean.

We know how geography exerts great influence on politics and security, particularly in matters 'maritime'. It is in this context that the Indian Ocean acquires importance. On its waters are carried half of the world's container shipments, one-third of bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of oil. About one-third of the world's population inhabits the littoral straits and islands of the Indian Ocean. Four of these countries have populations in excess of one hundred and forty million people, namely, India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Bangladesh.

Millennia before Columbus sailed the Atlantic and Magellan crossed the Pacific, the Indian Ocean was an active thoroughfare of cultural and commercial traffic. It was around 45 AD that the discovery was made of how to use the monsoon winds to directly cross the Arabian Sea instead of hugging the coast. The Indian navigators, though, had already sailed and discovered Sacotra long before the first century AD. They had navigated the Red Sea using the magnetic needle, the Matsya Yantra, for determining direction. The existence of prosperous Hindu colonies in Malaya, Sumatra, Java, Cambodia and modern-day Vietnam clearly indicates that the Bay of Bengal had been mastered long before the First Century AD. That peninsula India was maritime in its tradition is borne out by the writings of Fa Hien, a Chinese visitor to India between AD 405 and 410. He was transported by sea from Sri Lanka to Sri Vijaya along with 200 merchants. There are numerous references to the Mauryas and the Andhras about the Eastern Seas. The Chinese had an extensive sea trade along the Malabar Coast. Hsien Tsang, who visited India in the 7th Century AD describes the vast overseas trade during the Gupta period. There are numerous mentions of the Chola emperors and their powerful seafaring capacity.



**OUR GOAL SHOULD ALSO BE TO REVIVE THE HISTORICAL TRADE ROUTES IN A LARGE GEOPOLITICAL AND GEO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT.**

The writer is Advisor, Bharat Ki Sech and is former Culture Secretary, Govt of India

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A vibrant trade route through sea linked the east with the west, from the West Coast of Japan, through islands of Indonesia, India and to the land of the Middle East; and from there across the Mediterranean to Europe. The links were formed by traders through buying and selling from port to port. They traded mainly in spices. The use of monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean was a boon to sailing ships. It helped them in their travels to and from India.

Artefacts of the Saraswati-Sindhu Civilisation have been found in middle-east and Egypt dating back 5000 years. Large colonies of Romans lived in the port cities of India, especially on the eastern coast in Tamil Nadu, in the first millennium. Some of the earliest seafaring ships plied between the coast of Kerala and the Middle East. The second-oldest mosque in the world was constructed in Kodungal in Kerala in 629 AD. Buddhism spread to all corners of Asia through sea and land routes. Centres like Sukhothai, Ayodhya, Angkorvat in the East, or Swat, Bamian, or Dun Hwang, are manifestations of vibrant cultural links of India with the region around the Indian Ocean. Ramayan was the most popular story told in this region. The

Hindu and Buddhist traditions provide some of the finest paintings, sculptures and reliefs across Asia.

Despite having footprints all across, India has failed to build a historical narrative around it. Sacotra hardly finds any mention, as do several other coastal world heritage sites across the Western Indian Ocean that show evidence of Indian maritime activity. In the Ajanta caves, the narrative of Simhala, a seafaring merchant is prominently depicted. Simhala was an incarnation of Siddhartha Gautama.

He, along with 500 merchants, had landed in Tamradweep (Sri Lanka). This is an interesting story that finds a connection with Sri Lanka. A great scope for collaboration exists amongst maritime museums. A collaboration with the maritime museum, currently being set up at Lothal in Gujarat, India, would prove very useful. India has yet to highlight its historical connection across Africa, the Middle East and Southern Europe. While inaugurating the Kochi metro in June 2017, Prime Minister Modi had called Kochi, the queen of the Arabian Sea, an important spice trading centre. Our goal should also be to revive the historical trade routes in

a large geopolitical and geo-economic context.

How can India launch a project to sustain its cross-national connectivity with East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, and the South East Asian archipelagos? More than three dozen countries can be identified as partners if an Outreach Project gets mooted. India is a signatory to various UNESCO conventions. An outreach like this will provide a platform across the Indian Ocean world through a cross-cultural transnational narrative. It can seek a trans-national nomination under World

Heritage by highlighting the links of the Indian Ocean Maritime route. This will provide visibility to connectivity, encourage research, tourism, and develop heritage. The project could navigate through coastal architecture, maritime heritage, artefacts, maritime museums, underwater cultural heritage, industrial heritage, ship building, intangible cultural heritage, trade routes, cultural products, pilgrimage, religious travel, oral traditions and literary traditions.

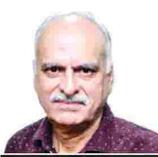
A possible way forward would be to begin collecting data on historical exchanges in the field of both tangible and intangible maritime cultural heritage. This may include knowledge pathways related to art, philosophy, mathematics, geography and sciences. No project of this kind exists at the moment. This research could feed into proposing a World Heritage nomination to UNESCO. This will truly place the maritime cultural heritage of the Indian Ocean on a firm and independent footing.

The Maritime Silk Route (MSR) initiative is already impacting the strategic balance in the Indian Ocean region. It is common knowledge that MSR strives for an influence in the Indian Ocean. The new geopolitics of the Indian Ocean region is defined by America's declining influence. The old geo-politics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), characterised by US hegemony as a leading force from the Middle East to the Pacific, is giving way to a new dynamic as America's focus shifts gradually from the Indian Ocean to the West Pacific region. Though India's economy is the biggest in the IOR, China is the biggest user of its sea lanes. The MSR initiative is an indication of increasing realisation of the growing salience of the Indian Ocean. MSR is aimed at allowing China's maritime military power to break free from the geographical constraints of the Western Pacific island chains.

Nearly all of India's merchandise trade transit via the sea. Land based trade routes are unlikely to come up in the near future. India would necessarily have to rely on its own shipping lanes. The security and safety of the shipping would remain a paramount concern for many years to come. The critical question is whether MSR shall impair this safety?

Belt Road and MSR offer thousands of scholarships, hold art and film festivals, book fairs, make it more convenient to apply for tourist visas, cooperate on epidemic, information, treatment technologies, public health emergencies, technology transfer, maritime cooperation, cooperation among cities, and among non-governmental organisations. India should implement an initiative that promotes understanding of common heritage and multiple identities. India needs to revive its lost linkages, provide a cross-cultural transnational narrative and evolve a relationship between natural and cultural heritage in the IOR.

## Stability at the top, uncertainty below: The test before Modi 3.0



**ANIL ANAND**

A strong, dominant leader, Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi is in the midst of his third term as Prime Minister. The BJP's failure to secure even a simple majority in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls has not affected the stability of its coalition government.

With Mr Nitish Kumar in the Bihar chief minister's seat, notwithstanding his oft-repeated health issues, and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) chief and Andhra Pradesh chief minister, Mr N Chandrababu Naidu rushing every week to Delhi with fresh set of demands and returning satisfied, the Modi Government has sailed smoothly so far, resting on the crutches of TDP and Janata Dal (U).

This is one dimension of the political stability which, of course, is directly related to a stable government at the Centre. Full marks to Mr Modi and his strategists for deftly managing the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA's) internal dynamics. Does it imply questioning the tools of statecraft used to achieve this stability? Yes, it does if the strategy overwhelming rests on weakening the pillars on which rests the edifice of democracy, using constitutional bodies and government wings to corner political rivals, and silencing opponents.

What most worry the nation, and more so Mr Modi is the uncertainty prevailing outside the NDA arena? Beginning from Parliament, the uncertainty runs down to the lowest level of political and administrative structures. And equally or more worrying is the manner in which the foundations of the society, based on brotherhood and harmony, are systematically sought to be shaken in the name of religion, colour and cast with a political purpose. Everyone knew that the Indo-US trade agreement was on its way and unstoppable. Even as its fine print is still to be deciphered in full detail to declare the winners and losers, the uncertainty on this front has also loomed large. The problem, ostensibly, lies in the strange attitude of the ruling diaspora at the helm to portray themselves as winners all the time, come what may. This phenomenon is a full play in the aftermath of the agreement happening.

No government can be right and win all the time. There are good and bad decisions and their fallout. A dispensation could be a winner sometimes and a loser at others. The Godly approach



to declare an indispensable and no-wrongdoer image and stamping political rivals, dead or alive, and those having a different viewpoint as the fall-guys, stretching the definition to being anti-national, has added to the chaos and created a complex situation.

The situation demands some serious introspection while keeping the mind clear of electoral calculus. Again, the lopsided phenomenon of winning elections, from Lok Sabha to Panchayat, at any cost, should be kept aside for some time for the same of pulling the country out of this uncertainty and divisiveness.

A supermodel of negotiated settlement of issues should begin with the resolution of stalemates in Parliament. The two Houses of Parliament are under a cloud, with, unfortunately, aspersions being cast at the Chair; it is time for Mr Modi to act swiftly and take command in his own hands. This will help him deflect the opposition charge of giving a short shrift to Parliament and only making occasional brief appearances.

Defence Minister, Mr Rajnath Singh, Mr Modi's number two in the Union cabinet, seems to have been assigned the task to deputate for him in Parliament, barring replying

to debates on the Budget and the Presidential address. Under Mr Modi's dominance, he does not seem to be carrying full authority and a very limited role of heading the all-party meetings or remaining symbolically present in the two Houses of Parliament at crucial junctures as the Prime Minister's substitute.

Since the controversial Indo-US trade deal has now become a reality and an effervescent opposition gearing to corner the government, the ruling dispensation should act with utmost urgency to take the nation into confidence before the issue spills on the streets and in agricultural farms. The Minister of External Affairs and the Commerce Minister have played their customary role in the run-up to the deal being formalised; it is now up to the Prime Minister to take the nation, directly and through the opposition parties, into confidence and inform them about its nitty-gritty.

There is no harm in admitting mistakes, such as bowing before, which could be strategic-bullying tactics of US President Mr Donald Trump. Mr Modi must ensure that the country stands strong and united to resist any further US pressures and how to derive the best out of the Trade deal.

Likewise, Mr Modi has a big role to play in checking the tendency of communal polarisation, particularly before every election. It must be accruing electoral benefits to the BJP but at a greater cost to the nation. As is his wont, he must lead by example and not only carefully select words and adjectives while delivering speeches, but should also send a clear message to the fringe elements, within the BJP and outside, to stop misrepresenting the Sanatan Dharma.

Finally, a demarcation has to be made for use of the police and the security apparatus. It has been in the forefront in dealing with terrorism and anti-national and anti-social elements. This model, being replicated elsewhere in society for political messaging, is fraught with dangers, and the outcome is there for everyone to see. Wherever the force was used to quell opposition or a diverse point of view, which has at times led to communal overtones, it has disturbed societal harmony.

Even in a given theatre where tangible results have been achieved with strong security-related tactics, it has to be followed by a civilian-democratic approach. A prerequisite should be, which has been the case in the past, that political leadership, ruling and opposition, should have an upper hand and a final say. Not disbanding them behind bars.

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The writer is a policy analyst

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## Need for a course correction in child protection Jurisprudence



**RACHNA TYAGI**

In recent years, a deeply concerning pattern has surfaced in the adjudication of sexual violence against women and children. Courts have, at times, diluted charges, discounted survivor testimony, or relied on hyper technical reasoning under the guise of legal caution. In some cases, minor survivors have been disbelieved for using vernacular language to describe abuse. In others, responsibility has subtly shifted toward the victim. When interpretation distances itself from lived reality, the justice system risks ceasing to be a shield for the vulnerable and instead becomes a barrier they must struggle to overcome.

This concern reached its most troubling expression in March 2025, when the Allahabad High Court modified charges in a child sexual abuse case. The Court held that grabbing the child's breasts, forcibly pulling down her clothing, and dragging her beneath a culvert did not amount to "attempt to rape." At the very threshold, the gravest charge was diluted. What was presented as definitional caution carried profound implications. It risked narrowing the meaning of attempt and weakening deterrence in crimes against children. The settled doctrine of criminal law is clear. Attempt begins where preparation ends. When overt acts are undertaken directly in furtherance of the intended offence, and completion is prevented only by external interruption, the law recognises it as an attempt. In this case, the accused forcibly assaulted the child, removed her clothing, and dragged her to a concealed location. The act was interrupted only by the arrival of a passerby. The intent was evident.

The steps were direct. The interruption was external. The law, by its own standard, required recognition of attempt. Equally troubling was the procedural failure preceding this interpretation. Despite the gravity of the offence, no FIR was registered for nearly four years. The child's mother approached the police authorities repeatedly, wrote to the Superintendent of Police, and ultimately invoked Section 156(3) of the CrPc (No 175(3) of the BNSS). Yet the burden of pursuit fell upon the victim's family.

Meanwhile, the child dropped out of school, lived in proximity to the accused, and endured continuing fear and psychological trauma. Delay in justice is not a mere procedural inconvenience. In cases of child sexual abuse, it compounds harm and deepens vulnerability. For Just Rights for Children, this was not a mere disagreement over a narrow interpretation of the law. It

was a question of whether the justice system would permit dilution to define deterrence. More than 270 partner organisations across India supported a Special Leave Petition before the Supreme Court of India.

The petition rested in a simple constitutional belief that the law must protect the child and must be feared by those who violate her dignity. On 10 February 2026, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark judgment. The controversial order of the Allahabad High Court was set aside. The Court reaffirmed the foundational principle that justice must prevail over narrow and hyper technical interpretation. It held that the accused were liable for attempt to rape, emphasising that the crime remained incomplete only to third-party intervention. The dilution of charges was found to be contrary to settled principles of criminal jurisprudence and inconsistent with the protective framework of child protection law. The judgment does more than correct a legal error. It restores coherence to child protection jurisprudence. It reinforces that courts must interpret sexual offences through the lens of harm, dignity, and statutory purpose, not through hyper technical thresholds. It affirms that judicial accountability is intrinsic to justice delivery and that interpretation must strengthen deterrence rather than weaken it.

By requesting the National Judicial Academy to constitute a Committee of Experts to examine ground realities and frame guidelines for adjudicating cases involving vulnerable victims, the elevated judicial sensitivity and accountability from aspirational ideals to institutional obligations. Inconsistent interpretation, personal bias, and absence of institutional accountability have too often resulted in re-victimisation.

Survivors are subjected to scepticism, minimisation, or blame instead of protection. Many withdraw from the pursuit of justice not because truth is absent, but because endurance became impossible. This judgment marks a decisive course correction for future generations. It restores balance between procedure and purpose, interpretation and justice. It also affirms a fundamental truth.

The burden of shame never belongs to the survivor. It belongs to the perpetrator and to any system that fails to protect the vulnerable. Justice is measured by how firmly it stands with the most vulnerable. In reaffirming that principle, the Supreme Court has not merely set aside a judgment. It has strengthened deterrence, restored faith in the rule of law, and ensured that child protection jurisprudence remains anchored in dignity, accountability, and justice.

The writer is General Counsel, Just Rights for Children

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JOHN HEALEY UK Defence Secretary

“ Make no mistake this is a regime that he [Khamenei] has run for decades as a source of evil, it has murdered its own citizens, it has exported terror including to Britain



ARVIND KEJRIWAL AAP Chief

Modi ji, you can continue to work for power, and I will continue to work for the country. When I served as an income tax commissioner, people used to swear on my honesty



SACHIN PILOT Congress leader

The Prime Minister is not talking about his 11-year report card from any platform and avoiding important issues such as unemployment and farmers' concerns”

Middle East on the boil

An already volatile Middle East region has waded into an uncharted territory of utter chaos and political vacuum following a joint blitzkrieg by the United States and Israel targeting Iran. The death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian supreme leader who ruled the theocratic country with an iron fist for nearly 37 years, in the military strikes marked a seismic political shift that raises disturbing questions over the future of not just Iran but of the wider region caught in turbulence. Along with Khamenei, a hard-line cleric who turned Iran into a symbol of brutal state repression and ruthlessly crushed mass uprising, the country's defence minister, chief of the armed forces and several senior leaders were killed in the attacks. The retaliatory strikes that followed have been massive and unprecedented in scale, spreading across at least six neighbouring countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan and Kuwait — all of which host American military bases. The Dubai International Airport, too, has been targeted in a wave of ballistic missile attacks. The fighting effectively shut down shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, the conduit for one-fifth of the world's oil supply, raising fears over an imminent rise in oil prices. Major airports in the region have been closed. The sudden escalation of the conflict means that the recent nuclear diplomacy, brokered by Oman and Switzerland, has totally collapsed. By targeting symbols of government alongside military assets, the US-Israeli coalition is signalling a shift from containment toward active regime change.

A key risk arising from the current political vacuum in Iran is that the militant Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps may take over

A section of Iranians may have hit the streets celebrating the fall of Khamenei, but such a fallout is no justification for the military campaign against a sovereign country. It is ironic that US President Donald Trump, who had vowed in the past not to attack any country, opted for a military campaign to effect regime change in a country that did not pose any immediate threat to America. Iran was nowhere close to "weaponising" its nuclear material so as to justify the US attack. It was an act of recklessness on the part of Trump to make an appeal to Iranians to "take back their country". When Trump ran for president in 2024, he boasted of starting "no new wars". Barely a year later, Trump is racing to topple foreign regimes. The self-declared 'President of peace' has now chosen to become the President of war after all, unleashing the full power of the US military on Iran with a clear goal of toppling its government. It is clear that American leaders have not learnt any lessons from their past military misadventures in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. A key risk arising from the current political vacuum in Iran is that the militant Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps may take over. The Middle East region has a turbulent history of periods of political instability, becoming a breeding ground for terrorism.

Taliban-Pakistan rupture is more than a bilateral dispute; it signals a post-2021 geopolitics shift in South Asia



BRIG ADVITYA MADAN (RETD)

What exactly is happening between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan? Once described as "all-weather allies," the two now find themselves locked in a volatile cycle of air strikes, suicide bombings and collapsing cease-fires. The deterioration is not episodic; it is structural. It reflects unresolved historical disputes, shifting power equations after 2021, and the unintended consequences of Pakistan's own Afghan policy.

The immediate trigger for the latest escalation lies in the events of the past year. On October 9, 2025, Pakistan carried out air strikes against targets it claimed were linked to militant groups operating from the Afghan territory. In retaliation, Taliban forces attacked Pakistani posts on October 12 and 15. Tensions peaked until a ceasefire was brokered on October 18 in Doha, mediated by Qatar and Turkey. The truce, however, proved fragile and did not endure. This year, the violence resumed with greater intensity. Two suicide bombings in Khyber district signalled the resurgence of militant activity: on February 16, eleven Pakistani soldiers were killed; on February 21, another soldier and a Lieutenant Colonel lost their lives. Pakistan responded on February 22 with air strikes targeting Kabul, Kandahar and Paktia — reportedly the first time it directly struck Taliban military facilities as well as Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) elements using air-ground missiles. On February 26, Taliban fighters retaliated by attacking Pakistani border outposts. Efforts at mediation are now reportedly being explored by Russia, China, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, underscoring the wider regional stakes.

Uneasy neighbours



Mediation may pause tensions, but the underlying issues — Durand Line, TTP sanctuaries, refugee pressures — remain unresolved

Two Decades Ago

To understand how this rupture emerged, one must revisit the past two decades. During the insurgency years, the Taliban leadership was based largely in Quetta. Pakistan extended logistical and strategic support to the movement as it fought US and Afghan government forces. Why did Islamabad back the Taliban? Primarily for two reasons. First, it was uncomfortable with India's expanding developmental and diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan — particularly in infrastructure projects. Second, it believed that a friendly Taliban regime would provide "strategic depth" against India in the event of conflict.

Yet once the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021 and declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the dynamic shifted. An insurgent movement dependent on a sanctuary became a sovereign authority determined to assert autonomy. Allies became uneasy neighbours.

At the heart of this estrangement lies the Durand Line — the 2,640-km border drawn in 1893 between British India and Afghanistan by Sir Mortimer Durand and Afghan ruler Abdur Rahman Khan. Pakistan inherited this boundary in 1947 and regards it as a legitimate international border. Successive Afghan governments, including the Taliban, have refused to formally recognise it. The Durand Line cuts through Pashtun and Baloch tribal areas, dividing families and communities. The Taliban argue that the line was imposed to demarcate spheres of influence rather than to create a permanent border. Had the British accepted Afghan appeals to revisit the agreement, much of Pashtun territory might have fallen within Afghanistan.

During the insurgency phase, Pakistan did not object to fluid cross-border movement; it served its strategic purposes. But once the Taliban became the ruling authority, they began resuming Pakistan's efforts to fence and regulate the border. Islamabad now seeks

strict control over movement across the Durand Line, citing security concerns. The Taliban demand freer movement for Pashtun tribes and reject what they view as external interference. This border dispute has transformed from a dormant historical grievance into a daily flashpoint.

Good And Bad Taliban

Another crucial dimension is the distinction between the Afghan Taliban and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In Pakistani discourse, these were once described as "good Taliban" and "bad Taliban." Organisationally separate but ideologically aligned, the Afghan Taliban focused on expelling US forces and toppling the Islamic Republic in Kabul — an objective they achieved. The TTP, by contrast, seeks to overthrow the Pakistani state and establish an Islamic caliphate, at least across the former tribal areas and ideally nationwide. The 2014 attack on a school in Peshawar that killed 132 students remains a grim reminder of its brutality.

Today, the TTP operates largely from Afghan territory. Many of its fighters are ethnically Pashtun, with familial and tribal ties across the border. Seeds of the current crisis were sown in 2018 when Pakistan merged the Federally Administered Tribal Areas into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, altering local power structures. When the Afghan Taliban returned to power in 2021, the TTP found ideological inspiration and strategic space. Initially, the Afghan Taliban mediated a truce between Pakistan and the TTP, but it collapsed in 2022. Last year alone, TTP attacks reportedly killed at least 400 Pakistani security personnel.

Pakistan accuses Kabul of harbouring TTP militants. The Taliban deny this and condemn Pakistani airstrikes as violations of sovereignty. Matters have been further aggravated by Pakistan's deportation of nearly 1.7 million Afghan refugees, a move that has fuelled resentment within Afghanistan.

Regional Diplomacy

Complicating the picture is the evolving regional diplomacy. Relations between India and the Taliban, once adversarial in the late 1990s, have cautiously reopened. India hosted Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi last year, and in January, Afghanistan appointed an envoy to head its diplomatic mission in New Delhi. India has not formally recognised the Taliban regime, but engagement has increased. Pakistan's Foreign Minister has even alleged that the Taliban are acting as an Indian proxy.

In military terms, the balance is asymmetrical. The Taliban excel in unconventional guerrilla warfare and asymmetric tactics. Pakistan retains conventional superiority — a structured army, air force capabilities and advanced weaponry. In a head-on conflict, Pakistan would hold the upper hand. Yet border conflicts and insurgent warfare rarely unfold in conventional formats. Escalation risks drawing in non-state actors and destabilising the wider region.

For India, the stakes are significant. Three core objectives shape New Delhi's engagement with Afghanistan. First, to safeguard nearly \$3 billion invested between 2001 and 2021 in infrastructure, health and education projects. Second, to ensure that Afghan soil is not used by anti-India militant groups. Third, to prevent Afghanistan from becoming an exclusive strategic extension of Pakistan, thereby reviving the "strategic depth" doctrine.

Afghanistan also figures in India's connectivity ambitions. Along with Iran, it is central to the International North-South Transport Corridor, providing access to Central Asia. Stable relations with Kabul could facilitate trade and strategic outreach. Recent developments add another layer of uncertainty. US and Israeli strikes on Iran have heightened regional volatility. Any spillover — including refugee flows from Iran into Afghanistan — could strain an already fragile Afghan state and indirectly affect India development interests.

The Taliban-Pakistan rupture is thus more than a bilateral dispute. It is a recalibration of post-2021 geopolitics in South Asia and the broader region. Pakistan's long-standing Afghan policy has produced unintended blowback. The Taliban, no longer dependent insurgents, are asserting sovereignty. Mediation attempts may produce temporary pauses, but the underlying issues — the Durand Line, the TTP sanctuary question, refugee pressures and competing regional alignments — remain unresolved. For India, careful engagement without former recognition, strategic patience and calibrated diplomacy will be essential. In the shifting sands of the region, yesterday's proxies have become today's problems — and tomorrow's alignments remain uncertain.

(The author is a retired Army officer)

Letters to the Editor

Sin tax

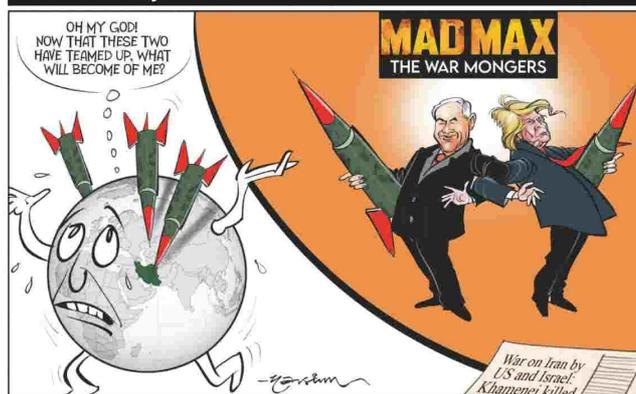
Taxation on cigarettes in India has historically produced substitution effects rather than outright cessation. Consumers downshift themselves to cheaper formats or, more problematically, turn to illicit cigarettes that evade both taxation and health regulation. The real test of the 53% total tax incidence, which came into effect from February 1 this year, as against the WHO's benchmark of 75%, hinges on whether it can sustain India's fragile balance between public health ambition, revenue realities and market behaviour, rather than how closely it mirrors

global benchmarks. ("Tobacco Tax: Public health or revenue?", Feb. 24). High taxes on cigarettes, without corresponding high taxes on other tobacco products, only lead to consumer migration rather than actually quitting smoking. Even with rising prices, tobacco consumption in India remains high, resulting in 1.35 million deaths occurring annually. This clearly suggests that the tax increase is not punitive enough to break the smoking addiction. To effectively curb smoking, experts suggest that India needs to raise taxes to the 75% threshold, introduce annual tax adjustments to account for inflation, and apply similar tax pressure across all tobacco products.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

- Bloomberg India AI world's valuable unpaid intern India is fast becoming one of the world's biggest AI user bases. The question now is how it can turn that scale into superpower status rather than just training Silicon Valley for free. BBC India's top court bans textbook India's Supreme Court has banned a school textbook after a chapter in it made a reference to corruption in judiciary. The social science book was published by NCERT, which designs the syllabus schoolchildren in the country. Al Jazeera How Canada u-turned on India As officials in Ottawa were preparing for Prime Minister Mark Carney's maiden visit to India, Canadian police were knocking on a Sikh activist's door in Surrey, Vancouver, on Sunday to inform him that his life was at risk.

## Imperialist terror unleashed on Iran

The joint United States-Israel offensive against Iran, eight months after the 2025 attack, signals a militarist-imperialist brazenness to meet 'objectives' that are made up. The attack involved the targeted assassination of Iran's political, religious and military leadership and their families. A world, particularly the West, inured to the prolonged genocidal killings in Gaza, is unlikely to be stirred by the latest US-Israeli military action or the dangers posed to nation-states by rogue-like US and Israel flouting international law. The playbook is the same as in the past: diplomatic dialogue is initiated, this time with Oman as the mediator, and the cover of talks is used to destroy the other party. What makes it particularly reprehensible this time is that Oman's mediation was close to bearing fruit with Iran conceding far more than it has ever done in talks with the US. Therefore, the "pre-emptive" attack was obviously to pre-empt the US-Oman-Iran dialogue from closing a deal.

This rush to attack Iran has been laid bare by Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi, who was the mediator. He revealed what the negotiations had achieved to thwart an Israeli military offensive similar to the last one. Now, the perception has gained ground that Israel wanted to pre-empt any US-Iran reconciliation that would endanger the Zionist's militarist march towards the dream of Greater Israel. The war has triggered Iranian hostility against Arab states and pushed the region into deeper instability. President Trump's claims of Iran being an "imminent" threat to the US is a familiar script, drawing on a mix of disparate themes—plans for nuclear weapons (no credible evidence) and "freedom" for the people through regime change. The aggressors chose their moment carefully, as Iran is still under severe economic strain and was reeling under civilian unrest.

While the West's Arab allies may be vocal in their hostility to Iran, they are unlikely to be beneficiaries. Military action has rarely brought about a smooth regime change. Iran has no choice but to fight back lest it be reduced to another Gaza and its people consigned to the fate of Palestinians. How the surviving political leadership of Iran and the Revolutionary Guards respond to the challenges they face now will indicate what is in store for the region. There have been excesses in Iran under Ayatollah Khamenei, but none of that can justify the US-Israeli war and assassinations. The situation in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Gaza, Lebanon and elsewhere, where US forces have interfered and occupied in the past, offers one lesson: self-appointed foreign savagists with their own scores to settle can rarely ensure a transition from a problematic regime to a stable, peaceful and democratic one.

## Act decisively on Chickpet fire safety

The massive fire that gutted over 30 shops in a three-storey commercial complex in Chickpet on February 25 was a near-miss that Bengaluru cannot afford to dismiss lightly. The blaze, which broke out around 6.30 am in Kumbharpet off Avenue Road, raged for more than eight hours, destroying businesses dealing in fancy goods, perfumes, toys, printing material and hardware. That no lives were lost owed more to timing than to preparedness; most shops were shut, and workers who use the upper floors as makeshift overnight dormitories were evacuated before the fire intensified. The incident exposes familiar but unresolved red flags in the Petre area. Most alarming was the nearly two-hour delay in alerting the fire department, with shopkeepers reportedly attempting to douse the flames themselves. This allowed a containable fire to escalate into a major blaze. Equally troubling is the routine misuse of retail buildings as godowns, stocked with highly flammable plastic goods, perfumes and chemicals. An electrical short circuit is suspected, once again drawing attention to ageing wiring struggling to cope with modern commercial loads.

Chickpet's physical form magnifies these risks. Buildings stand wall-to-wall, leaving no setbacks to arrest the spread of fire. Staircases are narrow and frequently blocked by stored goods, while ventilation is almost non-existent. The narrow, inaccessible lanes and lack of a dedicated underground hydrant network forced fire tenders to park 500 metres away, relaying water through long hoses. That a complex housing 125 shops could function without robust fire-safety oversight reflects long-standing regulatory gaps in dense commercial districts.

Redevelopment is often projected as the obvious solution. In theory, a comprehensive rebuild could widen access roads, segregate storage, and introduce modern fire infrastructure. In practice, however, this may not suit Chickpet. As part of the original Petre established by Kempegowda in the 16th century, it carries immense historical and cultural weight. Besides, fragmented ownership and the scale of daily commerce make wholesale demolition legally contentious and economically disruptive. This reality makes immediate, enforceable reforms unavoidable. The Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) must prioritise electrical audits, underground cabling, lane-level fire hydrants, and permanent stationing of mini fire tenders within the market. Storage of hazardous material must be strictly regulated, escape routes kept clear, and trader associations trained as first responders. Early warning systems, such as wireless smoke alarms, can provide critical minutes in areas with limited access. The Chickpet fire is not an isolated mishap but a reminder of accumulated neglect. Acting on it decisively can prevent a far deadlier incident and safeguard a commercial district that remains vital to Bengaluru's economy and heritage.

Last week's blaze exposes an appalling lack of preparedness

Our institutions should reflect the changes in life expectancy, enabling retirees who wish to contribute professionally to do so

VIBHAV MARIWALA

I recently attended a roundtable on the potential opportunities of cryopreservation, i.e. preserving the human body at low temperatures in the hope of future revival.

While the conversation was riveting and sparked lots of debate, scientifically and ethically, I was struck by the question not being discussed: What kind of society do we need to make a longer life worth living?

This question is the central blind spot of the longevity movement. Its proponents are focused almost entirely on the biology of ageing, which are in and of themselves not trivial. But they rest on an assumption so large it goes almost unexamined: that if we extend the quantity of human life, the quality of social life will somehow follow; it may not.

With geopolitical, climate, and technological changes, and the institutional strain, society may not be able to navigate a much older society.

Human institutions, work, retirement, education, marriage, and the welfare state were largely designed in an era when life expectancy in advanced economies hovered around 65 to 70 years.

The modern pension system was conceived when workers were expected to draw from it for a decade at most. The standard arc of a career, study, work, retire was premised on a roughly linear, time-limited life.

Even the structure of higher education, compressing learning into the early twenties, reflects a model of human development calibrated to a shorter existence.

We are already living beyond those designs. In most OECD countries, life expectancy now exceeds 80 years. And by 2050, there will be 52 people aged 65 or over for every 100 working-age adults in the OECD. Nonetheless, our institutions have barely moved, and retirees feel it today.

A survey of over 1,000 experienced professionals and retirees aged 50 to 80 across India, conducted by WisdomCir-

clein partnership with Dalberg, reveals the scale of the mismatch.

Approximately 70% of respondents are either currently working or actively exploring opportunities post-retirement. Nearly half identified professional engagement as the activity they most look forward to ahead of travel, education, volunteering, and spirituality.

Moreover, 62% reported feeling fully prepared to adapt to new roles. The aspiration, the energy, and the capability

are present. The institutions to absorb them are not.

A problem of supply, not demand

The gap is not one of motivation. It is one of design. On WisdomCircle's platform, there is currently one available opportunity for every 40 professionals seeking one. That is not a typical market failure; it is a sign that the economy has not reoriented itself to deploy the productive capacity of its elderly.

An interesting insight the survey revealed is that organisations do not provide much support for one's transition to retirement. And while one could debate whether a firm should provide such support to former employees, it reveals a lack of incentive to support this cohort of workers.

In fact, only 2% of respondents experienced any form of gradual transition programme. As one respondent put it: "They could have given me opportunities to mentor younger employees. My decades of experience just walked out the door with me."

This is not a peripheral concern. An IHR study cited in related research estimates that within a single organisation, approximately 700 retirements result in the loss of around 27,000 years of

collective experience, spanning client relationships, institutional memory, and the kind of pattern recognition that no onboarding programme can replicate. When multiplied across an economy, the scale of this knowledge haemorrhage becomes difficult to fully account for.

Perhaps the most important single finding in the survey data is a pattern that emerges with age. After the standard retirement age, i.e. 60 years, the proportion of older adults in formal employment declines sharply. But the desire to explore opportunities does not. It persists, and in some age cohorts, it rises. Among respondents aged 75 and above, two-thirds describe themselves as actively exploring opportunities while none are in full-time work.

The gap between access and aspiration is a consequence of how our institutions are calibrated to a retirement age tied to a shorter life expectancy. The retirement cliff was designed for a world that no longer exists. Longevity aims to extend this further, without redefining society as a whole.

Although many reforms, from pension plans to the nature of employment matter, the bigger question is around purpose and meaning. Work, in this context, is not merely an economic variable.

Participant interviews reveal that the primary reasons for older professionals seeking work are purpose and identity, and a centred-around connection, not financial gains.

Japan, facing the most acute ageing challenge of any large economy, has moved to keep older citizens embedded in community and social functions as a matter of explicit policy.

Singapore's SkillsFuture programme reframes education as a lifelong process rather than a front-loaded credential. These are important efforts, but they remain at the margins of a much larger institutional inertia that has yet to be seriously confronted.

Millions of people want to contribute, feel prepared to do so, and are finding that the institutions meant to facilitate that contribution simply do not exist.

The science of living longer is advancing rapidly. The architecture of living differently has barely begun.

(The writer is a senior policy advisor at WisdomCircle, an AgeTech platform connecting experienced professionals with organisations globally. The WisdomCircle-Dalberg survey covered 1,067 respondents aged 50-80 across India)

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

### The pink before the gold shower

Bengaluru's trees herald summer—blossoming then blazing

JAYANTHI CHANDRASEKARAN

"Winter comes, can spring be far behind?" wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley, invoking hope in the cycle of seasons. In Northern India spring lingers gently after winter, offering a tender interlude before summer sets in. But in Bengaluru, the season is announced not by a thermometer but by a breathtaking aerial ballet. Long before the mercury peaks, the city's canopy undergoes a dramatic transformation, shedding its leaves for a riotous, neon-bright palette. This is the "Garden City" at its most authentic—a curated masterpiece of botanical engineering where the heralds of summer are the trees themselves.

This seasonal spectacle is more than just a visual treat; it is a living link to Bengaluru's history. The "seral biombing" landscape we see today was meticulously planned by the Wadiyars dynasty

and their German and British botanists.

They sought to blend the exotic with the native, creating a city that didn't just have gardens but was a garden. Among these seasonal marvels, one tree in particular commands attention: the Tabebuia rosea, often called the rose trumpet tree. In February-March, cloaked in intricate, delicate, paper-thin pink blossoms, it stands without a single leaf in sight, as though draped in a bridal veil. Though tall and stately, there is a certain demureness in its presence—a quiet elegance that softens the severity of the season. Walking down an avenue like Cubbon Park or the lanes of Jayanagar during this time feels like stepping into a watercolour painting.

Closely following the pink wave is the Jacaranda mimosaefolia. With its fern-like foliage and bell-shaped, mauve flowers, the Jacaranda adds a cool, regal purple to the city's palette. Originally introduced from South America by visionary horticulturists like Gustav Krumbiegel, these trees were part of a "seral biombing" plan. The goal was simple yet poetic: to ensure that as one species faded, another would take its place, keeping the city in a perpetual

state of floral celebration.

As April matures and the heat sharpens, the Cassia fistula, or the Indian Laburnum, takes centre stage. Known locally as *Kakke Maru*, its pendulous clusters of bright yellow flowers earn it the nickname "Golden Shower". Unlike the delicate Tabebuias, the Cassia's yellow is defiant and electric, its golden inflorescences hanging like ornate chandeliers that sway in the summer breeze.

Then comes the undisputed queen of the Indian summer: the Gulmohar. If the Tabebuias are a soft whisper, the Gulmohar is a joyful shout. Its wide, umbrella-like canopy turns a searing shade of scarlet and orange, mirroring the intensity of the sun it thrives under. By May, these trees, which line the city's highways, old cantonment roads and the Indian Institute of Science campus, join this annual pageant.

For the modern Bengalurite, these blooms are a cultural marker. They signify the arrival of the Ugadi festival, the taste of the first summer mangoes, and a brief, beautiful window where the city's infamous traffic is forgiven because the view from the windshield is framed in gold and crimson.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### India must take the lead in ending the war

The escalating conflict between Israel, the US, and Iran raises a pressing question: can the world afford this war? With airspace closed and trade disrupted, the impact is felt globally. As a "middle nation", India should leverage its relationships to broker peace. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's connections with world leaders offer an opportunity to mediate. Regime change has failed in the past; it is time for diplomacy. India is among what

is termed as the "middle nations". It needs to accept this responsibility and talk and discuss with friends and allies to end this war. The US president has said several times that PM Modi is a good friend, and Prime Minister Modi has also stated multiple times about how close he is to his friend Donald Trump. PM Modi should use his good offices, and speak to the US to end this war. Hemachandra Basappa, Bengaluru

### Restraint is key

The reported assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is a catastrophic breach of international norms. Extrajudicial killings undermine global stability and invite anarchy. Responsible nations must condemn this act and demand a return to diplomacy. The cycle of violence must end. The targeted killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by the US and Israeli forces represents a reckless departure from civilised diplomacy that invites global anarchy. Regardless of one's geopolitical stance, the extrajudicial assassination of a sovereign head of State is a dan-

gerous precedent that replaces established legal frameworks with raw military force. Vijayakumar H K, Raichur

### Conscience over comfort

Appropos 'The Epstein effect'. Why smart people protect dangerous men (Mar 1). The Epstein case reveals an uncomfortable truth: comfort often trumps morality. Influential people protect the powerful, normalising cruelty and silencing accountability. It is a failure of courage, not awareness. We must value conscience above comfort. Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

### Abuse of power

The special court's criticism of the CBI in the liquor policy case exposes a disturbing trend of using agencies to target opposition leaders. The court's remarks highlight the need for accountability and transparency in investigations. The CBI must be insulated from political interference. P. Vidmanabhan, Bengaluru

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

## SPEAK OUT



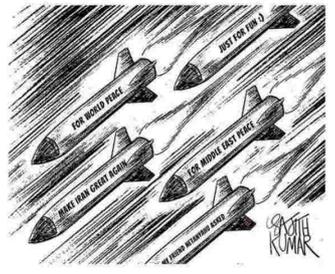
It is time to end family rule in Tamil Nadu.

Edappadi K Palaniswami, AIADMK chief

Everybody is against nepotism until it is their turn.

Shon Mehta

## TO BE PRECISE



## IN PERSPECTIVE

### When creativity wounds harmony

The Kerala Story 2 revives discredited 'love jihad' claims, risking deeper communal divides

JOHN BRITTS

Films may provoke, satire, incite, criticise, or even offend—that is part of our fundamental freedom. But when the primary intention is to tarnish, dehumanise, or systematically degrade a section of society, it becomes targeted contempt masquerading as creativity. The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond, like its prequel, weaponises imagination against the Muslim community in particular, and Kerala in general—a state long seen as a model of communal harmony. When the makers met the media in Delhi, they admitted the film is not just about Kerala, but incidents across the country. If so, why drag an entire state into the narrative for targeted vilification? The Kerala High Court, taking cognisance, made scathing remarks against the filmmakers for showing the state 'in a wrong light'.

Propaganda films are not new to Indian cinema, but when blatant lies are peddled as facts under the guise of 'inspired by true events', they take on a dangerous edge. The Kerala Story (released in 2023, timed ahead of the Lok Sabha polls) claimed to expose a massive 'love jihad' conspiracy, alleging thousands of Hindu and Christian women from Kerala were tricked into converting to Islam and recruited by ISIS. Marketed aggressively—with Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself mentioning it at a rally in Karnataka—the film initially touted the figure of 32,000 women (later revised amid backlash). Yet, fact-checkers, investigations, and official probes found no evidence. A handful of isolated cases were exaggerated into a sweeping, unfounded narrative. Needless to say, the Union government is yet to acknowledge this phantom called 'Love Jihad'.

Every credible analysis found it to be Islamophobic propaganda that stigmatised Muslims as predators, portrayed interfaith relationships as threats, and falsely painted Kerala—a state renowned for its high literacy, social progress, and centuries-old communal harmony—as a hotbed of religious extremism and conversion racketeers. The sequel is on the same track, with the trailer showing a hapless woman being force-fed beef. As someone who frequently travels outside Kerala, I can vouch that the damage from the first film was profound. Even educated people asked me about the 'worsening situation in Kerala'. Irredeemable divisions, fuelled suspicion between communities, amplified stereotypes that turned everyday interactions into perceived dangers, and contributed to a broader climate of Islamophobia.

Reports highlighted how it exacerbated religious tensions, influenced public opinion to view Muslims with suspicion, and even sparked harassment linked to heightened polarisation. In Kerala itself, where interfaith coexistence has long been a strength, the film was seen as a deliberate attempt to erode that fabric, sow seeds of hatred, and damage the state's secular image for political gain. The landy bluntly refused, illustrating how divisive narratives worsen prejudice. He Muslim friend, his daughter's recalled how his daughter's disclosed that a PhD scholar, was denied residential accommodation in Delhi after her surname revealed her religious identity. The landy bluntly refused, telling her to look elsewhere. This incident, he noted, shows the gap between constitutional ideals of equality and fraternity and a ground reality of exclusion—where propaganda fuels everyday discrimination.

Such content doesn't just entertain—it actively shapes perceptions, turning nuanced realities into victim-villain binaries along religious lines. In India's diverse society, these portrayals risk eroding trust, fostering community suspicion, stereotyping minorities, and transforming personal freedoms into communal flashpoints—often for commercial or political gain, amplified by social media. The Supreme Court recently slammed the title of an OTT film, *Ghoshkar Pandat* (starring Manoj Bajpayee, directed by Neeraj Pandey) for being "contrary to public order, morality, and constitutional fraternity amid fragile societal sensibilities." If this is the response to a colloquial title, what observations might this objectionable movie sequel deserve from the apex court? In a separate opinion, Justice Bhuvanendran underscored that it is constitutionally impermissible to vilify any community through any medium. Today's polarising politics is paving the way for a plethora of propaganda films, as prominent viewers can be influenced. This trend has amplified and professionalised, as seen in the much-hyped *Dhurandhar*, a spy thriller starring Ranveer Singh. Like most so-called transnationalist movies, it blends historical events with fiction to portray perpetual cross-border threats, drawing criticism for distortions, manufactured Pakistani villainy, and hyper-patriotic binaries, often labelled as ideologically embedded films. As the Kerala Story 2 was released on February 27, following clearance from a division bench of the Kerala High Court and echoes of the 2023 film's harm persist, the challenge is clear: prioritise responsible storytelling over sensationalism that profits from fear, hatred, and polarisation. Kerala's worsening situation in Kerala! Irredeemable divisions, fuelled suspicion between communities, amplified stereotypes that turned everyday interactions into perceived dangers, and contributed to a broader climate of Islamophobia. Reports highlighted how it

(The writer is a Member of Parliament)

# Tackling abuse: When will we report what we know?

MIRIAM CHINNAPPA

I was having a coffee catch-up with a friend in Bengaluru recently, the kind of conversation that begins casually and ends somewhere much heavier. We found ourselves talking about the Epstein files, the renewed attention they have drawn, and about Gisèle Pelicot in France, a survivor of sexual violence who chose to speak publicly about what was done to her. She refused anonymity, saying that shame belongs to the perpetrator, not the victim.

We wondered whether this was finally the moment of reckoning survivors across the world have waited for or just another cycle of outrage that would flare briefly, trend loudly, and then fade.

My friend then said something that shifted the conversation entirely. She told me she had finally opened up about how her uncle had repeatedly assaulted her when she was a child. It was known in the family. It

had always been known. And it had always been managed. Yet, even now, years later, people were still sitting on the fence. Advising restraint. Suggesting silence. Saying it was complicated.

That, in many ways, is the heart of the problem in India: not the absence of law, but the presence of a culture that protects perpetrators and isolates victims.

India has strong laws to address child sexual abuse. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, or POCSO, recognises that abuse most often happens within trusted spaces and allows survivors to come forward even years later, as adults. There is no limitation period. The Juvenile Justice Act establishes Child Welfare Committees in every district to receive complaints and act in the best interests of the child. Special courts exist to hear these cases, and child helplines such as 1098 are meant to provide immediate support.

On paper, the framework is robust. In

practice, reporting remains low, trials drag on, and justice arrives late, if at all. National Crime Records Bureau data shows that thousands of cases of child sexual abuse are reported every year, with tens of thousands remaining pending in courts, trapped in procedural delay. In 2022 alone, more than 64,000 cases of sexual offences against children were reported, including over 38,000 cases of rape of minors under the POCSO Act.

And yet these disturbing numbers are not the full picture. They are only the visible surface. Most survivors never report abuse at all. Fear, shame, family pressure, social stigma, and mistrust of institutions ensure that what reaches police records is only a fraction of what actually occurs.

Those who do report are most often children harmed by people they know. These are not strangers. They are uncles, teachers, neighbours, religious figures, coaches, and community leaders — people with

familiarity, authority, and access. What fails is the social and cultural resolve to hold perpetrators accountable.

The renewed attention on Jeffrey Epstein exposes this failure on a global scale. Despite years of allegations, numerous survivors, and well-documented links to power, accountability has been limited. Files are released. Names circulate. Arrests remain few.

This is not coincidence. Research in criminology and child protection has long shown that sexual predators rely on credibility, respectability, and social acceptance to operate. They cultivate trust deliberately, building outwardly respectable lives that are not incidental but strategic, becoming shields that allow abuse to continue unchecked.

Access, too, is deliberate. Studies show that sexual predators actively seek environments where children are available and oversight is weak. In India, this reality is compounded by poverty, inequality, over-

crowding and chronic institutional neglect. Millions of children are marginalised, unattended, under-supervised, or dependent on adults outside their families for care, education, food, or opportunity. This makes them highly accessible and deeply vulnerable.

Education, religion, sport, charity work, and social service repeatedly emerge as spaces of abuse due to the combination of trust, authority, and access they involve. In India, this pattern is painfully familiar: the benevolent uncle, the revered religious figure, the committed teacher, and the so-called social reformer working with marginalised children are all granted unquestioned access in the name of care or change.

When abuse is named, another pattern follows swiftly. Victims are discredited. Their motives are questioned. Property disputes are invented. Jealousy is implied. Families are urged to stay quiet. Communities rally around the accused. Survivors are pressured and intimidated into silence.

Patriarchy makes this easier, and it is upheld not only by men but also often by women acting in defence of family honour and social stability. Speaking out about abuse is deliberately distorted into disruption instead of being recognised as the naming of harm.

When my friend said I finished our coffee, the Epstein files were still on our phones, and Pelicot's words lingered between us. The distance between a global scandal and an Indian family living room suddenly felt very small.

We already know what abuse looks like and how it hides. The question is no longer whether we know. Until reporting abuse is seen not as disruption but as duty, and until silence is recognised as complicity rather than restraint, justice and healing will remain something promised but not delivered.

(The writer is the executive director of the Centre for Law and Transformative Change)

## Pakistan's airstrikes in Afghanistan showed its overwhelming superiority in conventional warfare, but the Taliban have refined a lethal repertoire of guerrilla tactics

ELIAN PELTIER

Once again, Afghanistan is fighting a mightier enemy. After Pakistan declared "open war" on the Taliban government on Friday, two armed forces with wide gaps in weaponry and tactics between them now face each other along a roughly 1,600-mile-long border.

Pakistan has one of the largest militaries in Asia. The Taliban in Afghanistan have honed guerrilla tactics over more than two decades of war with US forces, which abandoned billions of dollars worth of weapons in 2021.

The latest phase of the conflict, which started with border skirmishes last year, is expected to continue flaring up and may escalate. Additional airstrikes threaten to inflict major damage on cities in Afghanistan, which is already reeling from extreme poverty and a humanitarian crisis. Militant groups supporting the Taliban are likely to target the Pakistani territory with more attacks, including suicide bombings and assaults on security forces, analysts say.

The Pakistani military carried out a barrage of airstrikes on Afghan military infrastructure on Friday, after accusing the Taliban government of hosting and supporting a militant group that has repeatedly attacked Pakistan's security forces.

"Pakistan wants to take the war to Afghanistan and no longer in Pakistan," said Qamar Cheema, the executive director of the Sanobar Institute, a research organisation based in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital.

The strikes this past week did not target major infrastructure to leave room for escalation, Cheema noted. "The Pakistani military knows where to hit and hurt the Taliban the most," he said.

Pakistan's military and security apparatus supported the Taliban for decades, including by providing a refuge for the group's leadership during the US-led war in Afghanistan and supplying the insurgency with weapons.

Its government initially welcomed the Taliban's return to power in 2021, but the relationship soured shortly after Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, an Islamic militant group that opposes the Pakistani state, intensified its attacks across the border. Pakistan accuses the Taliban government of harbouring the group, which is also known as the Pakistani Taliban.

On Friday, the relationship between the two countries reached its lowest point in years.

"Now it is open war between us and you," Pakistan's defence minister, Khawaja Asif, said in a post on social media. The comment was a sharp turn from the public support he had once displayed towards Taliban officials.

The Afghan Ministry of Defence says it has 205,000 men in its armed forces. An additional 223,000 men are in the Afghan police, according to the Interior Ministry, though analysts say those figures are difficult to verify.

The Taliban have also inherited Black Hawk helicopters, Humvee vehicles and thousands of weapons from the war against the United States — worth more than \$7 billion in total, according to the Defence Department. Afghan soldiers in the capital, Kabul, and across the country



Relatives and mourners stand near the coffin of a victim killed during Pakistani airstrikes in Ghani Khel district, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, on March 1. Afghan and Pakistani troops battled along their border with the fighting coming alongside multiple strikes including the former US air base at Bagram. AFP

## No clear endgame in the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict

can regularly be seen with M16 and AR-15 rifles, and markets their US military uniforms and spare parts for night vision goggles.

Many of those weapons have ended up in the hands of insurgent groups like the Pakistani Taliban.

"The Taliban have definitely capitalised on the stocks of US weapons, but they don't have the logistical and maintenance capacity," said Paddy Ginn, a senior expert on Afghanistan at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime.

The Afghan military would struggle to hit major Pakistani military bases, Ginn added. "Afghanistan has a fledgling air force made of helicopters and drones they've weaponised," he said. "Pakistan is pretty impressive in its air defence counter-drones and airstrike capabilities."

Still, the Taliban fighters who now make up the bulk of the Afghan military have repeatedly broken through Pakistani territory through lethal ground incursions. They struck more than 50 locations Friday in coordinated attacks, which the Afghan government said were in retaliation for Pakistani strikes earlier in the week.

"The Taliban mastered the art of taking out isolated military checkpoints when they were fighting internationally backed Afghan troops," said Ibrahim Bahiss, an Afghanistan analyst with the International Crisis Group.

"They're trying to rely on their tried and tested methods because they don't have a lot of other options," he added.

Afghan officials have called for dialogue, and analysts on both sides of the

border say the region cannot sustain more volatility.

"It's tit for tat, and it has to end," said Abdul Hai Qani, an expert on international relations who is based in Kabul. "It's in no one's interest to have more instability in the region, especially with the conflict now unfolding in Iran."

Pakistan has refused the call for talks. Although the Taliban publicly deny hosting the Pakistani Taliban, Islamabad says it has run out of patience with the Taliban leadership after several rounds of failed peace negotiations and relentless attacks.

The Pakistani Taliban have killed more than 1,300 people in over 800 attacks since 2021, according to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies, a research centre based in Islamabad.

Pakistan aircraft hit military compounds in Kabul and Kandahar — home to Afghanistan's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada — on Friday as well as various other military facilities and army depots near the Pakistani border in eastern Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military claims to have destroyed 135 Afghan tanks and carrier vehicles and killed more than 330 Afghan fighters in a single day, although it made no distinction between Afghan soldiers and Pakistani Taliban militants.

Pakistan also struck areas that were full of civilians, according to humanitarian organisations and Afghan officials. They added that it targeted at least two camps hosting Afghans who were recently expelled from Pakistan. Returnees evacuated one of the camps; three Afghan civilians were killed and seven others

wounded in a strike near the other camp in southeastern Afghanistan on Saturday, Afghan officials said.

The camps are run by United Nations agencies and international and Afghan organisations.

Allison Hooker, the US undersecretary of state for political affairs, said Friday that she had called Pakistan's foreign minister and "expressed support for Pakistan's right to defend itself against Taliban attacks."

After Pakistan's airstrikes in Afghanistan, the Pakistani Taliban and two other Islamic militant groups urged their fighters to intensify attacks in Pakistan's two most populous provinces, Punjab and Sindh, which have largely been spared the brunt of Pakistani Taliban's assaults.

The attacks would aim to "weaken the enemy" and show solidarity with Afghans, the groups said in statements. The Pakistani Taliban have about 6,000 fighters, according to the United Nations.

The Pakistani government has tightened security nationwide, and the US Embassy in Islamabad has advised Americans in Pakistan to avoid large commercial areas.

"A blowback will come," said Mansoor Ahmad Khan, a former Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan. "That is the nature of war."

Pakistan should leave the door open for de-escalation, he added.

"The Afghan Taliban have suffered heavy damage as a result of Pakistani strikes, no doubt," Khan said. "But an expansion of the war is not in Pakistan's interest. Nor is it in Afghanistan's."

The New York Times

## Ballots vs belief

CS DWARAKANATH

With the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) polls approaching, the debate over whether the anti-conversion law should be repealed, retained or just amended has resurfaced with renewed urgency.

On February 3, the Supreme Court of India took up a petition filed by the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), challenging the legality of anti-conversion laws and seeking a stay on them. The court issued notice to the Union government and 12 states. A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Jayaprakash Narayan is hearing the matter and has directed the respondents to reply within four weeks.

In 2022, the then BJP government enacted the Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Act, popularly known as the Anti-conversion law. Since the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government assumed office, it has repeatedly claimed to repeal the Act. The government has now completed 1,000 days in office and even celebrated the feat. Yet the law remains in force, despite repeated appeals from the Christian community.

According to the 2011 Census, Karnataka is home to 11.43 lakh Christians, of whom 5,04,863 live in Bengaluru. In the upcoming GBA polls, Christian votes are significant for the "secular" Congress. Yet the party appears hesitant to withdraw the Act. The BJP, on the other hand, insists on strengthening it. Congresses caught in a dilemma: repealing the law may consolidate Christian support, but it risks giving the BJP an opportunity to mobilise Hindu votes.

Unlike in previous decades, Congress can no longer assume that Christians constitute an unflinching voter base. The community is showing signs of political awakening and assertion. In local body elections in Dakshina Kannada and elsewhere, sections of Christian voters have reportedly shifted away from the Congress. The community is gearing up for a massive protest against the Congress seeking the repeal of the anti-conversion law.

The BJP and the broader Sangh Parivar ecosystem argue that anti-conversion laws are necessary to prevent religious conversion through force, deceit and influence. They contend that repealing such laws would allow proselytising without adequate safeguards.

The idea of restricting religious conversion is not new. In the 1930s and 40s, several princely states enforced laws to prevent such actions by missionaries. However, in the colonial era, such laws were localised, and their reach and enforcement were also strict.

In post-independence India, Article 25 of the Constitution

guaranteed freedom to practise, propagate and spread religion. Despite this, anxieties around conversion persisted for socio-political reasons, prompting several states to introduce anti-conversion laws.

Since the previous BJP government enforced the anti-conversion law, there have been several atrocities against Christians on the pretext of conversion. Innocent Christians have been victimised, since the Act places the onus of proving that a conversion is not forced on the accused and not the complainant. Karnataka's anti-conversion law is not a neutral, regulatory law. It considers minorities as offenders.

As per available data, there have been 13 cases of conversion accusations. There have been 11 cases of attacks on places of worship and nine cases of atrocities against women. In Uttar Pradesh, where the law is in force, the Christian community is suffering heavily.

Apart from Christian community leaders, human rights activists, legal experts with social concern and social justice adherents have contended that anti-conversion laws are clearly against the fundamental right of freedom of religion (article 25). Such laws are being misused to target minorities. Critics intend to prove that such laws are to confront minorities under the pretext of law, hence they are dangerous.

The anti-conversion law hinders the constitutional right of freedom of religion (article 25). Articles 21 and 14 grant the right to practise, propagate and spread religion. Anti-conversion laws, especially when they mandate prior permission, may violate these rules and hinder voluntary conversions, according to experts. It is important to note that the law can be misused and even used to issue threats. According to one line of argument, withdrawing anti-conversion laws is the only constitutionally honest way.

The Congress has indicated that the law could be amended rather than repealed. But an amendment will legitimise its flawed premise. Repeal would reaffirm Karnataka's commitment to constitutional freedoms, restore minority confidence and curb potential misuse by law enforcement. Thus, the law must not be amended but completely dropped.

B R Ambekar had believed that choosing a religion was a man's fundamental right and personal choice. He rejected the idea that a person should be committed to the religion of his forefathers, even if the religion fails to establish dignity, equality and justice. When looked at from his perspective, the anti-conversion law is unconstitutional.

(The writer is a senior advocate and chairperson of the social justice wing of the Congress)

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1976

New levies proposed in state

Bangalore, March 1  
Finance Minister M. Y. Gorpage today presented to the Karnataka Assembly a Rs. 28.78-cr deficit Budget for 1976-77. The additional taxes proposed include an increase in sales tax on all electrical goods, heavy chemicals, lubricating oils, industrial and domestic fuel gases, tea, all kinds of paper, footwear and purchase tax on sugarcane payable by khandsari units. Mr. Gorpage also increased the entertainment tax, stamp duty, education cess and health cess.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2001

India condemns Taliban move to demolish statues

New Delhi, March 1  
India today expressed outrage over the Taliban regime's reported move to go ahead with the destruction of all statues of religious and historical importance in Afghanistan. "We are absolutely outraged by reports that the Taliban is persisting with its medieval programme," a spokesman of the External Affairs Ministry said today as reports from Kabul suggested that the Taliban militia is going ahead with the recent decree of its supreme leader Mulla Omer.

## Don't allow your mind to get sick

get married, he could at least bring a girl home so that his mother might pass away peacefully, believing her cherished wish fulfilled. Reluctantly he agrees, and a young woman is hired to visit daily for a week, posing as his prospective bride.

Lo and behold, things change dramatically. Instead of breathing her last, the old lady begins to recover. Within days, she is out of bed, her eyes bright with purpose, planning a wedding with renewed enthusiasm. Till such time that she

was mentally sick, her body refused to cooperate but once she recovered mentally, her body also regained health.

The lesson is simple but profound: even in the worst situations, we should not allow our mind to get sick. That can paralyse our entire body. To remain hopeful even in the worst situation is a great quality as was demonstrated by the Thai football team boys who remained entrapped in the tunnel for good seven days and our own workers who got trapped in the Uttarakhand Tunnel under construc-



taken two years back, and could be taken out almost after a month or so.

To remain mentally healthy, the best way is to consciously avoid doing anything that can take away one's peace of mind. This is possible when one learns to manage stress, anxiety and maintain emotional well-being. It is important to cultivate such godly qualities as humility, patience, tolerance for the views of others, contentment, control on wanton desires, practicing a sense of gratitude, compassion and to have a feeling of sharing and caring — all of which play a key role in ensuring emotional well-being.

# DECCAN Chronicle

2 MARCH 2026

## Mideast in flames as US, Israel wage war on Iran

Atyallah Ali Khamenei, the "Supreme Leader" of Iran is dead. The Middle East is in flames with drone destruction pouring from the skies causing deaths on the ground. As the war, started by the USA and Israel, raged over Iran, which retaliated in drone and missile strikes on Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the UAE, Doha in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Jordan, there was no knowing what it would lead to or where it would end. The US President Donald Trump, whose narration of events couched in the euphemism — major combat operations — and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may be the only ones exulting in having engineered a change in Iran's leadership.

The US President, who had promised to end wars and not start any as he aimed to put America first, has senselessly triggered this war which has already ballooned into a huge regional conflict in which civilians have died in many countries. That he may have ordered operations without careful forethought about what comes after is in keeping with Mr Trump's playbook by which he has been involved in at least six previous instances of starting military operations, including in Iran whose uranium enrichment facilities were bombed just last June.

The rationale for starting this war, apart from Israel's permanent fear of Iran's unswerving enmity, is unclear. After all, Mr Trump had boasted last year that Iran's enrichment capability had been in a state of hibernation which has already ballooned into a huge regional conflict in which civilians have died in many countries. That he may have ordered operations without careful forethought about what comes after is in keeping with Mr Trump's playbook by which he has been involved in at least six previous instances of starting military operations, including in Iran whose uranium enrichment facilities were bombed just last June.

Almost as many people will be celebrating Khamenei's death as mourning his demise. He had ruled for four decades, run the most repressive regime, brutally crushing dissent while his murderous protector in the Iran Revolutionary Guards Corps killed their countrymen for demonstrating dissent or shot or hanged women on whom the most repressive and draconian measures had indeed been imposed. It does not, however, follow that his death will lead to any change of heart in the regime which will probably be headed by the same kind of theorists and their quasi-military cohorts who have subjugated the people and hijacked the country.

A brutal repression of protests against an economic downturn — inflation is running at 70 per cent now — may have taken an estimated 6,000 lives in January with the unofficial death toll running into the larger, possibly leading to a false sense of security settling on the Iranian leadership. A major coordinated strike based on Israeli and American intelligence took down many of the senior leaders leaving a vacuum that the theologians and the feared revolutionary guards will be aiming to fill. If that happens, this air strike will be just another that would have done little to change the thinking in what is avowedly a free country in which the people elect their administrative leaders.

In retaliation, Iran aimed missiles at 27 US and Israeli military establishments but also struck iconic hotels and buildings in Dubai even as violent demonstrations broke out in Iraq and Pakistan and peaceful protests in India over Khamenei's death. How those nations housing American troops in bases on their soil respond to their sovereignty being breached in this manner could add another deadly dimension to this war. What happens next could reshape the whole of the Middle East, the global economy and the balance of world power for more than a generation.

## Kejriwal relief slap for Modi govt

The order of the Delhi special court acquitting Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) convener and former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, its deputy Manish Sisodia, former Bharat Rashtra Samithi MP K. Kavitha and 20 others in an excise policy case comes as a big relief for the AAP which was set off as a platform against corruption and for clean politics only to get mired in a corruption case just before the last Delhi Assembly election. More importantly, it has come as a tight slap on the establishment comprising the Delhi chief secretary, the Lieutenant Governor and the Union home ministry which supervises the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as well as the Union finance ministry under which the Enforcement Directorate (ED) functions for its diabolical plans against an Opposition political party and its leaders which now stand exposed in front of the nation.

The acquittal comes with a finding that the entire investigation was a "premeditated and choreographed exercise" and the prosecution case was built "solely on the basis of inadmissible hearsay attributed to an approver, despite the investigation yielding no material". There cannot be a worse comment a court can make on an investigation agency. That the court has asked for a departmental inquiry against the officers who conducted the probe must be considered a warning to those officials who act as stooges of their political bosses and harass innocent people; that a chief minister and his colleagues were the victims in this case calls for close follow-up of the directive.

The acquittal in the case brings to sharp focus the way the present administration has been using the ED to throw its political opponents in jail. The Prevention of Money Laundering Act allows the ED to go after people who launder money obtained through listed criminal activities. Mr Kejriwal, Mr Sisodia and others spent months in jail which makes it difficult to bail next to impossible. Now that the court concerned has decided that no crime was involved in the case, the ED and its handlers must answer to the people on their bona fides to remain in those offices.

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Subhani



## Rubio's Munich manifesto is Make West Great Again



Sanjaya Baru  
Sanjayovacha

The great Western empires had entered into terminal decline, US secretary of state Marco Rubio reminded his European audience at last month's Munich Security Conference, because, as he put it, "godless Communist revolutions and anti-colonial uprisings" had transformed the world. Against this backdrop, Mr Rubio argued, "many come to believe that the West's age of dominance had come to an end and that our future was destined to be a faint and feeble echo of our past". Urging his European colleagues to reject such a dismal view of the future of the "Christian West", Mr Rubio assured Europe that President Donald Trump's project to make America Great Again (MAGA) was in fact a strategy to "Make the West Great Again" (MTWGA). "The United States and Europe, we belong together," he reassured his European hosts. "America was founded 250 years ago, but the roots began here on this continent long before the map. The most cherished bonds that nations could share, forged by centuries of shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry, and the sacrifices our forefathers made together for the common civilisation to which we have fallen heir."

The United States is connected with Europe, Mr

Rubio said, "not just economically, not just militarily... We are connected spiritually and we are connected culturally. We want Europe to be strong. We believe that Europe must survive, because the two great wars of the last century serve for us as history's constant reminder that ultimately, our destiny is and will always be intertwined with yours, because we know that the fate of Europe will never be irrelevant to our own". I have quoted Mr Rubio at length because, surprisingly, his speech received little attention and even less coverage in India. Mr Rubio's "Munich Manifesto", so to speak, is both a declaration of the civilisational unity of the West and a call to arms against not just "godless Communists" but also "anti-colonialists" of the Global South.

From Cuba and Venezuela next door to Europe and West Asia in the Middle and across Eurasia all the way to the Indian subcontinent, the West seeks to retain the dominance it acquired at the end of the Second World War. Mr Rubio's assurance that the West will not be dented by the rise of recent European concerns that President Donald Trump may dump them in pursuit of MAGA. No wonder he received a standing ovation.

We do not know from the media reports if any of the Indian worthies in attendance at Munich stood up to respond to this anticolonial manifesto of neo-colonial aspirations. Unlike, because so many of our elite who represent India at such conclaves have internalised the view that continued Western dominance and a world order under American leadership

We must thank Mr Rubio for his brutal honesty. For we have understood from his speech that it is not just the 'godless Communists' of China that the West worries about but also the 'anti-colonialists' of the Global South.

ship is in India's interests. We must thank Mr Rubio for his brutal honesty. For we have understood from his speech that it is not just the "godless Communists" of China that the West worries about but also the "anti-colonialists" of the Global South. Sadly though, even as we spout "amarnibh-bharat" at home, sing *Vande Mataram*, say *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* and hope to be leaders of the Global South, many of us have no qualms believing that continued Western dominance makes the world safer.

There is today a generation of Indians that has all but forgotten, perhaps never even been taught, that the Indian subcontinent was home to the earliest anti-colonial movement led by the Indian National Congress. India's struggle for freedom from European colonialism (not just British, but also French and Portuguese) inspired anti-colonial struggles across Asia and Africa. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were and remain inspirational figures across the globe and what is now called Global South.

It was a British historian, Angus Maddison, who reminded us that till 1700 China and India were the world's dominant economic entities, together accounting for 50 per cent of world income and that two hundred fifty years of colonialism, from 1700 to 1950, reduced this share to below 10 per cent. Over the last eight decades they have not only increased their share of world income, but have also enabled several other post-colonial nations to improve their lot.

While Asia's share has been rising, led by East and Southeast Asian nations and more recently India, that of the West, particularly Europe, has been declining. This reversal of fortunes is a historical phenomenon shaped by demography, the spread of education, economic development and political empowerment. This of millions in what was once called the "Third World". For some time after the Second World War, the West facilitated the rise of the Rest. China was the biggest beneficiary of the process and has now risen enough to begin to worry, if not challenge, the West.

Mr Rubio's call to arms of the "Christian West" is an understandable response to the rise of an Asian challenger, the "godless Communists". This is an inevitable competition between a declining and a rising power. What, however, ever deserves condemnation is his regret that "anti-colonial uprisings" ought to be challenged too. This view seizes a century of history and a return to an inglorious past.

Anti-colonial uprisings have contributed to the political liberation and economic emancipation of millions across Asia, Africa and Latin America — large continents conquered and dominated by the West. That Donald Trump's America wants to preserve the trans-Atlantic alliance to enable a united West to continue to dominate over the Rest is a project that India must explicitly reject.

Anti-colonialism and exploitation was a blemish on human civilisation. India inspired the world by fighting it and claiming its political leadership owes it to the people of India and the leadership of our national movement to reject Mr Rubio's manifesto. It is unfortunate that the present leadership has chosen silence over the assertion of national dignity.

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and economist. His most recent book is Succession: The Flight Out of New India.

### LETTERS

#### IRAN ATTACKED

It's unfortunate that conflicts in West Asia have culminated in a full blown war between Israel-US and Iran (US, Israel launch strikes on Iran, Tehran hits back, March 1). The war seems to be imminent, if the fast-changing developments are observed keenly. The US and Israel may not be satisfied with the change of guard in Iran, unlike in Iraq but still want to play a major role in the internal affairs of that country. The desperate Iran would try to spread the war as far as possible to cause maximum damage that it could capable of. The avoidable war in West Asia has drawn the entire world into chaos.

Dr D.V.G. Sankara Rao  
Srikakulam

#### IRAN ATTACKED

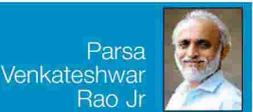
It is extremely shocking, heart-rending and painful to read the death of 20 persons and serious injury of many others in a huge blast at a fireworks factory, Vetlapalem, Kakinada district (Fireworks factory blast kills 20 in Vetlapalem, March 1). The avoidable tragedy is unmistakably and plainly due to utter disregard for the SOPs and safeguards by the management and administration of the company. Stern action must be taken against the people who are responsible for the heartbreaking incident and preventive measures need to be taken immediately by the authorities concerned.

Dr C. Ghanshyam  
Visakhapatnam

The tragic blast starkly does reveal that when safety norms are flouted and regulations go up in smoke, innocent lives are reduced to ashes and families are left shattered. Cutting corners and playing with fire in hazardous industries is a recipe for disaster. Authorities must ensure that rules are not merely on paper. To avert such untoward incidents, regular inspections, strict adherence to licensing norms, and proper storage of explosives are essential. Residents should promptly report violations and avoid gathering near accident sites. It is high time we nip such negligence in the bud and put safety first.

Raju Kolluru  
Kakinada

Email your letters to  
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Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

## After the ruling: Kejriwal gets big boost; AAP-BJP war to intensify

Arvind Kejriwal is certainly relieved as special judge Jitendra Singh quashed the case filed by the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate over the privatisation of liquor sales in Delhi. The Kejriwal government repealed the policy after the controversy of corruption surrounding it. Mr Kejriwal's colleagues and several others also have been acquitted. Judge Singh rebuked the investigating agencies for filing the case based on weak charges, which did not pass the legal threshold. It is the most resounding rebuke to the Narendra Modi government because both the CBI and the ED are agencies which work under the supervision of the Central government. The CBI is part of the department of personnel and training, which comes under the Prime Minister's Office. The ED is part of the finance ministry.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the liquor sales policy of the Kejriwal government, the corruption case filed against the former Delhi chief minister, against former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia and many others in the AAP was clearly seen as the BJP's determined attempt to tarnish the anti-corruption crusading party's knight-in-shining-armor image. It is also quite clear that the corruption case and the high-profile arrests of top AAP leaders played a decisive role in the BJP's victory in the Delhi through elections in February 2025. Though the BJP and the Modi government are sure to deny any ulterior motive in pursuing the corruption charges,

it is much too evident that it was part of a political strategy.

Now that the charges and accusations have been overturned by the court, remains to be seen whether the Delhi High Court will have to say as the CBI has filed an appeal challenging the lower court's verdict. Mr Kejriwal, of course, expects to make his way back to the political helm. In many ways, Mr Kejriwal is the underdog supreme of the AAP. The party however wants to prove that it is based on its clean governance rather than on the personality factor of Mr Kejriwal, but given the social dynamics of Indian politics it is the leader who is the anchor of a political party's fortunes. Mr Kejriwal is an essential factor of the AAP's success.

The media made much of Mr Kejriwal's emotional breakdown when he cried before the cameras. The media has generally been contemptuous of Mr Kejriwal's personal issues. It had made a point of focusing on his bouts of cough a decade ago when he was fighting the election a second time in 2015. The emotional breakdown could be seen as a symptom of Mr Kejriwal being not hard enough to take the blows of a powerful adversary, especially that which is at the helm in the Central government, and that the tears may indicate that the gentle middle-class individual that he is he cannot stand up to mental and physical torture necessitated by the rigors of the imprisonment. But Mr Kejriwal is a consummate artist who can use his personal vulnerabilities as a

political trump card.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces stiff competition from Mr Kejriwal in political theatrics. The BJP and its allies are sure to turn public sympathy in his favour, and there is good enough reason for the BJP to lose sleep over it. The stinging judgment delivered by Judge Singh provides enough rhetorical ammunition for Mr Kejriwal to turn the tables against Mr Modi and the BJP.

There are plenty of political strategies lurking behind these developments. What is of significance is that both the AAP and BJP are at the right end of the political spectrum. The question to be asked is whether the AAP has the endorsement of ideological mentor Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh? It would appear that it does. So, the RSS would not have liked the BJP-led operation to demolish the party and its BJP then possible that the invisible army of RSS volunteers could lend support to the AAP. The struggle for influence and power in the political arena between the AAP and BJP will be fought behind the scenes. Mr Kejriwal's India Against Corruption movement was no ordinary middle-class movement which the likes of Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav believed it was. Mr Kejriwal's innate Hindu middle-class conservatism lent a different political profile to the AAP, and this played a significant role in the electoral victories of the AAP in 2015 and 2020. Is there then room for two right-wing parties? The

argument would be that AAP will remain a regional party, and the BJP will be a national party. The demarcated spheres of influence of the AAP and the BJP need to be marked out.

Mr Kejriwal and the AAP became part of the Opposition IN.L.D.I.A. bloc, but the AAP does not appear to be too comfortable in the company of the Congress and the Communists, and even socialist organisations like the Samawadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal. A clear hint that the AAP is a right-wing Hindu conservative party was given when Mr Kejriwal made the celebration of Ram Navami an official programme. The mortal combat between the AAP and BJP can be intense and even cruel. The BJP and the Narendra Modi government will try to work their way around the special judge's indictment of the investigative agencies. It won't be surprising if the government were to come up with a fresh set of charges or cover the holes in the earlier charges. Mr Kejriwal can't rest too long on the victory afforded by the special judge's verdict. The BJP does not want to share political power with anyone, either ideological rivals like Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress or M.K. Stalin's DMK, or ideological fellow-travellers like Mr Kejriwal's AAP. Narendra Modi and the BJP want to reign supreme and alone.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

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## EDITORIALS

# Candidates spar over campaign financing. They should be debating solutions

The gamesmanship and guilt-by-association tactics that are defining this election cycle jumped the shark with the news last week that an Illinois House member from Chicago sent mailers to constituents accusing his progressive challenger of wanting to “expand ICE in our community.”

The attack on challenger Miguel Alvelo-Rivera by 40th District state Rep. Jaime Andrade’s campaign on its face made little sense, as Alvelo-Rivera is endorsed by the most passionate anti-ICE politicians in our area, including Ald. Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez and U.S. Rep. Delia Ramirez. But Andrade defended the accusation by saying that it was based on donations to Alvelo-Rivera from other politicians (including Ramirez) who support him, some of whom in turn had received modest donations from out-of-state moderate Democratic politicians who voted last year for Immigration and Customs Enforcement funding.

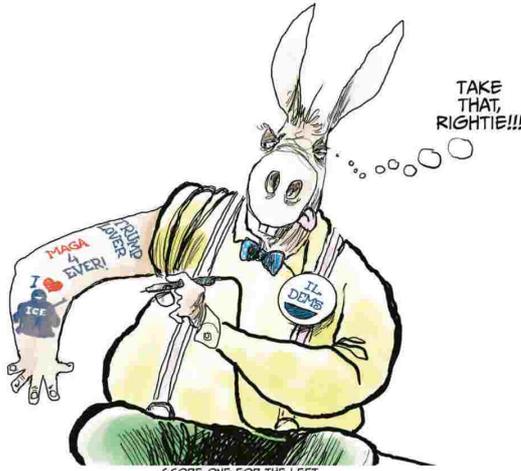
Got that? That is about as tenuous and convoluted as such an attack can get. No one with any knowledge of Chicago politics can believe that Alvelo-Rivera, a product of what Andrade calls the Democratic socialist “machine” in his part of the city, is an ICE supporter.

For his part, Andrade effectively is defending these highly misleading mailers as normal hardball political tactics that have been employed by the same Democratic socialists in other races in the neighborhoods he represents, including Avondale, Albany Park and Irving Park. He’s correct there.

But that doesn’t make what he’s doing right. And we say that knowing we endorsed Andrade in the primary. For the record, we still stand by that endorsement. If with a little less enthusiasm.

This bare-knuckled example shines a light on the distressing trend that has come to dominate this primary season for Democrats, a particularly intense one given the unusually large number of open seats for Congress and for other offices. Discussions of candidates’ qualifications and positions on issues have been eclipsed by near-constant focus on who’s donating to their campaigns.

It’s not just the candidates who are at fault here. Questions at debates and forums have tended to overemphasize who’s giving what



SCORE ONE FOR THE LEFT

SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

to whom over other important matters in this election.

Much of the back-and-forth has centered on AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and its multimillion-dollar bets via various super political action committees on several Democrats running for open congressional seats. To read some of the coverage of these races, you’d think that what’s happening in the Middle East is far and away the most important issue on voters’ minds. Its devastating human costs notwithstanding, one can read any poll and conclude that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is far down the list of Americans’ priorities in this election.

There are any number of reasons for leftist rivals to moderate Democrats such as Laura Fine and Donna Miller (running for Congress in the 9th and 2nd districts, respectively) to attack them over the identity of their donors. One, we’re certain, is to define them as something they’re clearly not — cloaked backers of some sort of Trumpian agenda. We get that politics ain’t beanbag

and all that, but the idea that these veteran politicians, who’ve amassed records most anyone outside of the blue bubble of Chicagoland would describe as distinctly liberal, are right-wingers in disguise is a disservice to all voters.

All Democrats running in these hotly contested races ought to stipulate that everyone on the ballot is an actual, real Democrat. To say otherwise is simply to distract and obfuscate.

Having conducted endorsement meetings with many of these candidates and collected questionnaires from most of the remainder, we can safely assure voters that virtually no one running as a Democrat in this primary season approves of how ICE agents are conducting themselves or supports continuing to fund ICE in its present state. Likewise, all these Democrats are harshly critical of this second iteration of the Trump administration and oppose the vast majority of its policies.

Much more pertinent, we believe, to Democratic voters’ choices are candidates’ positions on

issues such as nationalized health care; a national minimum wage of \$17.25 an hour or more; taxes on the wealthy and how to structure those; and what to do about data centers and their impact on energy costs.

We could go on. Yet we see a paucity of discussion on those topics about which voters have said in poll after poll they’re most concerned.

Campaign finance is a legitimate issue. By all means, those who choose to accept money from AIPAC (or from other deep-pocketed donors such as the crypto and AI industries) should have to explain why they’re doing so and also how they feel about issues pertaining to those special interests.

But, with less than three weeks until Election Day, we’re not satisfied with the relentless jousting over cartoonish talking points and guilt by association. And we don’t think voters should be satisfied, either.

Candidates, we’ve met many of you. We admire most of you. You can do better.

## Quotes of the week

“I never claimed to be a nun.”

— Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas on accusations that she verbally abused employees of a county technology contractor

“Our country is winning again. In fact, we’re winning so much that we really don’t know what to do about it. People are asking me, ‘Please, please, please, Mister President, we’re winning too much. We can’t take it anymore.’”

— President Donald Trump

“Is the president working to make life more affordable for you and your family? Is the president working to keep Americans safe, both at home and abroad? Is the president working for you?”

— Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger

“We’re just focusing on celebrating the women in our room, the extraordinary efforts. And continue to celebrate three gold medals in program history as well as the double gold for both men’s and women’s at the same time.”

— Hilary Knight, member of gold medal winning U.S. Olympic women’s hockey team

“I just want to be a foundation for the team and for the bullpen, and I think every starter does.”

— Davis Martin, White Sox pitcher

“We pray for his children and grandchildren. Let them know that they follow in the footsteps of a man who was a giant for justice. And, in that way, his word will continue to live on well beyond his years.”

— Cardinal Blase Cupich, about the Rev. Jesse Jackson

## When 20% of Illinois voters decide primary elections, democracy cowers

In many Illinois districts, the primary effectively decides the general election. So what’s likely to happen at the ballot box, knowing that more people show up to vote for president than governor in Illinois, and fewer people vote in primaries than general elections?

As we pored over the numbers for previous off-cycle primaries, we were alarmed to see that over the past four gubernatorial cycles (2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022), roughly 1 in 5 registered voters here decided the outcome.

In raw numbers, here’s how it looks: Illinois had 8,107,797 registered voters in 2022, and only 1,757,872 — less than 22% — of them voted in the primary.

The stump speech that voters — or would-be voters — get about this time of year entails platitudes about exercising rights, not sitting on the sidelines, using your voice and so on. These are fine sentiments, and we have no wish to undermine them. One of the things that makes America, America, is free and fair elections and the protections to back them up. We can vote without fear of intimidation or suppression, and if that’s ever not the case, there are many institutions, including the Tribune, that would demand justice.

So stipulated. But we’d also like to acknowledge other problems keeping folks on the sidelines.

Low turnout reflects badly upon the electorate, yes, but it also reflects poorly on the system itself. In our view, Illinois primaries are effectively decided by a small minority because too many districts are engineered to be safe,



Antinisha Sturgeon, right, helps her grandfather, Ben Walker, vote during the Illinois primary election on March 19, 2024, at Marshall High School in Chicago. VINCENT ALBAN/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

too many races go uncontested and too few voters feel their vote matters. When a district is drawn to heavily favor one party, the general election becomes a formality, and the real contest shifts to a low-turnout primary.

Too often, many voters are deprived of meaningful choice at the ballot.

Economist Orphe Divoungny argued in a 2021 report that when political maps are drawn to heavily favor one party, it suppresses voter participation because many voters essentially have no alternative to the incumbent or dominant party candidate.

“Uncontested and lightly contested elections tend to skew policy in favor of powerful special

interest groups at the expense of everyone else,” he said. “This is because low voter participation makes legislators more susceptible to the influence of lobbyists rather than prioritizing the service of ordinary voters.”

His research back then found that roughly half of all Illinois House races went uncontested between 2012 to 2020 and that this was linked to voter participation that was, on average, 7 percentage points lower in uncontested districts.

That was five years ago and looked specifically at one field. The pattern extends well beyond legislative races. In November 2024, Ballotpedia reported that 70% of the 1,183 elections it tracked in Illi-

nois, across 17 types of offices, were uncontested, meaning voters had no real options.

The problem persists in this election cycle, particularly in legislative races where district lines heavily favor one party. In many of those districts, the general election is a foregone conclusion. Statewide offices reflect a related but distinct challenge: party weakness. Republicans, now marginalized in statewide contests, often struggle to recruit credible candidates. Treasurer Mike Frerichs, for example, faces no Republican challenger this cycle.

The lack of conservative candidates is glaring in Illinois, once a Republican state, which has seen Democrats capitalize on an aggressively partisan political mapmaking process (much as Republicans did in the past) to ice out political opposition.

Illinois is not alone in struggling with turnout. But when districts are engineered to predetermine outcomes, it compounds the problem. Illinois had the eighth-highest rate of uncontested elections in 2024, according to Ballotpedia.

We’ll still encourage voters to head to the polls this primary season. Most of these races have thoughtful, serious candidates on offer, at least in the primaries. But that won’t be true when it comes to the generals, and that reality underscores the need to fix Illinois’ legislative maps.

Structural competition is a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy and may help restore participation. Voters deserve options both now and in November.

## OPINION

# For America's 250th, Trump wants a national spectacle

By Edwin C. Yohnka

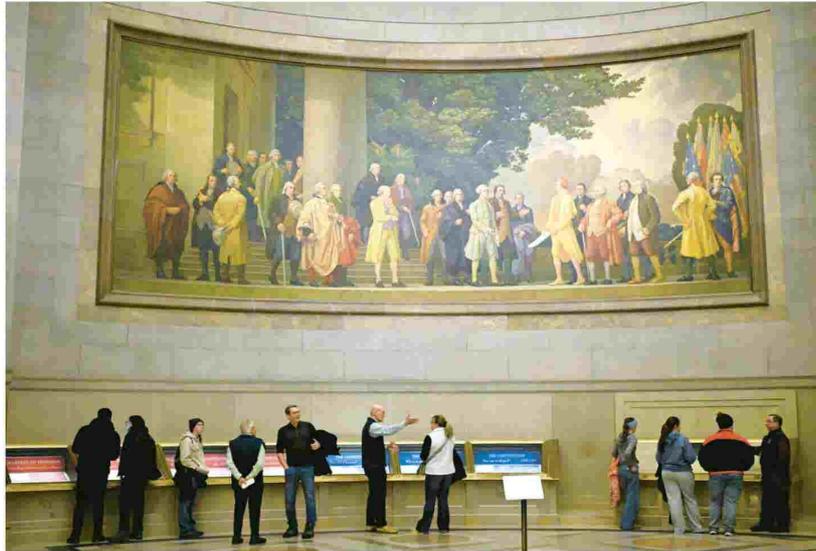
As a teen in a small Illinois town, America's bicentennial in 1976 fascinated me. The official logo marking the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was omnipresent — on posters in my high school, on clothing and in advertisements. The culmination of the event took many forms in July 1976: fire hydrants repainted in "patriotic" themes, tall ships sailing on New York City's Hudson River, massive firework celebrations in small towns and large cities, and even a visit from Queen Elizabeth II to Washington, D.C.

Many Americans in 1976 wrestled quietly with questions about our role in a modern world. The vision of America as an unquestioned force for good in the world was in disarray in the wake of the military and foreign policy disaster in Vietnam. The Watergate scandal and resignation of President Richard Nixon led many to question the trustworthiness of our own government.

Nixon hoped the 1976 bicentennial celebration would highlight his vision of the power and dominance of the United States; instead, Americans and public officials opted for more localized events.

With the 250th anniversary of our country's founding barely five months away, President Donald Trump wants a national spectacle over local reflection and remembrance. He is planning to host an Ultimate Fighting Championship event at the White House (which he claims will draw 100,000 spectators). Trump has called for national "Patriot Games" drawing together athletes from each state to participate in various contests to determine an ultimate winner (which feels cribbed from "The Hunger Games"). He recently signed an executive order apparently mandating an Indy car race on the streets of our nation's capital as part of the 250th celebration. And he wants to build a 250-foot high "arch" across the river from Washington to minimize the Lincoln Memorial.

The plans are sprinkled with pay-for-play. Media reports indicate that Trump has created a private entity where donors can contribute to his plans, in



A large wall mural showing the signing of the Declaration of Independence is seen over visitors at the National Archives on Jan. 29 in Washington. JOHN MCDONNELL/AP

**No doubt we will hear a good deal this summer from our president about American patriotism and greatness. Mass athletic events or marble monuments named for the president provide little cover for the way in which Trump is undermining the fundamental principles of our founding — to resist and reject a tyrant.**

exchange for access to his administration. Is that a way to celebrate our nation's birthday?

Rather than focusing on the shiny diversions of loud spectacles, Americans might take a few moments this year to explore the parallels between our current condition and the detailed indictment of particulars that Thomas Jefferson laid out against the king of England in 1776. Consider just a few of these equivalences.

■ The Declaration decried the king's sending of military forces

against the people of the Colonies — "transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries...totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation." In 2026, Americans face Trump's federal immigration agents running roughshod through American cities — including Chicago, Minneapolis and Los Angeles — abusing immigrants and U.S. citizens and capturing people without a warrant, with officials suggesting these troops are immune from accountability. ■ Jefferson condemned the

king's efforts to obstruct "the Administration of Justice." Trump and his attorney general, Pam Bondi, have turned our legal system into a tool of grievance for the president. Americans long trusted that our Department of Justice uncovered a criminal act and then began investigating to find the perpetrator, but Trump's DOJ appears to target a perceived "opponent" of the president — whether James Comey, Letitia James or Don Lemon — and then searches for the crime to be charged.

■ The Declaration charged the king with "cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world" and "imposing Taxes on us without our Consent." The Trump administration has engaged in placing tariffs around the world in an increasingly erratic and incoherent fashion. Some countries — such as Vietnam — appear to have

avoided higher tariffs by cutting a deal for a Trump-owned golf course. And Americans already struggling with high prices have paid these tariffs to their detriment.

■ No doubt we will hear a good deal this summer from our president about American patriotism and greatness. Mass athletic events or marble monuments named for the president provide little cover for the way in which Trump is undermining the fundamental principles of our founding — to resist and reject a tyrant.

■ My hope is that in communities across our country — like my small town in 1976 — we will see demonstrations of opposition to these spectacles.

Edwin C. Yohnka is director of communications and public policy at the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois.

## What Illinoisans should ask candidates before they vote

By Otis Moss III, Michael Pfeiffer, Ciera Bates-Chamberlain and Seth Limmer

The right to vote is essential to democracy.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who now rests in power, spoke that truth on the eve of primary elections five years ago.

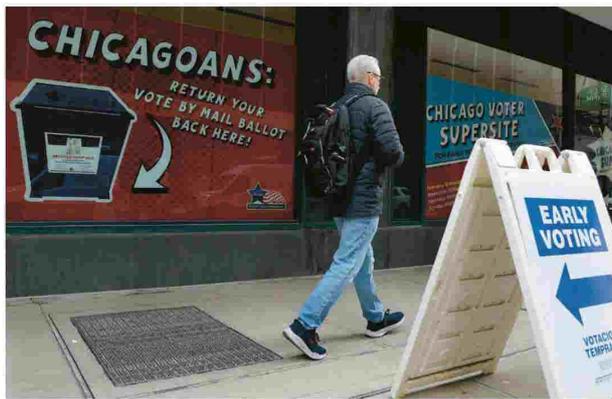
Our ancestors — including one of our namesakes — literally fought for our right to vote. As religious leaders, we consider that right to be a sacred rite and the ballot box the altar of democracy.

March 17 is election day for primaries in Illinois, and early voting is underway. Two years ago, turnout for the primaries was discouragingly low: Even though it was a presidential election year, only 19% of Illinoisans voted. That means 4 out of every 5 fellow citizens of our state abdicated their civic responsibility.

Stakes are too high for Americans to cede their power of the vote. There are so many issues demanding urgent action here in Illinois as well as nationally. We encourage our readers to learn where primary candidates stand on key issues and to vote for the change we need in our time.

Here at home, gun violence continues as a civic scourge. We advocate asking General Assembly candidates where they stand on two important matters.

The first is the Responsibility in Firearm Legislation (RIFL) Act, a bill currently under consideration in the Illinois House. The RIFL Act holds gun manufacturers responsible for the harms caused by their products by creating a financial incentive to reduce the association of their products with injury and death. If enacted into law, the bill would require firearm manufacturers to obtain a license to operate in Illinois. State retailers would be restricted to selling only from licensed manufacturers. Those fees collected would be directed towards a state treasury fund and would be used to support survivors of firearm



The new downtown voting supersite at 137 S. State St. on Feb. 12, which was opened for the first day of early voting. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

injuries and boost gun violence prevention efforts.

The bill is estimated to bring significant financial benefit to Illinois, with projections suggesting \$297 million in year one and over half a billion dollars by year three. The RIFL Act is supported by survivors, advocates and faith leaders. Ask your candidates where they stand on the RIFL Act before casting your ballot.

Also, ask your statewide candidates if they are committed to continued funding for community violence intervention (CVI) in Illinois. As we have documented often in this section, CVI has proved to be incredibly effective in mitigating the effects of gun violence. Statewide CVI efforts have benefited from the incredible cooperation of government, philanthropy and business leaders. However, with significant federal funding for CVI at risk — and federal funding for Illinois already being reduced — we need to make sure that our state contin-

ues, and hopefully increases, our financial commitment to CVI.

Ask your candidates where they stand on maintaining and expanding Illinois' financial commitment to the lifesaving work of CVI and to the needed community healing resource centers that address violence-related trauma.

Our votes in March will not only affect the direction of Illinois but also of America. We faith leaders are horrified and disgusted by the inhumane and murderous operation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, better known as ICE. While at our #FaithAgainsFear rallies, the four of us have used the language of "melting ICE." We believe that stronger action is necessary for this government body, which is veiled in secrecy and steeped in racism; it needs to be eradicated and its agents be held accountable so that a new, humane agency to regulate borders might be created.

We encourage voters to ask

their candidates if they support abolishing ICE. We also encourage voters to find out which candidates have taken donations from companies such as Palantir, which benefits from lucrative federal contracts to surveil citizens. Likewise, we believe candidates must commit to pursue accountability for federal officials and employees for unlawful action taken during recent ICE raids; it has been documented that ICE-initiated violence has worsened by 290%.

More than 400 judges across the United States have ruled that the administration is detaining immigrants unlawfully. From Border Patrol Cmdr. Gregory Bovino, who led Operation Midway Blitz here, to Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, ICE and the Department of Homeland Security must be held to account. Our elected officials must ensure this happens.

Painfully, we know that the very integrity of our elections, our very right to the free franchise, is under

threat. The perversely titled SAVE America Act really intends to disenfranchise minority voters. This bill is opposed by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and 130 other organizations. It is a scary time when the president calls for the nationalization of elections and sends the FBI to Georgia's Fulton County to seize voting records. Alarmingly, Noem has stated that DHS has the authority to identify "vulnerabilities" in election systems and implement "mitigation measures" to ensure state and local elections are "run correctly." Instead of the SAVE Act, which undermines democracy, any candidate for federal office should endorse the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

Lastly, we want to share that Illinois and America need ranked choice voting, which would make it likelier that broadly liked candidates would be elected. Not only would this voting method give voters greater choice, but it also would mitigate the polarizing effects of extreme voices in primaries and reduce the risk that minority candidates will wind up splitting votes, thereby reducing representation in government. Some municipalities have already established ranked choice voting, and Illinois should do the same statewide.

Learning where our candidates stand is fundamental to our voting power. Our right to vote is essential to our democracy. Our American democracy is essential to the preservation of human life and human liberty.

May we each fulfill our civic duty, our sacred duty, and vote in this primary for a better America.

Chicago faith leaders Rabbi Seth Limmer, the Rev. Otis Moss III, the Rev. Ciera Bates-Chamberlain and the Rev. Michael Pfeiffer joined the Tribune's opinion section in summer 2022 for a series of columns on potential solutions to Chicago's chronic gun violence problem. The column continues on an occasional basis.

## OPINION

# The ripple effects of Jesse Jackson's vision of Black economic power



Clarence Page

Having covered the Rev. Jesse Jackson for more than a half-century, I have an insider's understanding of why thousands of people lined up to wait patiently last week in Chicago to pay their final respects to the departed civil rights icon.

Jackson knew when and how to defy power, but he also knew how to cajole the powerful to make room at the table for the excluded.

Of all the memories I have gathered in the past 50 years, one stood out on this solemn occasion: Black Expo, an annual convention put on by Jackson's Operation Breadbasket for several years in the late 1960s and early 1970s to showcase Black businesses as well as music, arts and other endeavors.

Black Expos were held in Chicago until 1976, and other cities put them on as well, including New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Atlanta. But the one that stands out in my mind was in Chicago in 1971.

My fellow young reporters and I were amused to see Mayor Richard J. Daley pictured on the front page of the Tribune with his hand clasped with Jackson's in a classic "grip-and-grin" shot.

But with a difference. "Look at their hands," a friend pointed out. Indeed, this was not a traditional handshake.

As the camera flashed, Jackson had hooked his thumb with Daley's into what had been popularized by my generation as the "Black Power" handshake.

Whether Daley noticed, it didn't seem to matter. As a practiced politician, he was not about to let a good handshake opportunity go to waste. Nor was Jackson. For anyone familiar with the racial tensions of that era, this was something of a breakthrough.

For many of us, it was a modest sign, at least, that the cultural gaps in our racially fractious city might be bridged. Maybe we could all get along.

The reverend was trying, anyway.

Chicago, you'll recall, was where only five years earlier, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was struck in the head by a rock while



The Rev. Jesse Jackson speaks at the kickoff for the Black Expo on Aug. 25, 1971, at the Sheraton Hotel in Chicago. With Jackson are Gary Mayor Richard Hatcher, left, Rep. John Conyers, D-Michigan, second from right, and John Johnson, founder of Ebony, right. The five-day expo by Black and minority businesses opened at the International Amphitheatre that September. CHICAGO TRIBUNE HISTORICAL PHOTO

marching in a South Side neighborhood. After King's assassination in 1968, the city went through traumatic rioting, with 11 people killed and parts of the West Side laid waste. The so-called Black Power movement was on the rise, spurning the nonviolent ethos of King's movement, and not only the Black Panthers but also the mostly white Weather Underground were active in Chicago. In 1969, Chicago police killed two Panthers, including its national deputy chair, Fred Hampton, in a highly controversial predawn raid.

It was in this context that Jackson was offering a new model for political organizing. Instead of Black power, Jackson promoted "green power" to build Black economic and educational investment for everyone's benefit.

To the relief of many, the son of South Carolina was not out to be another revolutionary, but rather was offering reassurance that local

people, businesses, churches and communities could work together across racial, class and political lines.

It might not sound as impressive now, but when the fires of the 1960s were still vivid in the public mind, it was reassuring to hear Jackson's refrain, "Keep hope alive!"

And that's what Jackson did. Black Expo was a big test and, for many, a breakthrough for the hopes that Black Americans could take the advances of the civil rights era and build on them.

The event glorified Black entrepreneurs in the way usually associated with athletes and soul music stars. The theme of the five-day September event in the International Amphitheatre was "Save the children," but, as many noted, it might as well have been "Invest your dollars."

Jackson's vision of Black economic power was perhaps

an update of Booker T. Washington's, or perhaps a softer version of Elijah Muhammad's, and the Black Expo was a commercial success. The third annual exposition in 1972 was a huge financial and publicity success. Jackson managed to blend politics with artistic attractions, major corporate exhibitors and entertainment luminaries such as the Jackson 5, Isaac Hayes, and Big Bird and Roosevelt Franklin of "Sesame Street" — and lots of deal-making intended to build Black capitalism.

Perhaps it succeeded too well. A 1990 article in the Chicago Tribune described a revived expo in Chicago that year, casually mentioning that employers looking to recruit at the event included the Illinois State Police, H&R Block and the FBI!

Years would pass before Jackson would make a serious bid for the U.S. presidency. His run in

1984 and his more serious candidacy in 1988, some have argued, played a crucial role in setting the table for Barack Obama's success at claiming the highest office in 2008.

It's no wonder Tribune scribe Mike Royko called him the Rev. "Jesse Jetstream." It's hard to imagine how Jackson summoned the energy.

Now, he is at rest. And it's fitting, as Black History Month concludes, to remember how central Jackson was to broadening our understanding of a truly inclusive society, a country where Black achievement and full participation in the prosperity of America were natural and fitting and worthy of fostering. Jackson has become a legend, and he's made it possible for so many others to reach the pinnacle of American success.

Email Clarence Page at [cpintee@gmail.com](mailto:cpintee@gmail.com).

## Voice of the People

### Returning Chicagoans to crisis

We run the organizations that house Chicago's most vulnerable residents — veterans, seniors, people with disabilities and families with children. Every day, we see the return on that investment: people who were once on the streets holding jobs, raising kids, stabilizing their health and contributing to their communities. Now, two sweeping changes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) threaten to undo that progress and push thousands of Chicagoans from stability back into crisis.

The first threat strikes at the core of homelessness services. HUD's revised funding guidance for its Continuum of Care program would cap permanent supportive housing at 30% of funding — down from nearly 90%. Chicago has over 9,000 permanent supportive housing units, about 60% HUD-funded. Of the \$120 million in federal homelessness dollars flowing to our city, \$96 million supports permanent housing. An estimated 2,800 Chicago households are at risk. A federal court blocked the worst provisions of the guidance in December, but the administration has signaled it will try again.

This is bad policy and bad economics. Permanent supportive housing is not just compassionate — it saves money. A single chronically unsheltered person costs taxpayers an estimated \$35,000 annually from emergency room visits and hospitalizations, for example. A permanent supportive housing unit costs a fraction of that. Replacing proven long-term housing with two-year transitional programs ignores the reality that many people we serve have severe disabilities. They will not become self-sufficient on a political timeline. They will become homeless. The second threat emerged on Feb. 19 when HUD proposed a rule that would force mixed-status immigrant families out of federally assisted housing. Under current law, undocumented family members already don't

receive federal subsidies. Eligible members — often U.S. citizen children — receive prorated assistance while the family covers the rest. The new rule would require every household member to prove citizenship or the entire family faces eviction. It would also require housing authorities to report undocumented residents to the Department of Homeland Security.

Nationally, this could displace nearly 80,000 families, including 37,000 children. In Chicago, it would destabilize families already paying more than their fair share of rent.

These policies compound each other. The funding cuts eliminate the programs that many turn to for help. The mixed-status rule pushes families out of housing. Combined with cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the result is a homelessness crisis that will cost Chicago far more in emergency spending than the federal government saves.

We urge Congress to renew Continuum of Care grants and protect the Housing Choice Voucher program. We urge state and city leaders to prepare bridge funding. And we urge every Chicagoan to submit a public comment opposing HUD's proposed mixed-status rule during the comment period that ends April 21.

Investing in housing is smart. Tearing it apart is not. — Mark Ishaug, president and CEO, Thresholds; David Sinski, chief executive and vision officer, Heartland Human Care Services; and Laura Zumdahl, president and CEO, New Moms

### The system is failing many

I recently left my job as a psychiatrist at a safety net hospital on the West Side of Chicago. Not because the patients weren't worth treating — they were. But because I couldn't treat what was actually making them sick.

Housing instability. Food insecurity. The constant grinding stress of poverty and a lifetime of

trauma. I could prescribe medication, but I couldn't prescribe an apartment. I could treat depression, but I couldn't treat the despair that comes from a lack of work that pays enough to live or schools that lead nowhere generation after generation.

Then came the new Medicaid work requirements. More paperwork. More barriers. More ways for people who are already struggling to lose the health care they desperately need.

My patients don't talk about politics much. They're too busy surviving. But the truth is, politics are deciding everything about their lives — where they sleep, whether they eat, whether they can see a doctor. They just can't afford to notice.

Here's what would actually help them:

■ A public health insurance option that automatically enrolls the uninsured and negotiates drug prices, so no one falls through the cracks and medications are actually affordable.

■ A universal basic income — say, \$500 a month for every adult — so poverty isn't a life sentence.

■ Housing policies that make apartments affordable instead of luxury goods.

■ A democracy that actually responds to people instead of donors.

These aren't radical ideas. They're broadly popular. But given the way our federal government is set up right now, they're unlikely to pass.

We need deep governmental reforms — starting with ending the filibuster and overturning the Citizens United decision — to fix the political system so we can reinvent our economy away from corporate capitalism and toward worker capitalism: a system where the people who do the work share in the prosperity they create. Where technology serves humans, not the other way around. Where government is competent enough to actually deliver.

Because right now, too many of my former patients have learned

that it doesn't. — Dr. Travis Amengual, Chicago

### Major blow to health care

At a time when patients are waiting weeks for appointments and hospitals are struggling to fill shifts, the last thing policymakers should be doing is making it harder to train health care professionals. Unfortunately, a recent announcement from the U.S. Department of Education lays the groundwork to limit which health care workers are considered to have professional degrees, excluding access to vital student-loan financing.

The Education Department's proposed federal loan eligibility rule will limit the definition of a "professional degree" to 11 degrees, excluding nurses, physician assistants, physical therapists, social workers and other crucial health care roles. This would make it harder for these essential providers to finance graduate education — further straining an already stretched workforce.

Limiting the amount of federal loans these students can access will not lower tuition costs; it will create an untenable financial situation that is likely to turn them away from high-demand professions. Not to mention the disproportionate effect this will have on students from diverse and low-income backgrounds, undermining efforts to build a representative health care workforce and preventing even more qualified candidates from entering the field.

We are already facing severe shortages of physicians, nurses and allied health professionals, and we cannot afford to lose any more. I urge the Education Department to reconsider this policy and maintain current professional degree definitions to ensure a robust workforce pipeline across health care disciplines. — Dr. Rosalind Ramsey-Goldman, Chicago

### Teens getting a bad rap

Why do we allow the media to portray our teenagers so negatively? It seems news organizations focus on destructive activities downtown instead of highlighting the teens who are spending their weekends in more productive ways. Within the past month, I have witnessed amazing maturity and self-control among our teens, which has mostly gone unnoticed.

Several weeks ago, Highland Park High School hosted a chess tournament where hundreds of teens gathered to play chess. When I walked into the gym, there were dozens of teens from many schools paired together, playing chess in an absolutely quiet gym. There were no cell phones. There was no raucous behavior. There was only respect for the other players and the game.

Recently, I witnessed the same mature behavior in middle schoolers who had gathered for the solo and ensemble contest of the Northern Illinois Music Conference. Many boys and girls were gathered, carrying every instrument imaginable, and eager to perform before judges who would evaluate their level of expertise. Once again, there were no cell phones, and the halls were filled with whispers, out of consideration for those teens who were performing in the classrooms.

On neither of these occasions were adults required to patrol the halls to enforce good behavior. It came from the teens themselves. I am sure that other parents are observing this same type of responsible behavior in other sports, meetings and groups of teens.

Today's teenagers represent the future, and we should be giving them the respect and recognition they deserve, instead of focusing our attention on those who are bent on causing havoc. — Mary Ann McGinley, Wilmette

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# Opinion

## ‘Time is not on Russia’s side’

If the battle for Ukraine is not World War I or World War III, what is it?



David French

Four long years. That's how long Ukraine has been fighting for its life against Russia.

The sheer scale and ferocity of the conflict is hard for us to comprehend. Russia has lost a staggering number of men. The Economist estimates that total Russian casualties number between 1.1 and 1.4 million. Between 230,000 and 430,000 Russians have died. That's one in 25 Russian men between the ages of 18 and 49 who've probably been killed or seriously wounded since the war began.

Ukrainian losses have been far less severe in absolute numbers, but worse as a percentage of the population. The Center for Strategic and International Studies estimates that Ukraine has suffered 600,000 total casualties as of December, including between 100,000 and 140,000 dead. That's a one-in-16 ratio of deaths, injuries and missing cases for men between 18 and 49.

It's hard to grasp the scale of the losses, but it's also hard to grasp the nature of this war. It's a war unlike any other, where drones can sometimes outnumber people on the front lines, and even the concept of a true front line is fading away as both armies adapt to drone warfare.

On the recent fourth anniversary of the Russian attack, I reached out to one of the analysts of the war whom I respect the most — Michael Kofman, a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Kofman is that rare combination — a rigorous scholar and a courageous journalist, an expert who has spent a serious amount of time in the field.

The focus of our conversation is military, not political. There's a good reason for that — once the battle is joined, military results tend to dictate political realities.

Normally, I'd say that I hope you enjoy our conversation, but “enjoy” is the wrong word here. The topic is too grim. I learned from our talk and I hope you will too. I gained greater appreciation for the nature of the war, the challenges both sides face, and why Russia isn't ready to seek peace, but Ukraine is.

The bottom line, oddly enough, is both grim and hopeful. The grim part is clear. Russia is still pursuing maximal war aims. It is grinding away on the battlefield, advancing meter by meter and kilometer by kilometer.

But there is also reason for hope. There is very little chance of a Russian breakthrough. Ukrainian resolve remains and Russia might be losing more men than it can replace. As Kofman told me, “Time is not on Russia's side.”

This conversation has been lightly edited and condensed.

*Let me just start with the biggest picture question — how do you sum up the state of the war at the end of its fourth full year?*

This war for the last two years had largely had a positional and attritional character. What I mean by that is that the fighting has been grinding. Both sides have found ways to adapt in technology and tactics, but have struggled to escape the prevailing dynamic on the battlefield.

The Russian military, while advantaged in manpower and matériel, has not been able to achieve significant gains or to convert those advantages into operationally relevant breakthroughs. The Ukrainian military has sought innovative ways to offset the Russian advantages and has largely held the Russian military to incremental gains. Russian forces have been advancing in a creeping offensive, seeking to grind their way through the front over the last two years. Although each year they've taken more territory, their casualties have increased over time and their combat efficiency hasn't significantly improved.

And there's a duality to the war. On the one hand, every three to four months, you see a great deal that changes at the front lines in terms of technology, tactics, and how the forces adapt to the fighting. But zooming out from that, you also see a dynamic that hasn't changed nearly that much over the last few years. And ultimately Ukraine has proven resilient, despite the challenges they face, while Russia continues to see a mismatch between its political aims and its military means in this war.

*To the extent there's a kind of popular perception of the state of the war right now, I would say it goes something like this: that Ukrainian courage is unquestioned, but that there's a feeling that there's a clock that is ticking faster for Ukraine than Russia. That Russia can do this longer than Ukraine can do this. How do you see the concept of two ticking clocks here, one ticking faster for one side or the other?*

So the truth is a lot more muddled. I would say that perception would be a fair assessment if we look at 2024 and early 2025. However, if we examine Russian combat performance last year, it was rather underwhelming.

Their battlefield results have been lackluster and increasingly they face economic strain. Now this picture may seem a bit optimistic for Ukraine, but it's far from rosy. A big part of the challenge is that Ukraine is heavily dependent on external material support and the provision of capabilities and intelligence by Western countries. And so much depends on the continuation of that assistance, which is not easy to predict.

However, increasingly, it does look like time is not on Russia's side for specific reasons. The Russian military is still struggling to achieve even Moscow's minimal political objectives,

side? Because as we head into 2026, if 2026 unfolds in a fashion similar to 2025, then we can already begin to say that the answer is no.

*What about 2026? What are the factors that could make this year a tipping point?*

First, if you look at manpower availability, which is an important indicator for the way the Russian military's fighting, by 2025 they were barely breaking even looking at their recruitment rates versus their unrecoverable losses. And this does not bode well for 2026. It does not mean that the Russian military will be running out of men. It simply begins to question whether or not they'll be able to sustain the offensive intensity this year that we saw last year. The Russian military attempts to maintain an offensive for almost the entirety of the year,

Let's apply the same analysis on the Ukrainian side. So what are the strengths and weaknesses they have going into 2026?

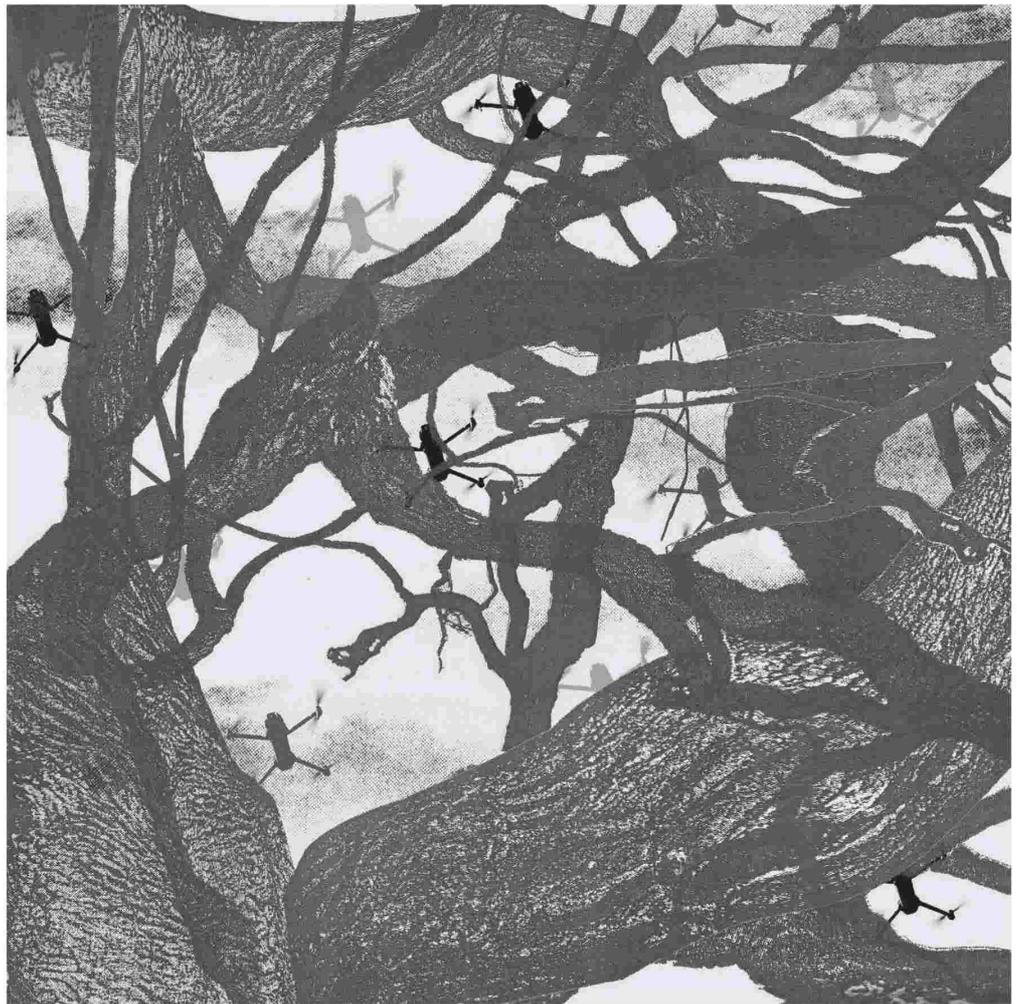
If we look at Ukraine's weaknesses through a similar lens, Ukraine continues to struggle with endemic manpower issues. The AWOL, absent without leave, problem significantly saps Ukrainian combat strength and their ability to replenish their forces. And Ukrainian effective combat strength at the front line has slowly been shrinking. Their manpower problems are worse and they've been compensating for them with more effective employment of drones and investment in drone units.

If we look at the other challenges that Ukraine has, many of them come down to force management. Ukraine lacks effective operational reserves and Ukrainian units have to run

ended the year looking a bit better than they did around the same time in 2024 when the Russian military was making accelerated advances in the fall of that year.

The big challenge for Ukraine, of course, is the potential unpredictability of Western support, particularly US support. And the fact that it's clear that in terms of financial assistance and material support, few things for Ukraine get better in this coming year. At best they can hope to maintain assistance at levels similar to 2025, and that's likely the best-case scenario.

At this point in the war, although this is my bias on conventional wars in general, there are no silver bullets to be found or game-changers that will dramatically alter the situation on the battlefield. There are, however, interesting developments afoot that could have ripple effects.



GEORGE DOUGLAS

which is the seizure of the remainder of the Donbas, and that could take another year or more, potentially, at the rate they're going.

They were able to substantially reduce the effectiveness and advantage that drones provided to Ukraine last year, but they were still not able to convert that shift in relative advantage into any significant breakthroughs on the battlefield.

A fair amount of the challenge for them is the way they are fighting, whether it's assaults with dismounted infantry, or infiltration through Ukrainian lines, is simply not conducive to achieving breakthroughs. And so absent major mistakes on the Ukrainian side, it's difficult to see how Russian forces are going to advance much faster than they have in previous phases of the war.

Of course, wars are unstable systems. There are all sorts of gradual then sudden transitions that happen in war and it's hard to extrapolate. We often are stuck because we're extrapolating from the previous phase of the war to look into the future. And the future is in that respect a bit unknown. But the challenge that Russia has in particular is that they have the inherently tougher task of having to run offensive operations. The political goals and ambitions that Moscow has for this war are very difficult to achieve with the military means they have available. So increasingly the question is: Is time really on Russia's

running often from February to December.

The trade-off that the Russian military's been making is that, on the one hand they can't generate momentum and they can't exploit a breach in Ukraine's defensive lines the way they are fighting. On the other hand, their offensive is very difficult to exhaust

because it runs year-round. Now, to sustain it, they have to maintain recruitment rates and replenishment rates at or above, ideally, their unrecoverable losses. And increasingly that looks in jeopardy heading into 2026, although we don't know how this year will go for them.

This is the first issue. The second is that the Russian economy is increasingly under strain. If you look at the key indicators: economic stagnation, a growing deficit, regional budgetary crises, most importantly, very low oil prices and increasing pressure on Russian export capacity forcing them to offer steep discounts. Russia can continue funding the war, but there are increasingly questions about what things look like for Moscow in the latter part of 2026 and certainly if the war goes into 2027.

around the front firefighting to plug gaps where Russian forces advance, which then leaves other parts of the front line exposed.

And of course, Ukraine ultimately depends significantly on Western support.

The good news with that is that Europeans, at the 11th hour in December, agreed to issue 90 billion euros in loans, which by the way Hungary's currently holding up because they want something regarding the Druzhba pipeline, but in general that funding should be sufficient for at least another one to two years to keep Ukraine in this war.

I think the challenge Ukraine has is that they too are trying to expand their strike campaign against Russia, but they are also pressed against time given growing exhaustion within the force and the Russian strike campaign, which has been particularly effective this year given how cold the winter is. It's driving people out of cities, it's going to hamper Ukrainian defense production and you can see a great deal of tiredness and wear on the force which has been deployed for so long, often without any significant rotation for the units.

So the difference is that Ukraine has ultimately the easier task of defending its territory. And although the force may be tired, Ukraine's situation isn't so dire, that is to say the situation at the front line as best one can tell isn't fragile. In some ways in 2025, Ukraine

For example, cutting Russian forces off of Starlink and forcing them to adapt to use other systems that are much, much less effective and more costly. But in general I think you can see the debate has long moved on past what is the next shiny object that can be provided to Ukraine that's going to change the dynamic in this war, and the answer is there isn't one.

*I want you to describe for the readers — I'm looking for the right word — the weirdness of the Russian offensive tactics now. So could you describe how Russia's offensive is unfolding?*

I need to take a few moments just to explain how we got into the character of the fighting in 2024 and that is 2024. So what happened in 2024 is that the Russian military had switched primarily to attacking with infantry assault groups in increasingly smaller, smaller group numbers, eight men, six men or so.

Ukraine had also adapted to the way the Russian military was trying to press its way to the front by expanding drone units and substantially expanding drone production. The Russian advance began to stall as we got into the winter heading into 2025.

Russian forces then began to adapt to the Ukrainian approach in several ways. First, they deployed their own elite drone formations called Rubicon and started to organize a more cohesive approach to how they're employ-

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# The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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## The U.S. chief justice is losing patience with Trump

Linda Greenhouse

Chief Justice John Roberts doesn't waste words. His majority opinion in the recent U.S. Supreme Court tariff ruling was, characteristically, a model of succinctness. In a mere 21 pages (Justice Neil Gorsuch's concurring opinion, by contrast, clocked in at 46 pages, and Justice Brett Kavanaugh's dissent at 63), he explained why, as a matter of statutory interpretation and the constitutional separation of powers, President Trump lacked the authority he had claimed, under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, to impose a hedgehog of tariffs on countries all over the world.

There was, however, one exception to the opinion's conciseness: a meaty paragraph describing the roller-coaster course of Mr. Trump's tariff regime. Here, with citations to seven separate executive orders omitted for the sake of readability, is the chief justice's account.

*Since imposing each set of tariffs, the president has issued several increases, reductions and other modifications. One month after imposing the 10 percent drug tariffing tariffs on Chinese goods, he increased the rate to 20 percent. One month later, he removed a statutory exemption for Chinese goods under \$800. Less than a week after imposing the reciprocal tariffs, the president increased the rate on Chinese goods from 10 percent to 84 percent. The very next day, he increased the rate further still, to 125 percent. This brought the total effective tariff rate on most Chinese goods to 145 percent. The president has also shifted sets of goods in and out of the reciprocal tariff framework (e.g., exempting from reciprocal tariffs beef, fruits, coffee, tea, spices and some fertilizers). And he has issued a variety of other adjustments (e.g., extending "the suspension of heightened reciprocal tariffs on Chinese imports).*

For all the attention the decision in this case, Learning Resources vs. Trump, has received, this paragraph has gone largely unmentioned. I understand why; it's unnecessary to the opinion's argument. If, as a matter of law, the tariffs are invalid, it doesn't matter whether they were imposed sensibly or capriciously. The paragraph is, in a word, gratuitous, something that can rarely be said about a passage in a Roberts opinion. So what is it doing there?

The answer, I think, is that the chief justice is sending a message not necessarily to Mr. Trump but also to the waiting world. Something along the lines of, "People, this is what we're dealing with." The point being not that "some fertilizers" are now exempt from reciprocal tariffs but that a reckless president is sowing chaos in America and around the globe.

We don't need to know Chief Justice Roberts's innermost thoughts about Mr. Trump — whatever they were before the president, in reaction to the tariff decision, described him and his majority as "fools" and "tap dancers" swayed "by foreign interests" — to discern his exasperation.

For the past year, the Trump administration has trod the Supreme Court, sending up one emergency application after another to demand temporary relief from adverse lower-court rulings. The administration frequently got what it wanted: a stay of the ruling while an appeal proceeded. Powerful dissenting opinions from the three liberal justices, Ketanji Brown Jackson, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor, made sure the public knew that these orders, while making no law, had the real-world effect of enabling the president to carry out his agenda, including slashing the federal workforce and getting lifesaving foreign assistance programs. Chief Justice Roberts was usually in the majority on these unsigned and generally unexplained orders; obviously he thought the stays were called for. But he probably isn't happy with the drip-drip-drip of public perception — reflected in polls and social media chatter — that the court was handing the president a blank check.

Something different happened in

late December when the justices denied the administration's request for a stay of a district-court decision barring its use of the National Guard in Illinois. The order was unsigned, with Justices Samuel Alito, Gorsuch and Clarence Thomas dissenting. The three-page order essentially made new law by narrowly defining the circumstances under which a president could federalize a state's National Guard. This was a very big deal. The president promptly acceded to the order, removing the federalized Guard from Los Angeles and Portland, Ore., as well as Chicago. Yet the court's action, coming on the day before Christmas Eve, received far less attention than the tariff case. In discussions about the court today, few people even seem to remember it. It is as if the view of the court as the administration's lackey was so entrenched that evidence to the contrary was too discordant to be fully absorbed.

The tariff decision was the first of the court's rulings, after full briefing and oral argument, on the merits of one of the second Trump administration's cases. A decision on the administration's effort to fire a member of the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors may be next. In that case, the administration claims sufficient cause to dismiss a Fed governor, Lisa Cook, based on assertions it claims she made in mortgage agreements. During oral argument, Chief Justice Roberts seemed to recoil from the overwrought tone of Solicitor General D. John Sauer's argument, which began with, "Deceit or gross negligence by a financial regulator in financial transactions is cause for removal," even though there has been no judicial finding that Ms. Cook engaged in either.

"You began by talking about deceit," Chief Justice Roberts said to Mr. Sauer. "Does what you said after that apply in the case of an inadvertent mistake contradicted by other documents in the record?" Mr. Sauer's answer, "We would say yes," hung unsatisfactorily in the air as the argument proceeded for the next two hours.

**How to read the gratuitous paragraph in John Roberts' tariff opinion.**

It's worth remembering that Chief Justice Roberts is the head of the entire judicial branch. It is in that capacity that his exaction with Mr. Trump verges on acute concern. The president has denounced judges who have ruled against him, including by calling for a Federal District Court judge's impeachment. Mr. Trump has helped create an atmosphere in which judges appropriately fear for their personal safety and that of their families. Many people expected the chief justice to address this issue directly in his year-end report in December, but he did not. In two decades as the nation's top jurist, he has at times spoken directly in defense of the judiciary, as in his 2024 report. But these occasions have been infrequent, as if the only messages this notably self-possessed and buttoned-down man cares to send are those his opinions deliver.



PHOTO BY CHRIS SOROKO/GETTY IMAGES

LINDA GREENHOUSE, the recipient of a 1998 Pulitzer Prize, reported on the Supreme Court for The New York Times from 1978 to 2008.

# Don't look now, but the green transition is still happening

David Wallace-Wells

In January, a total of seven gas-powered cars were sold in all of Norway. This year, Pakistan expects that parts of the country will get more electricity from decentralized rooftop solar than from its entire electricity grid during parts of the day. In the United States, where we often tell ourselves we are in the grips of climate backlash and fossil fuel retrenchment, Texas has been setting new solar records through frigid February, around 90 percent of all new power capacity installed anywhere in the nation last year was green and the share of renewables is expected to be even higher next year. The new "breakout star" of the battery world is the notorious petrostate Saudi Arabia, the countries with the biggest growth in solar power are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, and Australia's breakneck pursuit of clean energy too cheap to meter is so far along that electricity prices in some regions have fallen by a third in a single year. Parts of the country have announced that they will be giving away electricity for free for three hours a day. That isn't an accident. It's a state promise, which Australians can expect to take to the bank going forward.

These days, it sometimes seems as if the whole world is retreating on climate and green energy, with the fever of alarm giving way to what's been called a new energy realism. Part of this is simply the return of President Trump, who still calls global warming a hoax, who took a wrench to President Joe Biden's landmark climate bill, who promised oil and gas executives he would do their bidding in exchange for sufficient campaign contributions, who justified the kidnapping of the Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, by citing the country's oil reserves, and who just announced that the federal government has entirely revoked its longstanding commitment to treating carbon emissions as a harmful pollutant and global warming as a serious problem.

The repeal of the endangerment finding is an outrage: a see-no-evil, hear-no-evil declaration of indifference to an ever-intensifying crisis. But it isn't just Trump: Liberal politicians who used to routinely invoke the existential stakes of climate change have moved on, too, now preferring to talk about energy affordability. And it isn't just America, either. In Europe, imports of natural gas are expected to reach record highs this year, and China, which has become the global face of green energy over the last half decade, has been building more coal plants than at any point since before the Paris agreement. World leaders mostly skipped the last big climate conference, as they did the one before it. Few countries anywhere in the world are passing new climate policies into law anymore. After a period of growing concern and accelerating momentum, the project of greening the world's energy system has, in a sense, as if it has been thrown into reverse.

But by the most straightforward measures, that's simply wrong. There is more green stuff being installed than ever, and judged simply as a global infrastructure project, the volume is pretty staggering. In 2024, 92.5 percent of all new power capacity installed around the world was renewable. In 2025, it's believed that global green installations were even greater. And even in Trump's United States, which has been behaving in many ways like a petrostate, more than 92 percent of utility-scale electricity capacity planned for 2026 is green.

The transition is more complicated than the headline figures suggest, and even the near future looks uncertain, especially ahead of China's big Five-Year Plan announcement in March. In fact, the International Energy Agency recently revised its short-term renewable forecasts a bit downward, partly in response to changes in U.S. and Chinese policy. But in the big picture, I.E.A.'s global outlook is nevertheless still clear: Between 2025 and 2030, more than 90 percent of new electricity capacity anywhere in the world is expected to be renewable.

Fossil power has the advantage of incumbency, and the challenge of decarbonization is bigger and thornier than just solving electricity, which itself takes more than simply paving the world in solar panels. But if the energy transition is a race to build the future, green is not just winning but running away with it. The advantage, globally, is 10 to one.

That's not to say victory over warming is at hand. New power only changes the existing system on the margins, and the old system is pretty dirty. To this point, new green energy has mostly supplemented rather than displaced fossil fuels. Globally, emissions are still climbing, if slowly, and temperatures are not only rising but rising at an accelerating rate, raising

the uncomfortable possibility that the world's climate system may be more sensitive to emissions than almost anyone had bargained for. And meaning that however quickly the green transition is unfolding, the climate future still looks treacherous — about which I promise I will write more soon. But when I wrote in dismay last fall that we seemed to be giving up on climate politics a decade after the Paris agreement, I heard from leaders and advocates around the world that I was being too downbeat, focused too much on empty rhetoric and hit-or-miss policy momentum, not focused enough on taking the concrete measure of change on the ground.

In the fall, Christiana Figueres, the

former head of the U.N.'s climate change body, told me that climate politics didn't matter nearly as much as it has been thrown into reverse. But by the most straightforward measures, that's simply wrong. There is more green stuff being installed than ever, and judged simply as a global infrastructure project, the volume is pretty staggering. In 2024, 92.5 percent of all new power capacity installed around the world was renewable. In 2025, it's believed that global green installations were even greater. And even in Trump's United States, which has been behaving in many ways like a petrostate, more than 92 percent of utility-scale electricity capacity planned for 2026 is green.

So for a moment, allow me to play, if not climate optimist then transition optimist, at least. It's a pretty straightforward job, since the numbers sometimes speak for themselves. Globally, sales of gas-powered cars have declined by more than 20 percent since their peak, which we already passed a decade ago. Since then, sales of electric vehicles have grown almost 30-fold. In 2019, only 3 percent of car sales globally were electric; in 2025, a quarter were. In the European Union, full E.V.s and hybrids were more than half of all sales. In China, the world's largest car market, it's more than half. And the

world's climate system may be more sensitive to emissions than almost anyone had bargained for. And meaning that however quickly the green transition is unfolding, the climate future still looks treacherous — about which I promise I will write more soon. But when I wrote in dismay last fall that we seemed to be giving up on climate politics a decade after the Paris agreement, I heard from leaders and advocates around the world that I was being too downbeat, focused too much on empty rhetoric and hit-or-miss policy momentum, not focused enough on taking the concrete measure of change on the ground.

perched anywhere else before. Many rich countries of the world are well past their emissions peak — another fact about the green transition few outside of energy and climate circles appreciate. But those encouraging downward emissions slopes all depict records of deindustrialization. Not China's.

As for India, long viewed as China's natural carbon successor? Its power sector emissions are falling for just the second time in 50 years. And more than that: India is moving away from fossil fuels faster than China did, according to a new analysis by Ember — transitioning at an earlier stage of economic development, that is, having produced less than a quarter as much

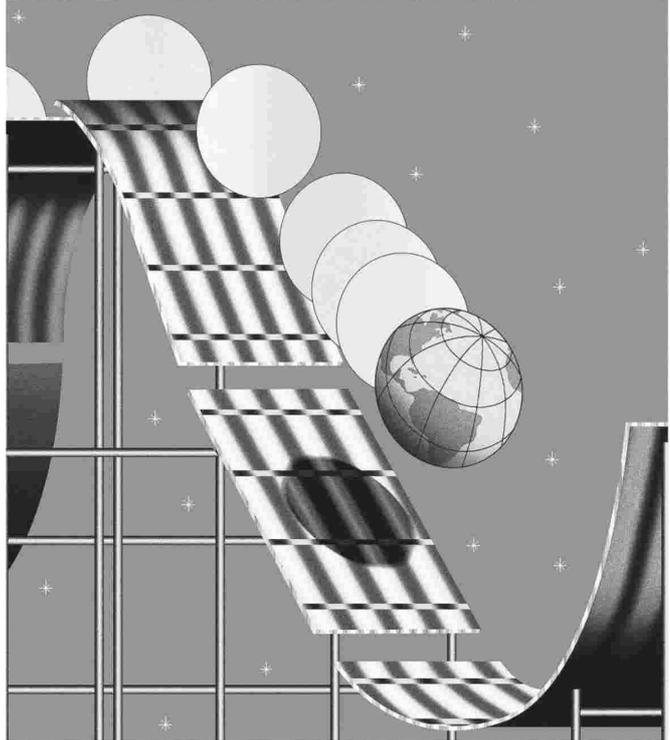
carbon, cumulatively, as China has to this point. This is especially remarkable given that for all that talk about its staggering emissions, China actually began moving away from fossil fuels much faster than the rich countries of the West ever did. India's economic mix is still ever less dependent on manufacturing and heavy industry, but at comparable levels of G.D.P., Ember found, India is both generating far more solar and using far less coal than China, which did it much faster than Europe or the United States. At a comparable level of electrification, India is using just one-sixth as much coal as China did. And there are those who believe that the transition in sub-Saharan Africa will be even faster — which could be a great blessing, given that barely half of the world has access to electricity today, with some estimates of the number lacking it floating around 600 million for 15 years now.

Where does this all leave us? Still far from a global power system dominated by low carbon sources. In the United States, we are stumbling forward, driving emissions slightly up in the short term but still heading for slow declines in the years ahead. Overall, we are still so far north of recent climate targets, there is now a robust debate among climate advocates about what new goals or measures to use, since the old ones are so obviously irrelevant.

And an awful lot of talk from the more climate complacent that the world has moved on to other concerns, tacitly accepting a future of much more climate disruption. But if the political mood has darkened, one last data point shines out to me like a beacon: In 2026, the world may well spend more on green energy in total than it devotes to military spending. And if not this year, it seems safe to say, it will probably happen soon.

What you see is a similar pattern when looking at solar power installations across the developing world, where decarbonization was long assumed to require significant subsidy and support from places like the United States and Europe. But in Algeria solar installations recently grew 33-fold in a 12-month period, with many other countries across the African continent tripling or more over the same period (even though oil imports still exceed decarbonization appeared intimidating enough that to many, it seemed the only way to surmount it was through politics. A decade later, we've lost a lot of political momentum, and the spirit of solidarity that seemed for a time to prompt it has evaporated. But in the most obvious sectors, at least, the transition is powering ahead anyway. When I spoke to Nicholas Stern — whose 2026 report warning about the underappreciated risks of unmitigated warming helped shape climate politics for the decades that followed — he lamented the loss of political attention but nevertheless expressed what he called "a heavily guarded optimism." "I don't think we'd get Paris if we started it now," he acknowledged. "But back then, none of us anticipated that we'd

global pattern pops up in some unexpected places. In Nepal, for instance, 76 percent of new cars sold in 2024 were E.V.s. In Ethiopia — where the government was so desperate to stop importing so much foreign oil, it took a heavy-handed policy intervention in 2024, banning the importation of gas-powered cars — E.V. sales grew from closer to zero to more than half of all new registrations that year. By global standards, the United States is a relative laggard — enough so that the climate scientist Zeke Hausfather recently suggested the country could end up, 30 years from now, looking like Cuba does today, with roads crowded with gas-guzzling clunkers. But even here sales of gas-powered cars between 2016 and 2024 were down more than 2.5 million per year. Over the same period, American E.V. sales are up 10-fold.



SHUTTERSTOCK

OPINION

'Time is not on Russia's side'

FRENCH, FROM PAGE 10 ing drones and engaged essentially in a tug of war with Ukrainian drone units for what both sides call the "kill zone."

This is the drone engagement zone that's somewhere around 20 kilometers from the front line in either direction. This was a significant contest that played out last year because the side that has superiority in the drone engagement zone has the initiative on the ground, greater freedom of action and can also inflict higher levels of losses and attrition on the opposing force.

And so even though it may seem last year as though not much changed, what really was taking place is that drone units, in supporting artillery and other fires, were focused on displacing and suppressing the drone units of the other side.

The locus of the contest switched from frontline infantry to supporting elements. And then increasingly what we saw is higher losses among those in support positions, drone units, logistics, than those actually in frontline infantry roles, which is unusual for a conventional war where most casualties stack among the infantry.

Now, the reason the Russian military began to use infiltration as the principal maneuver tactic by which they advanced last year is because Ukrainian forces were largely defending with drones. Drones were used in combination with minefields and artillery to essentially create defensive depth behind their forward positions.

However, Ukrainian forces did not have cohesive defensive lines. The image that is sometimes portrayed that this is like World War I with drones is very much incorrect. In reality, Ukrainian forward positions are small picket posts of men that are neither fighting positions or even observation posts.

They're marking a line with large gaps in between them. And Russian forces were essentially trying to walk past them, then accumulate in depth. On the front line, often you'll see maybe nine men per kilometer in two-three man positions, just to give you a sense of what the numbers might be, you could picture, as this is a porous front line.

And since frontline formations often lack reserves, even if a few men got into the rear, they would begin to pose a problem because the forces were not available to counterattack them.

tary started to use small groups and individual troops, guiding them by drone through Ukrainian lines, then accumulating them in the rear. And the challenge was that even if Ukrainian units were able to intercept, let's say hypothetically 70 percent of an attack, a dispersed attack of this nature, if 30 percent of men got through, they would immediately face another attack and another attack. Eventually Russian forces would accumulate in their rear and start displacing their line.

The other tactic the Russian military used is lightly motorized attacks, motorcycles, dune buggies, often alongside traditional mechanized assaults and the concept was the same, to try to get past the initial contact layer, the engagement zone of Ukrainian drones, and then into the rear.

Often the Russian military made better gains using fewer men in these types of assaults than in more traditional attacks. But it came at significant cost, because in this way the Russian military preserved equipment but took much higher casualties.

when it comes to manpower. That's why Russian unrecaptured losses have been climbing, those killed and seriously injured, because they're mostly using people in these assaults and they're using them in a rather expendable fashion.

What is your understanding of the posture of the Ukrainian people right now?

I think an honest assessment is that people are very tired. And obviously everyone wants the war to end, but the Ukrainian public is not of the mind that they're willing to make any concessions or accede to onerous terms currently being proposed by Moscow in order to end the war.

And there's a good reason for that: The Ukraine battlefield situation ultimately is not dire, they can still sustain the war, and Russia lacks the ability to pose a serious threat to the big Ukrainian cities or to take large territories.

As long as Ukraine has Western support, they still have a chance of achieving war termination, an end to



The Russian military is still struggling to achieve even Moscow's minimal political objectives, which is the seizure of the remainder of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, including the city of Kostiantynivka, and that could take another year or more, potentially.

this war on acceptable terms.

I don't think that the Ukrainian public or the political establishment is in a place where they are willing to easily concede to Moscow's demands. And they are largely negotiating from a position that is informed by the objective assessment of the prevailing military situation.

Russia consistently is making demands on the basis of aspirational military performance, but not actual military performance.

If you look at the extensive list of demands which go well beyond just taking the rest of the Donbas — people sometimes focus on that, but I think they miss the other national-level demands that Moscow has — these are the demands of a side that sees itself as a decisive victor in the war, but this position is unsubstantiated. In fact, Russian military performance has been relatively lackluster compared to what they're asking.

How much do you think that Putin is

receiving information that is based more on the aspirational than the actual?

Russian military leadership consistently briefs successes to the top that they haven't actually made. That was quite visible last year. I think the challenge is more that Putin believes Russia can outlast the West in this war and that even though the war has long ago reached diminishing returns for Moscow and that increasingly it looks like Russia's not going to get much more politically from continuing offensive operations this year, he doesn't share this view.

He believes the two bets he made last year — first that through sustained pressure eventually parts of the front line will begin collapsing. And the second bet was that Russian diplomacy will effectively maneuver the United States out of the Western coalition supporting Ukraine and try to turn Washington against Kyiv.

The reality is neither bet came to fruition, but he's likely to try to make

them again this year. And this is not unusual. The pathology of decision making in wars like this is that leaders often fall into sunk cost fallacies. Wars tend to go on well beyond the point when either side can attain a decisive advantage. At a certain point leaders often want to believe that something will break their way simply if they persist, even though there's no evidence of that happening.

I think another factor in looking at Russian decision making is that the Russian elite and the Russian economy have structurally adjusted to sustaining this war. The Russian elite now profits from it. And there is no impetus or imperative for Putin to end the war. On the contrary, he may face economic challenges and crises to try to then shift the economy back once the war is over. And much of the Russian system has already adapted to life under the conditions of this ongoing conflict. And consequently, the domestic incentives are very much not there.

FROM READERS

At risk: Afghan allies and U.S. credibility

Re "Congress ends visas for Afghan partners, closing a path to the U.S." (news article, nytimes.com, Feb. 25). By allowing the Special Immigrant Visa program for Afghan war-time partners to quietly lapse, Congress has placed America's credibility, and thousands of vetted Afghan families, in jeopardy.

At Global Refuge, where we have resettled thousands of Afghan allies, we see the human toll of this uncertainty every day: in every child who lies awake at night worrying about parents still in hiding, in spouses separated by continents and in fractured families unsure if they will ever hold their loved ones again.

That they remain stranded overseas, vulnerable precisely because of their ties to the United States, reflects a monumental failure to uphold the commitments we made to our allies in America's longest war. This inaction also comes amid a broader dismantling of humanitarian protections for Afghans, including unprecedented cuts to refugee admissions, the termination of Temporary Protected Status and Afghanistan's inclusion in sweeping travel and visa bans.

At the same time, the administration's continuing "re-review" of lawfully admitted refugees is poised to throw even previously vetted Afghans into renewed uncertainty about their status. Taken together, these decisions send a troubling message about whether our government intends to keep its word. America's promise to those who stood alongside our service members was never merely symbolic. For thousands of Afghan families and the countless Americans who stand in solidarity with them, it was a commitment that must still be honored. TIMOTHY YOUNG, BALTIMORE The writer is the director of public relations for Global Refuge, a national refugee resettlement nonprofit.

Trade pacts based on whims

Re "Trump mulls a North American trade pact without Canada" (news article, nytimes.com, Feb. 19).

Speaking as a Canadian, I'm no longer certain that a trade pact with the United States is worth the paper that it's written on. If trade agreements are entirely subject to presidential whim, then America no longer has much left to negotiate, because agreements that can be unilaterally altered by a single individual are essentially worthless. BRIAN J. LOWRY, FREDERICTON, NEW BRUNSWICK

For Mexico, a terrifying high-wire act

GRILLO, FROM PAGE 1 unilateral military strikes against cartel targets on Mexican soil since returning to office. (U.S. intelligence was pivotal in locating Mr. Osaguera before Mexican troops swept in.)

But that achievement was overshadowed by the brutal attacks that followed, as images of violence and chaos were broadcast to the globe just months before Mexico is set to host World Cup matches this summer. The violence underscored a central conundrum facing the Mexican government: If you allow cartel kingpins like Mr. Osaguera to roam free, that breeds impunity, but taking them down can unleash more bloodshed as the entrenched cartels hit back against soldiers and civilians and their lieutenants battle among themselves for the spoils of their empires.

The term "narco blockade" entered the vocabulary of Mexicans in the mid-2000s, part of a grim lexicon that emerged to describe rising cartel violence, along with other words like "narcofosas" (narco graves) and "narco-politics" (narco politicians).

At the time, various cartels had begun staging blockades — blocking traffic and spreading fear — in places like Monterrey and the state of Michoacán, using them along with burning businesses and shooting at security forces to stop arrests. Over the years, the attacks got bigger and bloodier. On May 1, 2015, the Jalisco cartel put up 39 narco blockades in Jalisco state and shot down a military helicopter, thwarting an attempt by Mexican security forces to arrest Mr. Osaguera. In 2019, the Sinaloa Cartel set up blockades that paralyzed the city of Culiacán until Mexican troops released Ovidio Guzmán López, a fentanyl trafficker and a son of El Chapo.

Narco blockades have always served a practical purpose for the cartels: They disrupt security operations and give gangsters a chance to escape, ultimately helping to protect cartels' business. They also help rally cartel forces, observers say. Narco blockades "function as a mechanism of internal cohesion," writes Carlos A. Pérez Rícart, a researcher at Mexico's Center for Economic Research and Teaching. "They were resources, test loyalties, reaffirm hierarchies." Interestingly, they serve another purpose, too. As cartels have become more deeply embedded in Mexican society, blockades have become a way for them to visibly assert their power. The political scientist Benjamin Lessing calls this strategy "violent lobbying." Gangsters put pressure on the national government with bloodshed so that it gives in to their demands — or, in the case of the most recent attacks, to warn the authorities not to go after their leaders again. All of this raises the question: Who



CEAR RODRIGUEZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

really runs Mexico? Despite the Trump administration's designation of the Jalisco cartel and other gangs in Latin America as foreign terrorist organizations, cartels certainly don't control territory the way the Islamic State did in Syria and Iraq; Mexican security forces still go into cartel strongholds, and the government still sends teachers to schools, keeps the lights on and collects garbage.

But cartels do want a weak and corrupt state that they can bully — and for many years, tragically, they have had this in Mexico. In 2006, the country's president, Felipe Calderón, launched a military crackdown on cartels, but it turned out that his own security secretary Genaro García Luna was working with the Sinaloa Cartel to take out that gang's rivals. (Mr. García Luna was later convicted of cocaine trafficking in New York.) Later, President Enrique Peña Nieto tried to change the narrative and get narcos out of the front page, but then, in 2014, cartel thugs working with corrupt police officers disappeared 43 students, drawing global attention and condemnation. Ms. Sheinbaum's predecessor and mentor Andrés Manuel López Obrador was accused of being too soft on cartels; he said during his campaign that the government should have a policy of "hugs, not bullets." He presided over the most murderous period in Mexico in decades.

Ms. Sheinbaum came into office saying she did not want a war with cartels, but pressure from Mr. Trump has apparently forced her administration to act. Her government has transferred people thought to be bosses to the United States outside the usual extradition process, arguing that they pose a national security threat. The extraordinary takedown of Mr. Osaguera was her boldest move yet, one that she undertook despite his cartel's record of violent retaliation.

It could be the start of a wider shift among Mexican authorities to stand up to the bullies who have ravaged Mexico for too long and to clear the way for broader policies to reduce impunity and violence. True change would require the United States to act, too. Not by conducting illegal military strikes on Mexican soil, as Mr. Trump has threatened, but by working to reduce American demand for drugs by transforming its rehabilitation system and by stopping the flow of guns south of the border.

Standing up to cartels in the face of their violent lobbying is a first step. A nation cannot cede its future to the threats of crime kings like Mr. Osaguera forever.

JOAN GRILLO has covered gang violence and organized crime in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America for two decades.

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OPINION

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

EDITORIALS

Trump's Iran gamble

THE UNITED STATES and Israel began a broad and sustained bombing campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran on Saturday morning. No one knows how this will end, which means the onus is on President Donald Trump to better convey his plans to the nation.

On Jan. 2, Trump said the United States was "locked and loaded" to come to the "rescue" if the Iranian regime reacted to widespread protests lethally. The security services responded by slaughtering perhaps tens of thousands of their own citizens. American and Iranian representatives negotiated for weeks while the U.S. amassed firepower in the Middle East.

On Saturday morning, Trump called Operation Epic Fury a "win" and said the goal was toppling the regime that has controlled Iran since 1979 to usher in "freedom for the people." The president said later in the day that Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader since 1989, was killed at his compound in Tehran and that the strikes will continue "as long as necessary to achieve our objective."

It's jarring to hear a clear call for democracy in Iran from an American president who campaigned on preventing open-ended conflicts in the Middle East. Success will likely require more than a bombing campaign.

For a generation, Iran has been the world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism, backing Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and other proxies as they wreaked havoc and killed Americans. The Islamic Republic looks more vulnerable than ever to toppling.

IT'S TOO EARLY TO CALL THE RISKIEST FOREIGN POLICY DECISION OF THIS TERM A FAILURE OR SUCCESS.

And the U.S. is not going it alone: In addition to Israel's backing, Saudi Arabia condemned Iranian retaliation. Even Canada expressed support, despite Prime Minister Mark Carney's recent feud with Trump. Calls for more negotiations from European countries only underscored their irrelevance.

Iran cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon. Trump insisted that last summer's bunker-buster bombs totally "obliterated" Iran's enrichment program, but now he says it needs to be "totally, again, obliterated." It's always been clear he was exaggerating the success of Operation Midnight Hammer, and Iran has remained unwilling to give up its goal of proliferation. The danger of lobbing some bombs without seeing this through is that Iran's leaders could become more determined than ever to get a bomb to deter future strikes.

The more immediate fear should be what happens to U.S. troops throughout the region. Iran pressurized "crushing" retaliation as it fired missiles at Israel and at least seven Arab states, striking a U.S. Navy headquarters in Bahrain. Trump acknowledged in announcing the commencement of operations that American forces "may have casualties." Despite the biggest buildup

of forces in the Middle East since the Iraq War, it's not clear the U.S. has sufficient stocks of missiles and defensive interceptors to sustain a prolonged air campaign.

It's essential to think through the endgame when deciding to kill the leaders of another country. Trump urged civilians to "take over" the government after the airstrikes finish. "It will be yours to take," he said. "This will be probably your only chance for generations." If only it was that easy.

It's possible a military junta gains control and intensifies repression. It's also possible that a country of 93 million, more than twice the geographic size of Texas, splinters along ethnic lines. That could mean civil war and instability that leads to the intervention of neighboring armies.

It's hard to see how "freedom for the people" can be accomplished in any meaningful sense without some U.S. boots on the ground, at least for a time. Yet Trump appears to lack any appetite for doing so. That might give pause to civilians trying to decide whether to risk their lives by rising up.

Whether Trump has made the right call will hinge on factors now beyond his control. No president has ever intended to get drawn into a quagmire.

The Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war. Short of that, the War Powers Act ensures the legislative branch will get a say on this war of choice. It's essential that the people's elected representatives get to vote on whether these strikes are justified. A comprehensive case has yet to be made, and better late than never.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Marching orders for Gen Z

Theodore R. Johnson's Jan. 29 op-ed, "A student asked how to improve government. My reply was disappointing," was inspired by an email from a high school student from Dallas. Post Opinions asked readers: "What advice would you give young people about improving government?" Here are some of the responses.

My answer comes from experience: The health of any institution, whether a school, workplace or nation, depends on impartiality. When decision-making bends to convenience, hierarchy or pressure, trust collapses. Good government begins with the courage to insist on fairness even when it is uncomfortable. Gen Z already understands this. We are not afraid to question authority, to challenge systems that fail us or to demand transparency from those in power. That instinct is not disruptive; it's democratic. The future will be shaped by people who refuse to accept "that's just how things are" and instead ask, "Why should it be this way?"

Improving government doesn't require status, wealth or connections. It requires speaking up, participating locally, scrutinizing decisions and refusing to let complexity intimidate us into silence.

Muhibo Abdalla, Leicester, England

You can improve government by having an open mind. We have one mouth and two ears for a reason. Present your case in a diplomatic fashion, devoid of emotion. Listen to what the other person says, leaving emotion out of your intake and without interrupting. You may not agree with each other, but you both hear a new perspective. Make every attempt to reach a middle ground or walk away. You most likely will not change the other person's mind, but arguing will get you nowhere.

Norman St. Amour, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania

Start on the local level and focus on one topic that you feel is important or simply right. This will form a basis for observing and participating lead to broader discussions and organizing, then improving government from the inside is a possibility. As a young person, I attended every city council meeting over four years, talked to countless people and learned how the Virginia Beach government worked and how it interacted with the community. Through these connections, I volunteered with the city and with groups working on the issues that drove me. All the while, I built up a network that, though it did not lead to being elected to an office, did help others be elected and improve the trajectory of my city.

The public is hungry for leadership. Folks are busy living their lives but do appreciate and gravitate toward those who step forward and develop the skills to represent them and the common good.

Georgette Constant, Norfolk

I would advise young people to spend less time on social media, more writing online versus talking to others in person. Government's problems cannot be solved with X posts or put-downs or cancellations. Good government involves ideas from many groups getting masticated and digested — a messy process. By contrast, social media has almost ended true public discourse by replacing it with outrage. The majority of us, who for the most part are in the middle, cannot outpace the platformed yelling that seems to win both local and national elections and hence crystallizes polarization in institutional form. We need less usage of "efficient" computerized systems that supersede face-to-face contact.

Carl Hastings, Narragansett, Rhode Island

Register to vote today. Bookmark your local government website for election dates. Check the League of Women Voters' website for candidate questionnaires and information on ballot measures.

Vote in the primaries: That's where the real election is in most places. This means voting in the primary for whichever party is favored where you live — even if it's not "your" party. Down the road, don't be afraid of ranked-choice voting or other potential electoral reforms; be afraid of political parties that claim to be your only choice.

If something in your neighborhood or larger community concerns you, reach out to local officials — a librarian, the city transportation office, whoever might be able to answer a question or field a request. Their job is to help your community (not always you, personally, though).

Volunteer somewhere: library, pet shelter, school, a cleanup group, scouting group, church, food pantry or whatever organization is named on a sign for adopting a road. If no one's name is there,

maybe put your family, church, business or other group's name there and clean it up once a month.

Anytime someone claims something outrageous or incendiary against another group or idea, do your own research: How often does this come up? How does it affect you and your community? What choices do people have? Who benefits monetarily from the status quo or from changing it? And, crucially: What else might be more important in your life choices and your community than this issue?

Jon Johnson, McKinney, Texas

The single most important thing young people can do is what we all can do, this year and every year: vote. Ideally, they would be digging deeper into each candidate and taking the time to become engaged and educated. But as that may sound overwhelming, they could instead simply pay attention to those around them whom they respect and trust. Many of us are unhappy, yet many of us failed to vote. Republicans are working diligently to try to restrict voting rights. There's a very good reason for that.

Elizabeth Sineclair Cady, Bowie

Retire, for everyone's sake

According to the Feb. 15 editorial "Dr. Oz has a point about retirement," it would be fine for Americans to postpone retirement. The editorial stated, "Today, 63 percent are in management, professional, sales or office occupations. These are largely not physically taxing jobs, and healthy people can continue to do them into their late 60s with little issue."

The Mayo Clinic appears to disagree. Callie M. Davies, a sports medicine physician there, cautions, "Sitting for most of the workday, an average of eight hours, raises your mortality risk, meaning you have a higher chance of dying earlier than expected." And, the clinic reports, "Studies that combine many research results show that prolonged sitting — more than eight hours a day — is linked to more than double the risk of developing type 2 diabetes." I retired a decade ago at age 58 and am infinitely more physically fit now than I spend up to three hours a day running, walking, doing resistance exercise and taking yoga classes.

Did the Editorial Board consider the retired workers who provide much-needed day care services at no cost for grandchildren? Did it consider the volunteers who help retired workers donate to their communities?

Sandy Eisen, Olney

Did Dr. Oz miss the Feb. 5 report by the U.S. Bureau of Statistics that the number of job openings in the U.S. was down by 966,000 over the year? Encouraging people to continue working past retirement age if they do not need the money is a slap in the face to the younger workers who need us old guys to clear out so they can advance — and a slap in the face to us retirees who remain quite functional, thank you very much. I retired at 60 to free up my job slot, but I kept working part-time for 15 as a contractor when I had expertise for specific projects, could mentor newer hires and serve as a bit of institutional memory. I recommend it.

Barbara Meierhofer, Arlington

Do you hear the people sing?

The Feb. 11 Style article "When the audience tries to steal the show on Broadway amid a viral incident in which a man confronted a group of fellow audience members during intermission at 'Mamma Mia!'," asked, "Is it okay to sing along at a Broadway show?"

The answer is easy and unequivocal. No. The performers on stage do not want to hear you sing, and the people sitting next to you do not want to hear you sing. It's a dreadful distraction that can destroy someone else's enjoyment and experience. Save your enthusiasm for the privacy of your home or car.

Melissa Poliak, Arlington

The problem isn't confined to singing. Over 50 years ago, I attended Bob Newhart's show in Las Vegas. Before beginning one of his classic routines, he said to the audience, "I've changed some of the lines in this because I got confused watching everyone's lips moving along with me."

Donald A. Tracy, Bethesda

Following Neal Katya's Feb. 25 op-ed, "Tariffs were illegal. Now Trump wants to deny refunds," Post Opinions wants to know: If you run a business, what opportunities did your company lose because capital was redirected to tariffs? Send us your response, and it might be published as a letter to the editor. wapo.st/tariff\_costs

A win for 11.9 million workers

THE LABOR DEPARTMENT published a rule Friday that would undo egregious attempts during the last administration to classify more workers as employees rather than independent contractors.

At the behest of union bosses seeking to expand their rolls of dues-paying members, President Joe Biden restricted who could be an independent contractor, even though he lacked the votes in the Democratic-controlled Congress to change the law.

The Trump administration announced last year that it would no longer enforce that rule while it drafted a replacement. The new version largely restores the status quo ante for independent contractors while giving employers greater certainty when classifying workers.

This battle centers on the definition of "employee," which believe it or not is unclear in labor law. It has been defined by decades of court decisions and has resulted in the United States having a large class of workers who are not traditional employees.

Independent contractors lack some protections that U.S. labor law requires be granted to employees, and many don't have access to employer-sponsored benefits. They also don't have the right to unionize, which is why organized labor is the strongest supporter of reclassifying independent contractors as employees.

But there are big trade-offs. Independent contractors get the flexibility to



A construction worker in California.

work wherever they want, set their own hours and choose which projects they want to work on. Being their own boss gives millions of people the freedom to care for their family.

Advocates for classifying more self-employed workers as employees are generally speaking on behalf of people who don't want their help. Of the estimated 11.9 million Americans for whom independent contract work is their sole or main job, 80 percent prefer to it traditional employment, according to a 2023 survey from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Gig economy" workers, such as Uber

or DoorDash drivers, dominate in the public imagination of what an independent contractor looks like. But that's the minority. The industries and occupations in which independent contracting is most common include real estate, construction, arts, design and personal care. If someone does not want to be an independent contractor, there's nothing to stop them from seeking full-time employment.

Bills such as the PRO Act, which would restrict the right to hire independent contractors, have repeatedly failed to pass. But liberal state governments have enacted various restrictions of their own on worker rights. The strictest passed in California in 2019.

After it went into effect, advocates achieved their goal of fewer people working as independent contractors. But there was no corresponding increase in traditional employment. It just led to fewer people working overall.

The new rule from the Trump administration reflects an understanding of the degree to which labor market flexibility is a key ingredient in America's secret sauce. It's simply easier for American workers to find the best job to match their skills than it is for Europeans to do the same. That's largely because bureaucrats have less say in the matter.

Congress would do the economy a favor by codifying the new rule into law so that the next president cannot repeat Biden's mistake.

the company's market value immediately dropped more than 30 percent.

It's highly unusual for an FDA commissioner to discuss drugs with pending applications in the media. It also demonstrates how the agency is raising the bar for firms seeking accelerated approval. These are typically drugs for rare diseases that are extremely difficult to study, both logistically (since there are few patients to participate) and ethically (since it would be wrong to withhold potentially lifesaving medication from people).

Yet Prasad and Makary are insisting that these experimental drugs demonstrate their clinical benefit even when that's not what the FDA agreed to at the outset of these studies. The same thing happened to a gene therapy for a rare disease known as Hunter syndrome, which the agency rejected in early February. Ditto for a rare blood cancer treatment, rejected in January.

Makary dismissed concerns that shifting goalposts will undermine investment, claiming that some in the media have proclaimed a "fatwa" on Prasad. But that will do little to assure biotech companies that new therapies for rare diseases are good investments,

The FDA shifts the goalposts on rare disease drugs

MARTY MAKARY appeared for Thursday an interview on CNBC to tout efforts under his leadership at the Food and Drug Administration to speed up approvals for treatments of rare diseases. In September, he wound up tanking the stock of a biotech company struggling to advance a leading-edge gene therapy drug through the agency's bureaucracy.

The episode is a perfect illustration of what's wrong with the FDA. The agency's leaders might say the right things about liberating drug development from red tape. Yet their actions are making it much harder for innovative companies to take advantage of brilliant new biotechnology — even as China invests heavily to surpass America in the field.

Makary was responding to criticism that the FDA's biologics unit, led by the persnickety Vinay Prasad, has in recent

months stymied multiple gene therapy drugs. That included UniQure's experimental therapy for Huntington's disease, the first-ever treatment for the debilitating genetic illness.

That drug generated enormous excitement last September when a small trial found it slowed the progression of Huntington's by 75 percent, compared to historical data on the disease. The agency had agreed to that study design in late 2024 as part of its accelerated approval pathway. But it backtracked in November, claiming that the historical data was not adequate as a control group, leaving the application in limbo.

Makary, in the CNBC interview, defended the decision. Though he didn't refer to UniQure by name, he described its study in detail, concluding, "At the end of the randomization period, it found no benefit, and yet, this is one of the drugs that we were pressured to approve." Unsurprisingly,

OPINION

DAVID IGNATIUS

# Will Trump's Iran strikes end the regime — or put more time on the clock?



After an Iranian strike in Manama, Bahrain, on Saturday.

For more than 45 years, U.S. presidents have wanted to destroy the radical, anti-American regime in Tehran. They always concluded that the risks of war were too great — until President Donald Trump's all-out attack with Israel early Saturday.

Trump said Saturday that the massive airstrikes had killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Few outside Iran will mourn the demise of a man who spent his career shouting, "Death to America!" and "Death to Israel!" And by this limited definition, Trump's decapitation strategy may have worked. But killing Khamenei, who was aging and infirm, isn't the same thing as regime change. If there's a plan for what's next, I haven't heard any U.S. or Israeli official explain it.

Wars always are easier to start than to finish, especially when you've set a political goal of regime change, rather than a clearly defined military objective. President Vladimir Putin thought he would take Kyiv in a week. Israel thought it would throttle Hamas in a few months. But wars to erase a regime don't work like that.

Once a president launches a war, he feels obligated to finish it successfully. "If you're in it, win it," the generals like to say. That's especially true in this case, where the regime is odious and Trump has urged Iranian citizens to risk their lives to topple it. It may be a war of choice for the United States, but that doesn't mean there's an easy exit ramp ahead.

Trump's preference had seemed, until Saturday, what might be called the "Viking way of war," in and out quickly, using speed and surprise to bring a rapid capitulation. But this war escalated in the first few

hours, and by Saturday night fires were raging from Iranian counterattacks on Bahrain, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Israel. Iran has also closed the Strait of Hormuz, choking oil supplies. Somebody should have posted a sign at the White House above a map of Iran: "This isn't Venezuela."

A Bahraini security adviser told me Saturday afternoon that 14 Iranian drones had struck the port facility that's home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet. In videos from the scene, you can hear the eerie mosquito buzz of a Shahed UAV and then see the burst of flame as it hit its target. That kind of attack usually strikes the other side in wars that America fights. The security adviser said that Bahrainis were puzzled why U.S. forces seemed powerless to stop the drones.

Make no mistake: Trump has announced maximalist goals for this operation. His statement released early Saturday morning was Trumpian rhetoric on steroids: "To the members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, the armed forces and all of the police, I say tonight that you must lay down your weapons and have complete immunity. Or in the alternative, face certain death. So, lay down your arms."

Trump called on the Iranian people to rise, once again, against a regime that, by Trump's estimate, slaughtered more than 30,000 protesters in January. "For many years, you have asked for America's help. But you never got it. ... Now you have a president who is giving you what you want. So let's see how you respond. America is backing you with overwhelming strength and devastating force. ... This is the moment for action. Do not let it pass."

Like Trump and so many Americans, I loathe the Iranian regime. It has spread

havoc from one end of the Middle East to the other. One day in April 1983, I missed getting hit by an Iranian car bomb at the American Embassy in Beirut by about 35 minutes. The sooner this regime is gone, the better.

But over the years, I've learned not to misjudge the regime's staying power. When I visited Iran in 2008, I was struck by the fact that police required people in automobiles to wear seat belts. On the road from Tehran to Qom, they had radar guns to catch speeders. This regime spreads chaos, but it's careful, too.

"Talking to key European allies of the U.S. late Saturday, I heard an intense desire for a quiet negotiated settlement to the war. Most of our allies had thought the attack was a bad idea. Britain denied use of a critical refueling facility at the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia were worried and wary. Only Israel seemed a passionate advocate. Now that it's happened, these allies will hope Trump quickly gets a settlement he can call a win. They won't want to stay on the firing line."

What worries me most is that the conflict may put more time on the clock of an Iranian regime that was about to expire. The aging supreme leader was unpopular. Iranians had been jockeying for position in the succession process. The one thing that could rehabilitate the hardline clerical team he represents is his martyrdom.

U.S. Central Command tried to emphasize that the United States was focused on military targets. Centcom said its rockets and missiles were seeking to "dismantle the Iranian regime's security apparatus." A Western security official told The Post

that strikes on the headquarters of Iran's intelligence service had killed at least four senior commanders. "Everything is falling apart there — we're seeing it, and feeling it," the official said.

It's good news for Iranians if the regime's apparatus of repression is crumbling. But just as Russia can absorb suffering in warfare, martyrdom is a powerful driver in Iran. I recall a reporting visit to the CIA's Iran Operation Center nearly 20 years ago, when the United States had embraced an earlier vision of regime change. On the wall was a poster of the beloved martyr Imam Hussein — a touchstone for IRGC members and a reminder to CIA officers of the passionate commitment of their adversary.

Mark Fowler, a retired CIA officer who worked on Iran for years, messaged me Saturday: "If the United States has learned anything from its past mistakes, it should use these hard-earned lessons by crafting a smart, bold post-war strategy worthy of the Iranian people's sacrifice, one that supports their pursuit of lasting change."

It would be nice to imagine, with Trump, that this will be a short war. But now that the United States has embarked in earnest on a campaign of regime change, we should understand that it's likely to be a protracted conflict, with many dangerous moments ahead.

In a conflict like this, with such big stakes and unknowable risks, Trump has a special responsibility to explain what he's doing to the American people — and ensure that the United States can stay the course. This is the opposite of "one and done." It may be a worthy fight, but it's likely to be an arduous one.

GEORGE F. WILL

# What Trump the wheedler misreads about Russia

Donald Trump continues trying to wheedle Vladimir Putin to end his war to extinguish Ukraine's nationhood short of that outcome. Trump's persistence calls to mind the man Gulliver encountered during his travels: He had spent "eight years upon a project for extracting subbeans out of cucumbers."

The president misunderstands two things. First, the more blood and treasure Putin expends in Ukraine, the more he wants to win in order to redeem his blunder. This war was supposed to prove Russia's might, and that Ukraine is an ersatz nation. Instead, it has revealed the yawning gap between Russia's pretensions and its capabilities, and has created an incandescent Ukrainian nationalism.

Second, the way for the West to economize violence and military expenditures in the long run is not to prepare for future conflicts with a Russia emboldened by success, but to deepen its diminishment by enabling Ukraine to continue bleeding Russia's army and economy.

Trump, having cast his trained eyes on video of a Moscow military parade, reportedly (according to the Financial Times) told aides that the Russian army looked "invincible." Well.

Ian Bremmer, president and founder of Eurasia Group, a political risk consulting firm, writes that in each of the past two months, Russia has suffered 30,000 to 95,000 casualties. In the past two years, Russia has taken 1 percent of Ukrainian territory at a cost of "157 dead per square kilometer." The four-year Russian death toll is probably at least nine times higher than the 26,000 Americans killed in three years in the Korean War.

The Economist says that in less than four years (June 22, 1941, to May 8, 1945), Russia advanced 1,600 kilometers from Moscow to Berlin. In more than four years, Russian forces in Donetsk, the war's principal cauldron, "had advanced just 60km — the distance from Washington to Baltimore." By the end of 2025, Russia was losing more ground than it could recruit, relying on money, not patriotism. Signing bonuses — some equal to the lifetime wages of some Russian workers — equal 90 percent of Russia's budget deficit. Prison terms and personal debts are canceled for recruits. Replacing battlefield casualties required up to 90 percent of 2025 recruits as replacements.

Kenya's intelligence agency says more than 1,000 Kenyans, those deserters tricked into signing military contracts to fight in Ukraine, have been needed to supplement the "invincible" Russian army. Britain's defense secretary says recruits from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Cuba, Nigeria and Senegal have been "recruited under false pretenses and press-ganged under pressure without necessarily realizing that they're destined for the Russian meat machine on the front line of Ukraine."

At the opening in Pyongyang of what are called "luxury apartment complexes" — think about that — North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un said the grieving families of North Koreans killed fighting for Russia in Ukraine (an estimated one-third of 12,000 sent in 2024) would be given priority access to the apartments. If you believe that ...

Presumably, Trump will tell Americans, when he thinks they deserve to know, his war or other plans for improving Iran. Meanwhile, he is supporting the reelection campaign of Europe's most pro-Putin and aggressively anti-Ukraine leader. In mid-February, Secretary of State Marco Rubio was dispatched to Hungary to intervene in that nation's election, on behalf of its authoritarian premier, Viktor Orban. His party at that moment was, according to trusted polls, behind by 10 points. This was so despite Orban's warring government-controlled media. Rubio told Orban that Trump "is deeply committed to your success" in the April 12 election.

Orban's government has reported a spate of bomb threats (but no bombs) against Hungarian schools and other institutions. The government says the threats are written in Ukrainian, so Ukraine is to blame. If you believe that ... Rubio's grovel was perhaps supposed to bribe Orban to stop blocking European Union financial assistance to Ukraine. The blocking has, however, continued.

A constant of modern Russian history is the systemic stupidity and toadyism that tyranny breeds. In the 1930s, some of Joseph Stalin's censors, who were more zealous than educated, reportedly (writes Stalin's biographer Stephen Kotkin) forbade radio broadcasts of music by Franz Schubert, who died in 1828, for fear he might be a supporter of his nemesis, Leon Trotsky, who was born in 1879.

Do not expect those who have risen profitably into Putin's orbit to steer their obsessed benefactor toward what Trump's National Security Strategy, published in December, calls "an expeditious cessation of hostilities in Ukraine." One wonders: Expediting what, exactly?

KATHLEEN PARKER

# A 1977 double murder is a warning for the Nick Reiner trial

Shortly after Nick Reiner pleaded not guilty Monday to charges that he murdered his parents, filmmaker Rob Reiner and photographer Michele Singer Reiner, Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman said he was still considering the death penalty.

"We will be looking at all aggravating and mitigating circumstances," he said, "and we have invited defense counsel to present to us both in writing and orally in a meeting any arguments that they would like to make."

Nick Reiner's two siblings have said they do not want their brother put to death, if he's convicted. Prosecutors in such cases of course work for the government, not for victims' families, for whom the perpetrator's death sentence can be yet another trauma on top of the loss of a loved one.

Consider a decades-old murder case from Columbia, South Carolina, that has recently resurfaced thanks to a victim's sister who, after years of silent suffering, has become an anti-death-penalty activist. On Oct. 29, 1977, 14-year-old Carlotta Hartness and 17-year-old Tommy Taylor were in the wrong place at the wrong time — parked in a car when three males were on a drug-and-alcohol-fueled mission to "find a girl to rape," as one of the suspects testified in court. Spotting the teenagers, they drove up and shot Tommy dead. Carlotta was kidnapped and taken to a nearby dirt road, where the trio repeatedly raped and tortured the teen before killing her. One of them returned later to mutilate her body. Two were sentenced to death and executed in

1985 and 1986. The third, who testified against the others, was sentenced to life and died in prison.

Carlotta's parents and their son have died, leaving only Sherrerd Hartness, who was 19 when her sister was killed, to remember and tell what happened to her family during that time.

"My family disintegrated after Carlotta's murder," she told me. She has been coping through the decades ever since, with the anguish and physical toll of both her little sister's murder and her family's cloistered silence. Hartness's father ordered the family never to mention Carlotta's name.

That command and decades of isolated suffering led Hartness, now 68, to a surprising conclusion and advice for prosecutors: Don't make it worse for the alleged perpetrator's family by seeking the death penalty. It almost always leads to appeals and forces the victim's family — who are called murder co-victims — to endure the agony of the killing again.

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Hartness said she still suffers extreme physical pain, diagnosed as fibromyalgia, related to Carlotta's murder. This condition is not uncommon among victims of psychological or emotional trauma. Each time one of Carlotta's killers was executed, aches and muscle cramps wracked Hartness's body, a physical terror connected not only to the deaths but to the suffering of the perpetrators' families.



Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman after Nick Reiner's arraignment on Monday.

For them, she thinks, it may be worse than for some victims' families. Not only do families of death row inmates have to count down the minutes and seconds until their son, brother, uncle or father is executed but they have to walk into school the next day, or church, or work. This realization led Hartness to oppose the death penalty. "I cannot be a part of something that brings suffering to families like my family suffered," she said.

Hartness's empathy has offended some people, she told me, but she doesn't care anymore. "Let them be offended." While many friends celebrated the executions, she said, "no one was celebrating in my house. We had to relive every detail of my sister's rape, torture and murder."

Hartness said no one called to check on her for weeks before or after the executions. (One neighbor brought a loaf of bread.) Loneliness and lack of support were constants in her life, giving her time to think and contemplate vexing questions — how cycles of crime pass through generations, how childhoods of neglect and abuse create people filled with rage and bereft of coping mechanisms. She yearned to help, to stop the cycles, to interrupt the rage, but how?

Then, in 2015, she read a story about gun violence with an accompanying graphic showing murder victims as stick figures that triggered something deep inside her. "Murder victims are not stick figures," she explained, tearing up. "I understand why they were used, but that day was when things really changed for me."

After decades of silence, she found her voice and began talking — on college campuses, on panels and even to garden clubs. The more she talked, the less her body ached. Though sometimes lonely, Hartness is far from alone. The Justice Department's Office for Victims of Crime reported in 2018 that 1 in 10 Americans will lose a loved one to homicide in their lifetime, co-victims whose suffering doesn't end when a murderer's heart stops.

Killing, whether by a renegade trio of rapists or by the government, isn't the answer, it seems. Not even, Hartness would argue, for an alleged murderer such as Nick Reiner. A life sentence spent suffering for his slain parents surely would be a punishment worse than death.